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A Book Review of Laura Ellingson's Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research: An Introduction

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A Book Review of Laura Ellingson's Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research: An Introduction

Abstract

Ellingson (2009) might be the first qualitative researcher to contextualize "crystallization" as a formalized sub-methodology for conducting qualitative research using a nontraditional approach. For Ellingson "crystallization depends upon including, interweaving, blending, or otherwise drawing upon more than one genre of expressing data" (p. 11). Epistemologically, Ellingson's feminist and social constructivist approach moves her notion of crystallization past positivism on one end and radical interpretivism on the other end of the qualitative research continuum. She looks beyond the established focus of traditional qualitative research to present crystallization as a holistic approach and "radical way of knowing" (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000, p. 30, as cited in Ellingson, 2009) by using the metaphors of a crystal and a quilt to frame her inquiry process. She advocates for researchers to interpret meaning of the participants' personal experiences through poetry, film, theater, dialogue, song, and dance.

Keywords

Immersion, Crystallization, Grounded Theory, Intermediate/Advanced Qualitative Research, Communication Research Methods, Qualitative Inquiry

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**A Book Review of Laura Ellingson's
*Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research: An Introduction***

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Ellingson (2009) might be the first qualitative researcher to contextualize “crystallization” as a formalized sub-methodology for conducting qualitative research using a nontraditional approach. For Ellingson “crystallization depends upon including, interweaving, blending, or otherwise drawing upon more than one genre of expressing data” (p. 11). Epistemologically, Ellingson’s feminist and social constructivist approach moves her notion of crystallization past positivism on one end and radical interpretivism on the other end of the qualitative research continuum. She looks beyond the established focus of traditional qualitative research to present crystallization as a holistic approach and “radical way of knowing” (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000, p. 30, as cited in Ellingson, 2009) by using the metaphors of a crystal and a quilt to frame her inquiry process. She advocates for researchers to interpret meaning of the participants’ personal experiences through poetry, film, theater, dialogue, song, and dance. Key Words: Immersion, Crystallization, Grounded Theory, Intermediate/Advanced Qualitative Research, Communication Research Methods, Qualitative Inquiry

Introduction

Laura Ellingson’s book, *Crystallization in Qualitative Research: An Introduction*, creates a unique attempt to both explain and interpret crystallization methodology. She offers a framework for blending grounded theory and other social scientific analyses with creative representations of data, such as descriptive narratives, poetry, dance, theater, and film. She postulates that crystallization is a post-modern, qualitative research approach that features in-depth multiple genre descriptions as a way to integrate themes and patterns of life experiences. A genre as defined by Campbell and Jamison (as cited in Ellingson, 2009) “is a group of acts unified by a constellation of forms that recurs in each of its members” (p. 5).

Ellingson examines the epistemological questions that arise when crossing methodological boundaries. She further provides detailed steps for designing, planning, and carrying out the crystallization process. The author offers guidelines for improving both social scientific and creative/artistic writing, and suggests strategies for targeting publication outlets promoting multiple genres in qualitative research. Ellingson’s concept of crystallization evolved from Richardson’s (2000) framework used to conduct qualitative research.

According to Ellingson crystallization falls within a social constructionist “worldview” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20) offering a valuable way of thinking and creative

inquiry to produce knowledge, and to create a “conceptual analysis” of the data (Charmaz, 2006). This emerging paradigm is easily linked to grounded theory and other systematic analyses that exist along the continuum from positivism through radical interpretivism (Ellingson, 2009). Ellingson’s explanation of the use of artistic genres identifies appropriate substantive and stylistic strategies in her findings. Her principles of crystallization take shape through “thick descriptions” and “complex interpretations” that at a minimum must include two or more genres that are “interwoven, blended, and thickened” to triangulate the data (p. 10). She divides crystallization into two approaches: integrated and dendritic. Integrative crystallization involves producing a written and or visual text consisting of multiple genres. She “borrows the term dendritic in order to conceptualize qualitative projects that continually branch out into patterned but also unpredictable, unique, and often beautiful forms of representation that reflect multiple epistemologies” (p. 125).

Epistemology is defined in this work as a theory of knowledge that justifies beliefs and is sometimes referred to “ways of knowing” with an understanding of what counts as knowledge, and how it can be produced along a continuum (Ellington, 2009, p. 30). Typically, researchers triangulate data from within a single methodology; whereas, crystallization not only uses traditional triangulation, but embodies two or more genres to further strengthen, improve, and code the data. As in all qualitative research, the ontological assumption is that “authors should be trustworthy to the highest standards of excellence in any genre” (p. 182). The author’s goals are to embrace marginalized and historically silenced groups, and give participants a voice and representation in the social, political, and academic arena thus enhancing, recording, and presenting the actor’s performance in a “natural setting” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37).

The author identifies both strengths and weaknesses in her crystallization approach:

	Advantages	Disadvantages
1.	Provides deep, rich, thick descriptions	Not everyone is fluent in multiple genres
2.	Gives the reader multiple ways of understanding	It involves a tradeoff between breadth and depth
3.	Reinforces the same experience in different forms	Lack of peer recognition as a viable methodological framework
4.	Pushes the envelope	Researchers must be open minded and willing to appreciate a wide-range of representation
5.	Gives the researcher a deeper level of understanding (pp. 15-16)	

Is crystallization an authentic qualitative research approach? How will the researcher discover the appropriate lens needed to critically analyze and interpret data without a guiding theoretical framework? Based upon Creswell's holistic account of qualitative research, Ellingson's crystallization methodology fits comfortably under the general characteristics of an emerging design; "that research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data" (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). In a traditional approach, the "structural laws and theories that do not fit marginalized individuals or groups and the constructs do not go far enough in advocating for action to help individuals" (p. 39). "The researcher's intent, then, is to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (p. 21).

Creswell (2007) suggests that "when researchers conduct qualitative research they are embracing the idea of multiple realities, as do the individuals being studied and the readers of a qualitative study" (pp. 16-18). Ellingson's representation of multiple realities holistically captures the bigger picture of the participants' internal and external experiences. Due to the complexity of self-reported dialogue; however, crystallization requires a strong researcher/participant relationship built upon trust, honesty, and empathy in order to establish the path to illumination, representation, and understanding of their worldviews. She invites her readers to develop a pathway to crystallization, as there is no formalized design that exists.

To ensure rigor and other systematic forms of analysis and evaluation, Ellington's iterative process takes preparation, improvisation, exploration, and free writing to build a natural pathway in order to reach the intended goals. At the end of each chapter, Ellingson provides a reflective interlude that demonstrates best practices. These exercises are designed for sharing the results of this "backstage" descriptive improvisation, and reinforce the salient constructs for the reader to internalize crystallization.

Conclusion

Ellingson advances her emerging ideas by building an integrated and dendritic, social constructivist framework that branches out and touches her readers, and builds a detailed pattern of connectivity to expand the boundaries of traditional qualitative research. Moreover, she offers a framework for blending grounded theory and other social scientific analyses with creative representations of data using narrative descriptions of rich, life experiences. Ellingson elaborates how her crystallization methodology enhanced her ability to peel back the clouded layers of communication noise in an oncology clinic. Using multiple genres allowed her to expose "backstage dialogue" in a nonfictional, descriptive improvisation that existed between doctors, medical staff, and the patients, thus surfacing the human side of the experience.

Crystallization is an in-depth process that goes beyond traditional qualitative methodology. It is a new and refreshing, yet unexplored approach that merits further analysis and evaluation within the qualitative research community. We discovered that when designing and structuring the patchwork, this framework provided us with an extensive, multi-level perception that reinforces new experiences and meaning in a

variety of behaviors. The illumination emanating from the crystal represents a much clearer, brighter, and authentic portraiture of the participants and the collected data.

As with any new research approach; crystallization must pass the litmus test for rigor, relevance, clarity, and further inquiry. Not everyone is fluent in multiple genres, it presently lacks peer recognition as an acceptable methodological approach, and the community must be open minded and willing to appreciate a wide-range of representations (Ellingson, 2009).

The writers recommend that the qualitative research community review and consider Laura Ellingson's new methodology of crystallization. It has pragmatic and artistic appeal for researchers who are advocates of giving voice and recognition to marginalized groups who desperately need to be heard.

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