

**Heat, Sweat, and Results:
The Fruits of Passion in Qualitative Research -
A Review of *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences* by Kristin Luker**

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In Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-glut, Kristin Luker examines the metaphor of salsa dancing in learning and conducting qualitative research and explores its utility and uniqueness. She emphasizes the need for social scientists to look for greater connections in their work and to trust their instincts more. By increasing their passion Dr. Luker suggests researchers will be able to conduct studies that are more rigorous and more robustly presented. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Salsa Dancing, Metaphors, and Writing

If we were playing a word association game, I doubt that passion fruit would be one of the answers if the stem were qualitative research. Laborious, time-consuming, exciting, criticized, appreciated, interesting, heart-warming, gut wrenching, reflective, and thought-provoking might be more expectable associations. But let's think about this for a moment. Why wouldn't we invoke passion fruit, passion, sexy, juicy, provocative, and fun? Probably because the stereotypical image of a researcher is one who is serious, methodical, and smart. So why can't all those things that describe salsa dancing also describe qualitative research? Well if you do Kristin Luker's brand of qualitative research, they could.

Let me discuss first my impressions based on the subtitle, and then move on to the title. The subtitle of the book, *Research in an Age of Info-Glut*, is not just about the amount of research that is so readily available for the professional or layperson, but it also refers to the glut of information marketed about how to conduct the research that can enter our over-stimulating pathways of knowledge production. Books and guides abound with advice and steps, and in some ways this book is similar, but with one exception. It has a more personal feel to it, as if the reader is in the author's workshop or classroom and she is asking and urging readers to reflect on their own preferences, ideas, philosophies, contexts, and advising readers to not just participate in perfecting the well-known and worn game with established rules and regulations. She asks us, the readers, to be in sync with the growing and changing complexities in our social worlds. For this reason I think Kristin Luker has raised a critical flag.

I like this book—to be honest because much of what she says I say to my students and authors and she and I both say it forthrightly. For example, like Dr. Luker, as an editor for *The Qualitative Report (TQR)*. I often ask our authors, after stating their purpose and question that drives the inquiry to add a little more, to these expected elements of a study by answering the “so what” question and clearly telling us why others would/should want to “care about your [the researcher's] questions” (p. 98). Similarly, I often say to my *TQR* and student authors that social science research needs to be about

changing the landscape of the bigger social picture for the benefit of the “public” (p. 17). Or that we need to acknowledge, attend to, and be ready to challenge those discourses and politics in which we are immersed as we conduct inquiry. Or that the research question, the driver of the project must be clear—she talks about it as “transform[ing] a research *interest* into a research *question*” (p. 51). Or a lit review needs to be a compelling story and “an intellectual roadmap” (p. 97) or that all must be integrally connected. She also writes things Ron Chenail, my co-editor, says such as “it is never too early to start writing” or that the researcher, to preserve integrity and rigor, should be interviewed with his/her own questions, “being prepared to answer questions yourself about where you stand on whatever issue you might be researching...this is only fair” (p. 152). I like her systematic way of presenting a way forward in creating and conducting inquiry. She could be my research sister.

Another reason I like this book, especially for beginning or burned out qualitative researchers is because as a ballroom dancer I like the salsa dancing fire in this book. The title, *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*, was intriguing; when I pictured salsa, I imagined grace, heat, sweat, music that invites irresistible shimmying. I figured if anyone could put those things into qualitative research, we all win. She does manage to do that *and* she uses other metaphors that make the reading interesting and the points solid. Consider these metaphors in relation to the decisions one must make in the process of planning, conducting, and making public qualitative inquiry: “an intellectual cocktail party” (p. 65), the “forest and the trees” (p. 68), the need to “kiss a lot of frogs, before you meet a prince” (p. 74), and a “can-opener response” (p. 143). I think I would love to have had her as one of my teachers.

But why salsa dancing and not fox trot, waltz, jive, or swing? Well actually it could have been any of them or weight lifting or bike riding “or any other enterprise that makes you hot and sweaty and takes your mind off your work” (p. 1). But having had experience with dancing, I find salsa to be an activity/experience that makes you sweaty and is a load of fun. It is hard work, salsa dancers are hot, are always moving, often in surprising and at times incomprehensible ways; there is beauty, there is form and there is creativity; there is action, there is flow; spinning; flexibility; timing; and sometimes a competition to outdo the other dancers on the floor. The dance is both for the dancers and for the observers. Even those who do not dance admire the intensity and heat. It demands attention. In my mind salsa is a great metaphor for qualitative research of the highest quality.

Dr. Luker says that “knowledge comes not from mastering esoteric facts or techniques but in making connections *across* traditional boundaries—going wide rather than deep” (p. 13). I can tell you that one of the aspects of dancing that my teachers make clear frequently is the strength of the dancers’ connection. Without the connection, the lead leaves his partner confused and unsure of what to understand and how to respond.

She advocates for research (of all kinds) to go farther; not to be imitative and repetitive of what has come before, but bold and beneficial to those who are studied as well as the professionals who will utilize the work. Furthermore, she advocates that qualitative inquiry be conducted more rigorously and more robustly presented. To do so she dances into qualitative inquiry or “salsa dancing research” through some quantitative or “canonical” moves, steps, and routines, always emphasizing the need for qualitative researchers to be systematic and rigorous. Her goal, which is accomplished, is “to take

what I want from *both* traditions in sociology, the macro and the micro, the quantitative and the qualitative, the logic of discovery and the logic of verification...to have us approach qualitative research in a spirit of expectancy, one informed by the theories we want to contribute to" (p. 39). In this way she uses "sampling, operationalizing, and generalization as a way to help us create a qualitative social science that can be rigorous, theory-building, and cumulative" (p. 52).

In the spirit of a pursuit of knowledge and learning, she says, "the one question I *always* try to think about, as I make every single decision in my research, is what would my smartest, nastiest, most skeptical, and meanest colleague think of this particular decision? How can I persuade someone who does not share my taken-for-granted assumptions about the world that my research is valid?" (p. 47).

The exercises Dr. Luker provides are like a good conversation or mentoring session with her. Her writing tips are solid and practical, making even the most daunting task do-able. The illustrations of her ideas are interesting. This is not the traditional text filled with a discourse of shoulds, but information for managing the info-glut that the authors of many other texts presume or leave out.

If you are a beginner to qualitative inquiry, I would recommend that you read this book as a starter and take a few salsa dancing lessons to see what qualitative inquiry can be all about. As a matter of fact I already benefited from Dr. Luker's advice by writing this review in 15-minute intervals—I sure got a lot done in between writing periods and felt energized when I came back to the computer. Advice well-given and well-taken!

References

Luker, K. (2008). *Salsa dancing into the social sciences: Research in an age of info-glut*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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