

**Giving Voice to the Results of Your Study:  
A Review of *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to  
Navigate Life's Challenges* by Marcia B. Baxter Magolda**

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*In Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges, Marcia B. Baxter Magolda offers a theory and model for building self-authorship through the development of an internal voice. Her primary audience is adults in their twenties and thirties, as well as their parents, peers, and employers. Qualitative researchers will also find the book of interest as a unique example of reporting results of a study in an original format. Key Words: Self-authorship, Internal Voice, Qualitative Research, and Report*

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If you've ever felt that all reports of qualitative studies follow a certain format and hence look alike, look again. In fact, look at *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges* by Marcia B. Baxter Magolda (2009). In this, Magolda's seventh book, the noted author on student development and learning presents the results of a longitudinal qualitative study in a notably different form of representation. At first glance it appears that Magolda has written a self-help book. The title speaks directly to the reader. The book flap promises,

This is a guide to addressing life's challenges and competing demands. It will help you to reflect on the problems and setbacks you encounter, to discover your own voice, uncover your authentic sense of values, build your confidence and find meaning in your life.

Magolda herself in a "Note to Readers" affirms that she hopes to help young adults in their twenties and thirties, as well as their parents, peers, and employers.

With the book's stated purpose and audience, it may seem an unlikely candidate for a book review in a journal on qualitative research. Being familiar with some of Magolda's published articles, I first picked up the book to see what her latest research addressed. The title made me think of autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2002), and I wondered if that was the book's subject. A quick review of the book flap, however, showed me the self help orientation mentioned above. Initially, I was surprised by the approach and wondered if the book was relevant to me. As I began to explore beyond the book flap, I found myself drawn in. I must confess, what I found most appealing was not so much the guidance to young adults, as worthy as it may be, but the fact that the book presents an original style of reporting the results of a qualitative study. You see, it turns out this is not a book filled with advice based on wisdom gained through the personal experiences and reflections of the author. It is in fact a presentation of the findings of a

longitudinal qualitative study and the theory that the researcher developed through her inductive data analysis.

As I learned through reading the book, Magolda conducted a longitudinal qualitative study over the course of twenty-two years. She began by interviewing eighteen-year-old students entering college and conducted annual interviews with participants through age forty. She started with 101 participants, but this number decreased over the years due to attrition. Some thirty participants remained active in the study for the full twenty-two years. The interviews were unstructured, open-ended, exploring the learning experiences of the participants and how they come to know. Magolda employed grounded theory methodology to analyze her data.

I accessed the information regarding the design and methodology of the study from an Appendix at the back of the book. Which brings me back to the style of reporting results offered in *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges*. Typically, a report of a qualitative study will begin with an introduction of the research problem and objectives and a discussion of the relevance of the study. This is generally followed by a presentation of the research design and methodology, including sampling, data collection, and data analysis. The findings are then presented, followed by a discussion of how the findings compare to prior studies on the subject and what might be the implications of the study or areas for further research.

Speaking of reporting the findings of a study, Patton (2002) comments, "Some reports are thin as a blade of grass; others feel 16 feet thick. Size, of course, is not the issue. Quality is....The final step is completing a report so that others can know what you've learned and how you learned it" (p. 502). In offering guidance regarding how to write a report on a grounded theory study, Creswell (1998) states, "Most important, authors need to present the theory in any grounded theory narrative" (p. 178). Creswell also observes, "In grounded theory studies, the researcher varies the narrative report based on the extent of data analysis" (p. 180). Magolda provides a "quality" report of her findings and the theory she developed, uniquely crafted around the extensive data analysis associated with a twenty-two-year-long study. Due to her intended audience, however, this report is indeed different from the typical presentation of findings. Embedded within a book designed to help young adults cope with the challenges of adulthood through self-authorship, Magolda presents key elements of a qualitative report.

In Chapter 1, Magolda discusses the challenges of adult life. Although presented in the conversational style of an advice book, this discussion could be considered the description of the research problem and objectives. In contrast to the typical report in a journal article, however, Magolda brings in the voices of her participants right from the outset, making use of quotes to illustrate the challenges she seeks to address through her theory and model of self-authorship development. She also addresses her relationship to her participants, noting,

As we explored both their successes and frustrations, they often reported feeling somewhat alone in facing the challenges of adult life. They found that significant people in their lives often tried to solve their problems rather than listen to how they felt about them. They found our conversations helpful to reflect on these issues, and some labeled our talks therapeutic. I became, in a way, a companion on their journeys. (p. 11)

Where a conventional report would next move to a detailed account of methodological choices and issues, in Magolda's book, Chapters 2-7 jump straight to findings. These chapters contain the stories of six of her participants, making use of extended quotes through which we can hear the participants' voices. In each case, Magolda frames and structures the individual stories by making use of the components of her new theory of self-authorship development. Magolda also depicts the journey to self-authorship in pictorial form via whimsical map drawings. Chapters 8 and 9 continue to provide thick description of data in the course of presenting a model for supporting others in developing self-authorship through learning partnerships. Magolda says of this model,

These stories inspired me to organize my study's participants' insights into a model of learning partnerships to help family members, friends, educators, and employers to become better company for the journey toward self-authorship. (p. 11)

Often reports of qualitative studies follow the presentation of findings with a discussion in which authors compare and contrast their findings with those of other studies on related topics. While Magolda does not include such a discussion in its conventional format, she does include in Chapter 10 a discussion of several other studies related to self-authorship, highlighting the diversity of subjective experience in this area based on cultural, contextual, and other factors. In Chapter 11, Magolda presents readers with the applicability of her theory, in the most directive (and, I might add, shortest) chapter entitled "Mapping Your Journey." It is not until the end of the book that Magolda includes what might be considered the explicitly "academic" aspects of her report. In Chapter 12, she details her theory of the development of internal voice, and this is followed by the aforementioned Appendix, which describes the methodology of the study.

While I was intrigued to be able to identify the components of a qualitative report within the context of a self-help book, I would be remiss to discuss the structure of the book exclusively and leave out any mention of the content. This, after all, is the heart of the book for Magolda and her intended audience. As she explains, "As my participants were navigating the challenges of adult life, I was navigating the challenges of interpreting what their experiences meant for adult development" (p. xi). Her theory of self-authorship development posits that there are three phases of this process: "moving toward self-authorship, building a self-authored system, and moving beyond self-authorship" (p. 323). The first stage involves letting go of relying on "external formulas" and recognizing the need to develop one's own "internal voice," this realization often coming as a result of a "crossroads" experience in one's life (p. 6). This phase also includes listening to and cultivating the internal voice. Magolda says of her participants,

They report that succeeding in adult life required them to develop their *internal voices*—to decide within themselves what to believe, who to be, and how to relate to others. (p. xix)

As young adults move into the second phase, building a self-authored system, they come to trust their internal voice. This step is associated with the understanding that while one cannot control all that happens in his life or in the world, one can control his reaction to what happens. This second phase leads to “building an internal foundation” of a personal guiding philosophy and “securing” that foundation by living out one’s internal belief system in daily life (pp. 326-327). Ultimately, Magolda sees individuals achieving self-transformation as they move beyond self-authorship. In outlining her theory, Magolda notes that “the cyclical nature of the evolution of self-authorship just described suggests that self-authorship is more complex and nuanced than a simple linear trajectory” (p. 330).

Magolda clearly was motivated by her study to try to help adults in their twenties and thirties who are facing multiple challenges. This motivation apparently inspired the unique approach she has taken in this book to speak directly to this audience. At the same time, there are signs of her academic training and experience throughout the book, and it is not a quick, superficial read. As a result, the text is something in between self-help book and scholarly report. I do not doubt that young adults would relate to the stories in this book and find its guidance helpful. I do wonder how much time adults in their twenties and thirties are spending with books on personal growth, and if they will take the time to read these stories of their peers and the lessons they learned.

There is more to Magolda’s theory than this thumbnail sketch includes. For example, she discusses identity, epistemological, and relational dimensions of her theory. She explores the role of pain, perspective, and partnerships in developing an internal voice. I encourage you to learn more for yourself by reading her book. For qualitative researchers, I also encourage you to consider the book as a unique form of reporting. While Magolda’s focus is on helping young adults develop their internal voice, she has demonstrated that the researcher can express her own voice, as well, in reporting the findings of a qualitative study.

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### Author Note

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