

Qualitative Research for Social Workers or Social Work for Qualitative Researchers?

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*Deborah Padgett's new edition of *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research* significantly updates and expands her initial edition. This qualitative research text will be a welcomed addition to social work research courses. While becoming a more inclusive text with wide applicability for the research context today, the author only hints at some of the more contentious or evolving issues that continue to make the field of qualitative research challenging to traditional research approaches. Several places/issues of growth and evolution are suggested by this reviewer. Key Words: Social Work, Utility, Participatory Action Research, and Institutional Review Board*

In the Preface to *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research* (2nd ed.) Padgett indicates that “for too long qualitative researchers have been put on the defensive. . .” (p. xvii). I was one of those troubled by the previous edition of *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research* that seemed to me to take on an apologetic tone, employing quantitative research standards to evaluate the usefulness and quality of qualitative research. Given those standards, it was not surprising that there was much to apologize for. Appreciatively in this edition, qualitative research is discussed in a way that suggests that qualitative research can “stand on its own two feet.”

Padgett promotes a “pragmatic middle ground” when it comes to the paradigm debates within qualitative research. Her pragmatic position accepts “the fallibility of knowledge development, elevating utility [italics added] over ideology or philosophy” (p. 9). This philosophical position makes sense in the social work context, a field grounded in inherently complex issues and practices that are stubbornly resistive to atomistic analysis. Using utility as a criterion of worthiness promotes the “so what?” question in a way that challenges the merit of social science research that does not positively impact our world. Research that quietly resides in professional journals or on library shelves (whose only “claim to fame” is that it has enhanced the resumes of the researchers) becomes suspect when invoking the utility criterion of rigor. The author references an interesting article by Hohmann and Shear (2002) that clearly indicates the importance of utility:

One of the achievements of modern psychiatry has been the adoption of rigorous scientific methods in the investigation of somatic and psychosocial treatments for mental illness. The institution of reliable diagnostic methods, the evolution of strategies such as fixed-dose medication administration, the use of well-specified treatment manuals, and the elaboration of therapist training and certification procedures have permitted sufficient experimental control to enable researchers to identify efficacious treatments. However, this control, while important for the initial testing of a treatment approach, limits the degree to which results can be generalized to the population of people in need of

treatment. It also does not provide the information necessary for clinicians to tailor treatment strategies to the social and cultural needs of their individual patients, who live in a wide variety of circumstances. (p. 201)

With many general qualitative research books now available, this edition finds a niche by adding detail regarding some little-discussed topics (e.g., the value of a sense of humour, researcher self-disclosure, observation pointers, typical errors in qualitative interviewing, interviewing in a non-English language, translating from a non-English language, meta-synthesis, mixed-methods, co-authorship considerations, writing a fundable qualitative research proposal).

This text presents possibilities and opportunities presented by qualitative research for the social worker but I continue searching for a qualitative methods and social work text that brings the possibilities and opportunities presented by social work for the qualitative researcher. The action/participatory action/community-based participatory research approaches (that are outlined in this text) are ideal for social work and just perhaps the closest we have to calling a research methodology social work research. Padgett provides an overview of the range of qualitative research to the spectrum of social workers, some of whom are more focused on change than others. For those social work applications that are less-change focused, any qualitative research text would suffice. But for creating change in any level of social system (small to large), the action-oriented qualitative approaches stand out as particularly useful. Perhaps a subsequent edition of this text might more precisely target and expand on these approaches.

In discussing “socially responsible research” (p. 76), Padgett distinguishes the inside (emic) perspective from the outside (etic) perspective, highlighting how some qualitative research approaches address one or the other. Some approaches “focus on the intricate textures of people’s lives” (p. 76) while others center on the “broader socioeconomic and culture perspectives” (p. 76). While this makes a distinction that can elucidate various qualitative research approaches, Adele Clarke (2005) has recently observed in her book *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn* that

there is no such thing as “context.” The conditional elements of the situation need to be specified in the analysis of the situation itself as they are constitutive of it, not merely surrounding it or framing it or contributing to it. (p. 71)

An implication of not distinguishing context from the situation-of-interest brings forth the value of the action-oriented qualitative research approaches that are all-inclusive in addressing the full range of aspects involved in the change process itself.

Ethical issues are prominently presented that highlight some concerns about the quality and appropriateness of Institutional Review Board (IRB) or ethics review oversight. Perhaps invoking the “pragmatic” or middle-ground position, Padgett sums up: “. . . bureaucratic inertia and the continued dominance of the biomedical model will likely ensure that the authority and jurisdiction of IRBs are in no imminent danger of receding” (p. 74). This is place where the controversies could have been more prominently displayed with challenges more forcefully presented. An example of a very pointed and pragmatic work that tackles a substantive issue surrounding the current practices and protocols of IRBs is “Qualitative Researchers’ Conceptualizations of the Risk Inherent in Qualitative Interviews” by Morse, Niehaus, Varnhagen, Austin, and McIntosh (2008). They maintain that consent in qualitative research

should not be thought of as a “one-time legality obtained at the beginning of the study but a contract that is renegotiated and reobtained through the data-collection process” (p. 211). In the service of this idea, the authors present what they term “principles of assessment for review of qualitative proposals” to address this IRB weakness. Writing and research akin to the Morse et al. article, that is, those containing challenges to the traditional protocols are appearing more and more frequently in the literature (Denzin & Giardina, (2008). Admittedly pushing the status quo, more discussion of these types of proposals would significantly add to the potentially-rich discourse surrounding research ethics in qualitative research.

Padgett highlights what I think is a very important issue that is far-too-often omitted in the literature—the tendency for qualitative research interviewers who are skilled social work practitioners to overly control or guide the interview toward some specific end. Appropriately, practitioners tend to shape their client interviews toward a desirable end. But as a practitioner-turned-qualitative researcher, such a narrowing of focus results in stilted or non-rich data for analysis. A much more open-ended approach and willingness to allow research participants to reveal what they wish in a manner that they wish will more likely produce the textured stories and accounts from which qualitative analysis can derive productive meaning.

In this book, a couple of newer innovations in qualitative research that were mentioned unfortunately received too little attention in my view. Meta-synthesis is a growing field of interest for qualitative researchers. Padgett’s inclusion of this topic is appropriate but her comments tended to be critical, but excluded the values and possibilities that meta-syntheses present. The author mentioned the development and proliferation of online publications, but either through authorial omission or a paucity of relevant quotable material in these online sources, very few online references were used in this book.

This book is presented as a “how-to” book on qualitative research for a variety of disciplines and experience levels, and, while it certainly lives up to that, I also found it to be a useful book to highlight issues that are still murky and unresolved. I could see using this book in a social work research course—my differences of opinion with the author on various points that I have mentioned in this review could be quite effectively built into the scaffolding this book provides.

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