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Creative Possibilities and Responsibilities: A Review of Maria J. Mayan's Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

In her book, *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry* (2009), Maria J. Mayan has provided a highly readable text. Using examples, tables, charts, plus exercises at the end of each chapter, a student new to the field, or an instructor looking for a useful text will find a good companion in this book. In addition to her thorough teaching, Maria Mayan uses humor, humility, and transparency to convey her deep moral and philosophical commitment to scientific rigor, as well as a deep sensitivity to honoring the stories researchers strive to tell about the human condition.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Qualitative Research Manual, and Ethics

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Creative Possibilities and Responsibilities: A Review of Maria J. Mayan's *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry*

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*In her book, *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry* (2009), Maria J. Mayan has provided a highly readable text. Using examples, tables, charts, plus exercises at the end of each chapter, a student new to the field, or an instructor looking for a useful text will find a good companion in this book. In addition to her thorough teaching, Maria Mayan uses humor, humility, and transparency to convey her deep moral and philosophical commitment to scientific rigor, as well as a deep sensitivity to honoring the stories researchers strive to tell about the human condition. Key Words: *Qualitative Research, Qualitative Research Manual, and Ethics**

I have just completed Maria J. Mayan's (2009) compact book (146 pages in paperback) *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry*. She ends with the following:

Qualitative research insists—thank goodness—that we can never adequately describe the human condition (Frank, 2005). In the end, we can construct sensible, complex, fascinating, and indefinite accounts of reality that simultaneously evoke wonderment and unease about what it means to be part of our social world. (pp. 138-139)

Maria Mayan (2009) writes with passion and humor. Reading her book, I felt as though we were having a cup of coffee and I was sitting across from her having a conversation. Her literary voice feels so accessible that it was easy, when I had a question, to email her. She emailed back the next day. Not quite a coffee conversation, but close. Above all, her writing reflects a humble approach to the task of being a qualitative researcher, one in which all the moral, philosophical, and creative possibilities and responsibilities are laid squarely on the shoulders of the researcher. We cannot shrink from the daunting and elevating task of describing other peoples' lives, and we had better acknowledge the "fascinating," the "indefinite," the "wonderment," and the "unease" that will accompany the journey.

Mayan's (2009) book is directed to the beginning qualitative researcher. It would make an excellent text for any qualitative research class. It is a thorough primer, useful also for those who may be past the beginning stages of this style of inquiry. The book is divided into ten chapters. Each chapter concludes with exercises that make excellent class assignments, which allows students to experience by doing what the chapter has been teaching. There are also examples and charts that help organize and illustrate the material throughout the chapters. There are appendices at the end of the book that further illustrate specific examples of data analysis (i.e., transcription, field notes, and a document analysis template).

Chapter One begins with an introduction to qualitative inquiry. To capture an example of the author's sensitive style, Mayan (2009) cautions that "...qualitative researchers aim not to limit a phenomenon—make it neat, tidy, and comfortable—but to break it open...so that a description of the phenomenon, in all of its contradictions, messiness, and depth, is (re)presented" (p. 11). Mayan is a stickler for methodological coherence, which is key to scientific rigor and trustworthiness. She describes and provides an exercise called the "armchair walkthrough" (p. 17) to help the fledgling researcher think through "the methodological trajectory of an entire research project" (p. 13). The research question drives the trajectory, not the researcher's favorite qualitative method or philosophy. I particularly enjoyed Mayan's "Qualitative Annoyances" reflecting her very personal, transparent style: "I have a few minor irritations that can flare up into great frustration, particularly on bad days", i.e., "It can be done by journalists"; "It's only anecdotal" (pp. 18-19).

Chapter Two focuses on theory and method with an easily understood summary of the dialogic nature and multiple possibilities existing in any piece of research. In this chapter, how choice of method and theoretical perspective/position (which are reviewed in Table 2.1 of Mayan's book) may relate or get mixed up with one another is highlighted through Mayan's (2009) discussion and exercise called "Sorting it Out" (p. 33).

Mayan's (2009) chapter on method (Chapter Three) is filled with examples that illustrate how different theoretical positions will pose different questions. The examples she provides within this and other chapters will help the reader distinguish the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, as well as how careful listening to your data can change the research question itself.

Chapter Four guides the reader into how to choose a research question and how a qualitative researcher can think about sampling. Chapter Five focuses on data collection and the many and creative ways a qualitative researcher may seek and discover information about the phenomenon under investigation.

Be creative and think about data as everything empirically available to us, whether it is the latest best seller, poetry, newspapers, art, film, photographs, video, graffiti, pop culture artifacts, movement, and even sound. (Mayan, 2009, p. 83)

Chapter Six delves into data analysis. Mayan (2009) emphasizes the importance of qualitative researchers' responsibility to fully describe and articulate their data analysis processes. She discusses qualitative inquiry from the perspectives of inductive, deductive, and abductive activities. "Abduction 'begins by examining data and...entertains all possible explanations for the observed data...'", and "[abduction] helps explain how qualitative work is actually a cognitive process that blends inductive and deductive reasoning" (p. 87). Her exercise "Categorizing and Theming" provides an excellent way for students to become more familiar with the difference in these commonly used and confused analytic methods.

Mayan's (2009) chapter on rigor (Chapter Seven) provides an interesting overview of the historical and emerging ways in which the subject of rigor has proceeded from 1981 through 2006. Situating this important subject in an evolving context helps the reader appreciate the tensions inherent in a field that is distinguishing itself from its

quantitative older sibling and wanting to gain equal status. The author gently challenges these tensions, particularly in her section that calls for using the terms familiar in quantitative research: validity, generalizability, and reliability. She asks, “Can we not use the terms that represent good science...but apply different rules of rigor accordingly?” (p. 105). After discussing rigor, “demonstrating how and why (through methodology) the findings of a particular inquiry are worth paying attention to” (p. 100), and “sharing how you do rigor” (p. 108), Mayan returns to her emphasis that “perhaps the most important strategy, which weaves throughout the entire research process, is reflexivity” (p. 112).

Chapter Eight provides a reliable guide to doing research proposals aimed toward grant writing. Chapter Nine makes Mayan’s (2009) case for ethics as reflected in her phrase “beyond ‘getting through ethics’” (p. 125). While the procedures of ethics boards are discussed, the far more important point for this author is that the researcher remains committed to the often messy issues stirred up in qualitative research. Because research is dialogic and relational, it can involve a relationship where one member may share a setting with another and eventually writes about that other/s. For this reason, ethical sensitivity cannot be overemphasized, nor should it.

Mayan’s (2009) last chapter (Chapter Ten) brings the reader through the full circle that encompasses this author’s moral and philosophic sensitivity. All researchers must ask:

Who are we representing in our research, and who benefits from our representations? Whose story is it—the researcher or the researched? It is not a crisis of representation; it is a moral problem. (p. 133)

Being committed to reflexivity is a key element in remaining responsible to the work and to our co-investigators. Mayan (2009) advocates transparency, “writing the self into the research process”, “writing in unconventional formats”, and “presenting findings as important yet impermanent” (p. 135), as antidotes to “help decentralize the researcher’s authority” (p. 135). However, she also points out that scholars have wondered “how we can be both the gazer and, at the same moment, the one gazed at?” (p. 137). The answer is that we cannot, yet that is all the more reason to remain committed to reflexivity, “grappling with self-awareness and politics, and how we frame reality, as we conduct our research and as we write” (p. 138).

Being an emerging qualitative researcher myself, I particularly valued the content and style of Maria Mayan’s (2009) book. While I valued the overviews, particulars, tables, and exercises as a type of qualitative research “boot camp,” I valued most her eloquent reminder that research above all is about the thoughtful process and multiple outcomes of being in and learning from relationships.

References

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Author Note

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