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## A Review of Qualitative Research in Counseling and Psychotherapy

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## A Review of Qualitative Research in Counseling and Psychotherapy

### Abstract

In reviewing *Qualitative Research in Counseling and Psychotherapy* (McLeod, 2011), I encountered with this text a backdrop of a grand tour question, "How well has the author contextualized qualitative inquiry in the realm of counseling and psychotherapy theory and practice?" I found McLeod (2011) constantly embedding qualitative methodology and plethora of methods into counseling and psychotherapy field by pointing out the relationship between research and practice of counseling and psychotherapy and giving detailed account on philosophical foundations and actual practice of qualitative methods while zigzagging among multiple levels of contexts. At the same time, McLeod maintained his pluralistic position on methodologies and methods by critically examining multiple forms of knowing and positioning toward production of knowledge.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Counseling, Psychotherapy

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## ***A Review of Qualitative Research in Counseling and Psychotherapy***

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*In reviewing *Qualitative Research in Counseling and Psychotherapy* (McLeod, 2011), I encountered with this text a backdrop of a grand tour question, “How well has the author contextualized qualitative inquiry in the realm of counseling and psychotherapy theory and practice?” I found McLeod (2011) constantly embedding qualitative methodology and plethora of methods into counseling and psychotherapy field by pointing out the relationship between research and practice of counseling and psychotherapy and giving detailed account on philosophical foundations and actual practice of qualitative methods while zigzagging among multiple levels of contexts. At the same time, McLeod maintained his pluralistic position on methodologies and methods by critically examining multiple forms of knowing and positioning toward production of knowledge. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Counseling, Psychotherapy.*

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As I will soon start my Ph.D. dissertation in family therapy utilizing qualitative methodology, I chose this book for a review using qualitative methodology. I hoped to gain practical knowledge from *Qualitative Research in Counseling and Psychotherapy* (McLeod, 2011) in understanding and conducting clinical qualitative research in the family therapy field. Before I go into the content of this review of the book, let me explain the process of my re-viewing the book as I share an idea with Steier (1985) that “the world as we know it is constructed by us, we cannot separate the phenomena we attempt to know from our systems of knowing” (p. 29), and that the processes of data generation themselves need to be shared. Following Chenail (2010), I contemplated on a question, “How can I honor each work with my commitment to reading the book and constructing a review that emerges from my close encounter with the text?” (p. 1636). I tried to open up myself to discover the book, reviewed the book in contexts, set up a grand tour question and subsequent questions for the review, took field notes, and allowed myself to react to texts that stood out for me in connection with the grand tour questions, coded the text, and coded the codes to create categories (Chenail, 2010). I then used the SmartArt graphic of Microsoft® Word to examine nested relationships among the emerging categories within each chapter and across chapters to re-render the book.

McLeod (2011) made it clear that his purpose of writing the book is “to examine the relevance of the qualitative inquiry for counseling and psychotherapy theory and practice” (p. x) through description and explanation of qualitative methods and examples of researches using these methods in the psychotherapy and counseling field, and critical revision of issues and controversies in the area of work. I then turned his purpose into a grand tour question, “How well has the author contextualized qualitative inquiry in the realm of counseling and psychotherapy theory and practice?” McLeod continues and

notes that the book is aimed for beginning students and therapy trainees who want to conduct research project, dissertation, or thesis as well as experienced practitioners who want to refine their knowledge on “how research can inform practice” (p. x). In addition, McLeod claims that “readers are encouraged to regard this book as an invitation to a conversation rather than as a definitive statement about the truths of these matters” (p. x). Finally, McLeod emphasized pluralism as his position to approach issues around the “relationship between knowledge and practice” (p. xii) and makes a commitment in acknowledgment of multiple ways of knowing and positioning toward knowledge production.

Initially, I started off reviewing the book with the grand tour question in my mind while my encounter with the text of the book allowed sub questions to emerge that contextualized my re-rendering of the text of the book. The subsequent questions included: “How well has the author embedded his assumptions about the relationship between practice of psychotherapy and counseling, and qualitative inquiry?” “How well has the author described particular qualitative method in terms of its philosophy and its actual practice in counseling and psychotherapy field?” and “How well has the author translated his positioning of pluralism into the text of the book?”

In chapter one, McLeod (2011) set the context for research within therapy and counseling field strongly: “The purpose of research is to enhance knowledge, to enable us to know more about the way counseling and psychotherapy operate and how or why they are effective” (p. 1). Within the context, McLeod embodies the positioning of plurality in the text in which he pulls together two different forms of knowing (pragmatic and narrative form of knowing) and discusses about the complementary nature of the forms of knowing in which both quantitative and qualitative research traditions are embedded. From there, McLeod takes readers from the philosophical basis of qualitative research to the practice of qualitative research through chapters two and three. McLeod sets a foundation of the human science in which qualitative research is embedded by explaining the four activities of qualitative researchers:

- Describing: the process of constructing comprehensive descriptive account of an aspect of social life that is being investigated (*phenomenology*);
- Interpreting: the process of understanding the meaning of a phenomenon (*hermeneutics*);
- Persuading: convincing others of the credibility of the conclusions arising from a study (*rhetoric*);
- *Committing* to the creation of a better world (*social justice*) (p. 21)

Now that the foundation is laid out, McLeod (2011) gives out exemplary bites to readers on each qualitative methodology. The samplings of the methodology include phenomenological research, ethnographic approaches, grounded theory, variations of grounded theory, conversation and discourse analysis, narrative analysis, heuristic research and autoethnography, action research, and qualitative case studies. I found McLeod’s text in each chapter zigzagging among several different levels of contexts. To make sense of the text as a whole, I re-rendered the text in terms of the different levels of contexts; qualitative researchers’ positioning to the counseling and psychotherapy field,

considerations on the use of each methodology in production of knowledge, and strengths and challenges of each methodology. In chapter six on grounded theory, for instance, McLeod discusses positioning of a grounded theory researcher within counseling and psychotherapy community when he made a note on a “strong sense...of the risk to professional acceptance associated with undertaking qualitative research in a psychology environment dominated by measurement and experimentation” (p. 133). At the next lower level of a context, McLeod touches on reflexivity of a researcher as a unique aspect of grounded theory in production of knowledge. Accordingly, “the key to achieving a satisfactory grounded theory analysis lies in the immersion of the researcher in the data....a researcher could not possess sufficient theoretical sensitivity without being able to reflect on his or her biases and assumptions” (p. 119). In the most immediate context, McLeod points out strength of grounded theory:

Grounded theory can therefore be seen as a robust method for the generation of a form of practical knowledge that is well suited to making a contribution to the efficient and humane functioning of modern bureaucratic systems of health and social welfare. (p. 143)

Complementary to the rhetoric of the text are recommended readings for further knowledge on each qualitative method, exercises that engages readers with issues at hands, and boxes that give detailed account on issues at hands. When it comes to case studies in each chapter, McLeod (2011) clarifies the connection between research and practice of counseling and psychotherapy by providing their contexts, qualitative distinctions drawn, their results, and significance of and consequences of the results in micro-scope detail. Although it is not explicitly stated, McLeod teaches the readers on how to squint their eyes for critical examination of qualitative researches by pointing out very certain aspects of researches within and across the researches, and within the tradition of larger counseling and psychotherapy field. Furthermore, in the last three chapters on the role of qualitative research in outcome research (chapter 13), on the concept of validity in qualitative research (chapter 14), and on “taking the research agenda forward” (p. 282, chapter 15), McLeod makes valuable contributions to issues and controversies within and beyond qualitative counseling and psychotherapy research while maintaining his position of methodological plurality.

As McLeod (2011) aims, the book is an excellent reference book for researchers in counseling and psychotherapy field who want to situate their research practice based on qualitative distinctions that they wish to bring forward on particular phenomenon of counseling and psychotherapy. Nevertheless, this is not a how-to book for each qualitative methodology as McLeod acknowledges. Readers who want to learn specifics of each qualitative methodology should follow McLeod’s recommendation on other books.

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### Author Note

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