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How to Read and Review a Book like a Qualitative Researcher

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How to Read and Review a Book like a Qualitative Researcher

Abstract

Reading a book with the intention of composing a review demands certain skills on the part of the reader that may differ when the goal of the read is for pleasure or scholarship. To help these reviewing readers to produce creative and useful review, the employment of qualitative research perspectives and procedures is suggested for reading books in a systematic matter leading to reviews that not only share the contents of the texts, but also transform the meaning of the texts producing new insights for the texts' authors and readers alike.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Book Reviews, Reading

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How to Read and Review a Book like a Qualitative Researcher

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Reading a book with the intention of composing a review demands certain skills on the part of the reader that may differ when the goal of the read is for pleasure or scholarship. To help these reviewing readers to produce creative and useful review, the employment of qualitative research perspectives and procedures is suggested for reading books in a systematic manner leading to reviews that not only share the contents of the texts, but also transform the meaning of the texts producing new insights for the texts' authors and readers alike. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Book Reviews, and Reading

There are many ways to read a book, but when the reading is intended to lead to a book review, the process can become a bit more challenging for the reader-reviewer. In the case of reading for pleasure, the reader can access the book in a wonderfully appreciative manner, consuming the plot, connecting with the characters, and escaping into the setting. When reading for scholarly purposes, the reader can extrude useful information, identify new sources of information, critically examine the author's words, and document the location of each and every notable moment in the text. For the book reviewer, the aspects of reading for pleasure and scholarship can be combined to help the reader not only focus on the aesthetics of the work, but also reflect on the author's execution and product. Yet, different from both the reading for pleasure and reading for scholarship modes, the reading reviewer must not only consume the book, but also compose an essay that captures a particular sense of the book that would be valuable for the book's author and would-be readers to contemplate. Merely retelling the contents of each chapter or summarizing a general affection for the text on the part of the reviewer does not seem to contribute much new or of value to the reader or to the book's author, so what are other ways a reviewer can create a book review that brings new insights to the understanding of the original work?

As a book reader and reviewer I seem to have adopted many perspectives and techniques from my training and experience as a qualitative researcher to systematically scrutinize a text, develop a focused perspective on the work, and present my reviews in a creative form that hopefully presents an account that is informative to the author and reader alike. Besides being a way of seeing the world that I like, reading and reviewing a book from the perspective of a qualitative researcher makes sense given the strengths of the family of methods. Qualitative research is a way for investigators to open themselves up to discover the perspective of an "other" in a manner similar to how a reader would open the pages of a book to discover what the author is conveying in the text. Textual materials are a common data source for qualitative researchers to examine in their inquiries so the gathering and analyzing procedures we use to manage data in a study can be quite amenable to the reviewing of a book. Qualitative research encourages us as investigators to be mindful of who we are and how our perspectives can influence how we interact with others and make sense of the world around us. In a similar fashion when

we read books we bring our experiences to bear on how we come to understand the words offered by the authors and how we re-present the meaning the text had to us. In this vein, qualitative research offers reviewers useful self-reflection tools such as audit trails and journaling that can help us track how we bring ourselves into the reading and reviewing processes.

As Editor-in-Chief of *The Qualitative Report* and *The Weekly Qualitative Report*, I may read and review up to a dozen books a year. It can be quite a challenge to work my way through these tomes especially if I am overly familiar with the author or the general subject matter being addressed. For other works, I can find myself approaching an area of qualitative research that is quite new to me presenting novel ways of conducting research and producing reports. In both of these cases, I ask myself 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? As I have evolved and developed as a book reviewer I find that I call upon basic qualitative research transformational approaches to describe, analyze, and interpret (Wolcott, 1994) the tomes I read and review. In this essay, I want to present some of the qualitative research procedures and perspectives I use in this endeavor to help readers approach their reviews in a way that I think can make the process more enjoyable and the end-product more pleasurable.

Open yourself up to discover the book (or Don't judge a book by its cover)

In phenomenology, qualitative researchers set aside any preconceptions about the research participant in order to observe that which will be in front of them during their interviews and analysis (Moustakas, 1994). This opening up, known as epoché, can allow researchers to set aside their own sensitivities so they can become more sensitive to the other in the research process. In encountering your book and author, take time before you delve into the book to sit down and write out your prejudices and biases about the author, book, and topic and then set your curiosity lens on high and open yourself up to discover the author's text. As you continue through your reading and reviewing process, return to your journaling and see how your preconceptions of the author and work compare and contrast your lived experience of the text and writer. If you are diligent to this process you might find that the substance of this exercise can actually become the content of your review as you share your understanding of the work as it developed over the course of the read. This first-person account can be wonderfully insightful for a reader contemplating the book or to the author reflecting on a reader's response to the text.

Reviews in context (Is there any other kind?)

In his 1979 paper Elliot Mishler asked researchers to take a step back from their analysis and consider their findings within the context of their observations and of themselves. For book reviewers the same sage advice holds. Take a step back from your reading and consider the author, the publisher, and subject area in which this book can be situated. What can you learn about the author? How can the book be seen as a reflection of the author's professional and personal background and training? Is the book part of a series? How does the publisher categorize the book? What other books also fall within this division of the publisher? How about yourself? Who are you? How did you select

this book? How does your background and training inform your read of the book? What do you hope to gain from reading the book? Sharing the results of these questions can help you produce a more personal review and one that also attempts to situate the work within a variety of contexts. Providing readers an opportunity to appreciate these perspectives can help them to consider the work in contexts that might be similar to their own allowing them to become familiar with the work more readily.

Start with a grand tour question and then develop your focus

In ethnography, qualitative researchers often start with a grand tour question that helps them to approach their research site with a broad perspective (Fetterman, 2009). This orientation exercise helps researchers to take a step back, survey the landscape, and then develop a focus for the study proper. In reviewing a book, the same process can be very useful. Before reading the book, take a tour of it to get a general impression of the work's main features. Review the table of contents, the list of figures, the references, and the index. Scan the covers inside and out. You might even want to skim the preface, forward, and other introductory material. In addition, you might want to visit the book's webpage to see what other information might be found about the book. As you begin to get a better feel for the book, start jotting down some specific questions that would help you to focus your reading of the book and the creation of your review. For example, after taking a grand tour of the book, you might become curious as to the author's purpose for writing the book so you can weigh the evidence to see if you agree with the author's stated goals and objectives. If upon completing your grand tour you have learned the author and the marketing materials for the book make claims that the book has been designed to make its content accessible for beginning qualitative researchers, a guiding question in this case would be "What has the author done to make the book reachable for beginning qualitative researchers and how well has the author accomplished this effort?" With this question in hand, you can now focus your read on this perspective, collect evidence, analyze your data, and present your findings with accompanying excerpts from the text to support your assertions. Presenting your grand tour question and subsequent focusing questions in your reviews can help the reader understand your reading processes better. Although they might read the book differently from you, they can gain insight into your perspective and compare and contrast your emergent review from how they might read the work differently.

Take field notes

Immerse yourself into the book and take a variety of notes based upon what you read and what your reading leads you to think. What are the important points being made? How do these ideas inform you, challenge you, change you? You are the instrument so record your reflections and reactions to the text. For RON or "Read Only Notes" write down passages that make a difference in your understanding of the author's message. For RAN or "Random Access Notes" allow yourself to react to these passages, jot down what these words mean to you, note what ideas come to your mind, and record what questions the text inspires in you. Also in this note-taking process, remember there is a difference between coding and analysis. In your first read of the book, your notes

may be more of a coding exercise wherein you noted passages as being informative or “differences that make a difference.” As you re-view the book, you can begin to code your codes as you begin to categorize your initial differences in connection with other differences. These categories or themes can become the strengths of the book, the novelties of the work, and the features that make the book worth the investment of readers’ time and money. These are the findings which make a review valuable as you share the results of not just your initial view, but of your re-view of the work; or to put it more simply--They are not called “book views” for a reason!

Topical surveys are not qualitative data analysis (or Describing one chapter after another is not a review)

Margarete Sandelowski and Julie Barroso (2003) created a handy typology in which they classified the different ways authors presented their research findings. One type they identified was called topical survey in which the authors simply presented the results of survey in a manner not too unlike the game show, *The Family Feud*, as in, “The survey says...” In these studies the authors merely reported the output of each question in their instrument. No analysis was conducted, but rather an accounting of participants’ responses. In contrast to this style of reporting, Sandelowski and Barroso identified different ways qualitative researchers conduct their analyses and report their findings. These strategies included

- Thematic surveys where the researchers can examine participants’ responses across the various questions to construct or discover themes or patterns or repetitions
- Conceptual / thematic description which involves researchers integrating the qualitative differences discerned in the data by relating the parts to each other to create or extend theoretical perspectives
- Interpretive evaluation that involve greater transformation of the patterns to create grounded theories, models, and essences

Following Sandelowski and Barroso’s lead, reviewers can move beyond reporting what the author wrote in each chapter (i.e., topical survey) and present themes than span across the book (i.e., think strengths and weaknesses), conceptual distinctions (e.g., aspects of the authors’ style that makes the book a good choice for beginning researchers), and more advanced interpretations (e.g., envisioning the book’s unique contribution to this area of the literature). Also remember, when you do come up with a theme, concept, or interpretive perspective on the work, communicate this finding in the title of your review so your readers learn right away what focus you will be taking in the review. Here are some examples from recent reviews I have composed where I have expressed the theme of the review in the title:

- Keeping a personal focus when contemplating a sense of home: A review of *Qualitative Housing Analysis: An International Perspective* (Chenail, 2009b)
- The value of community in creating quality: A review of *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Chenail, 2008b)

- Bringing method to the madness: Sandelowski and Barroso's *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research* (Chenail, 2009a)

In each of these reviews, I constructed the theme from my analysis of the notes I had taken on the text. In each case I was able to focus my findings regarding the books from the perspective of an organizing theme making the composing of the review quite manageable and hopefully, the end product more readable for the audience.

It's never too early to write your review

Harry Wolcott's (2009) famous advice to qualitative researchers, "you cannot begin writing too early" (p. 20), also holds for book reviewers. As your ideas begin to flow, shift your compositional style from note-taking to paragraphing. This discursive shift encourages you to flesh out your ideas and begin to complete the thoughts that first arose during your RON and RAN notes. At this point keep your writer's hat on and resist the urge to don your critic's cap remembering wonderful final drafts come from early rough drafts. Take it easy on yourself and work to produce some prose that begins the process of getting your thoughts out of your head and into your text. This transformational process can also lead to the emergence of creative insights that will sometimes even surprise you! That's the process that happened to me while writing this review about reviews. I started by reflecting on qualitative research distinctions which inform my reviewing practices. As I began to create my list of these procedures and perspectives, I found myself writing down sentences and then paragraphs about these randomly accessed notes until the essay began to take shape. If I had waited to write until after I had completed my note taking about critical qualitative methods, I might have missed making the points I wanted to make when I first thought of the qualitative procedure. In addition, as I started writing about one qualitative research aspect, I began to think of other procedures I use to construct my reviews which led to concepts I might not have considered if I only used my note taking process.

Remember scientific and artistic renderings of the findings

Qualitative research has strong traditional ties to both the social sciences and the humanities giving investigators choices when it comes to the style of conducting research and reporting our findings (Eisner, 1981). Remembering these scientific and artistic forms can present reviewers with some interesting ways to conceptualize, conduct, and compose their reviews. Sometimes I can adopt a more artistic style as when I wrote my review of Joe Norris' 2010 book, *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research: A Participatory Arts-based Approach*, in the form of a play (Chenail, 2010). Other times I have chosen a more scientific approach to reporting a review as was the case of my review (Chenail, 2008a) of Patricia Leavy's *Method Meets Art: Arts-based Research Practice* where I presenting the findings of my review in a more scientific style as I presented evidence in support of my thesis regarding the "Is it research?" question that sometimes emerges when consumers encounter qualitative research that may not conform to their perceptions of research. With both styles of reporting, I worked my way through the texts as described herein, but as I continued to reflect upon my findings as I viewed and re-

viewed the texts, I began to consider different ways I could use the form of the review to convey part of my message. In the case of my review of Joe's book, I thought the presentation of the review of a book about playbuilding in the form of a play helped to communicate the usefulness of reporting findings in that form. In the instance of challenging the narrowness of what critics consider research, I thought presenting my review in the form of thesis with supporting evidence helped to underline a need for both styles of inquiry or that it would be more fun to argue in a traditional sense for what some might consider an untraditional approach to research or maybe I just like irony!

Try the "4-T" approach for your next review

I have been working on a simple approach to qualitative data analysis I call the "4-T's" – Target, Tag, Tale, and Thesis and I think the procedures work quite well with creating reviews. To start the process here is how I define each T:

- Target: The portion of the text that has caught your interest
- Tag: The name you give to the target that reflects the meaning you ascribe to it
- Tale: The story of the tag's meaning in relationship to the target in which you make the evidential qualities of the target in support of your tag overt.
- Thesis: The proposition that connects the patterns reflected across the tales of the tags' relationships to their targets

To use the 4-T model, you can start at either end of the T's when conducting your reading and reviewing. With the target first variation, you read through the book noting or targeting passages that interest you; then tagging them so you understand what was the difference that made a difference upon your first view; then as you re-view your targets, begin to tell the tale they are telling you such as what you are finding interesting; and then begin to form your thesis or proposition regarding the book such as why you find this book to be an interesting read. With the thesis first approach, you can start with the proposition stated by the author as to what makes the book interesting such as the exercises that appear at the end of each chapter. Then you target them for your tags and tales and see if the evidence supports the author's thesis.

Conclusion

I encourage you to consider a qualitative researcher's approach to reading and reviewing. Maybe you can use grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to construct theories about the works you read, or phenomenology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to present your lived experience of reading the text, or narrative analysis to present how the author conveyed the story of the research (Riessman, 2007), or ethnography to craft thick descriptions of the works (Fetterman, 2009). With any of these and other qualitative approaches, remember to create a review that takes the reader beyond a mere recapping of the book's text. To accomplish this goal try to engage these qualitative research distinctions to create a transformed rendering of the work that is based upon the text's material and supported by the author's ideas, but goes beyond the work to suggest new

and novel ways of approaching and utilizing the book. In doing so I hold that you will create reviews that are not only informative for your readers and the authors of the texts reviewed, but also fun for you to do!

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