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Research, When You Know What You're Doing: A Review of Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Maria J. Mayan's publication of *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry* (2009) provides a broad introduction to the scope and process of conducting qualitative research. The author used many of the same concepts in his dissertation and continues to conduct qualitative inquiry, often times using Mayan's book as a useful resource in structuring his research. The book outlined qualitative philosophies, methodologies, and data analysis procedures used in qualitative research.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Qualitative Methodologies, Data Collection, Qualitative Philosophy

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Research, When You Know What You're Doing: A Review of *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry*

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Maria J. Mayan's publication of Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry (2009) provides a broad introduction to the scope and process of conducting qualitative research. The author used many of the same concepts in his dissertation and continues to conduct qualitative inquiry, often times using Mayan's book as a useful resource in structuring his research. The book outlined qualitative philosophies, methodologies, and data analysis procedures used in qualitative research. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Qualitative Methodologies, Data Collection, Qualitative Philosophy

The German scientist, Werner Von Braun, once quipped, "Research is what I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing." For many researchers, the debate over types of methodologies and data collection and analysis procedures takes precedence over the fundamental aspects of their work. For students new to qualitative research, it can be a challenging prospect to choose which qualitative methods to employ when conducting a study.

In *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry*, Maria J. Mayan offers a succinct overview of the qualitative paradigm. For professors looking for an introductory text for qualitative research courses or a student new to qualitative inquiry, Mayan's work is a welcome addition to their bookshelves. Rather than delving into the more intricate details of qualitative research, Mayan wrote this book in order that it "would be useful to and anchored in the questions of newcomers to qualitative inquiry, regardless of discipline" (p. 7). It is the breadth of this study that enables "newcomers" to understand the scope of qualitative research.

Divided into ten chapters, Mayan dissects qualitative research into steps that will guide students and researchers into designing studies into small actions. Chapter One deals with the purpose of qualitative research. Mayan argues (2009) that "qualitative researchers attempt to interpret or make sense of the meaning people attach to their experiences or underlying a particular phenomenon" (p. 11). Not wanting to portray qualitative research as simplistic, Mayan warns that researchers "invite context, complexity, and 'confounding variables'" (p. 11). It is this admission that dismisses criticisms of qualitative research as a worthy research paradigm. Another utility of this study is Mayan's addition of a framework to guide researchers into establishing a plan of action for qualitative research. Her "armchair walkthrough" establish a procedure for maintaining methodological coherence. For many new researchers, it provides a step-by-step list to increase the reliability of one's research.

As a graduate student, my dissertation advisor and I spent numerous hours discussing theoretical frameworks as I began working on the first three chapters. In our conversations, I began to appreciate more fully the implications of aligning theory and methodology. I can recall her advice, "clarifying those issues now will save you significant heartache down the road." In Chapter Two, Mayan provides a summary on the relationship between theoretical perspective and methodology coincide. Importantly, she admits that researchers can easily mix and match non-congruent concepts and theories.

In Chapters Three and Four, Mayan poses a series of questions that aid in the researcher's attempt to establish research questions and an appropriate method to obtaining the right information to answer them. The range of approaches to qualitative inquiry is by no means exhaustive (Mayan covers topics from autoethnography to phenomenology and

grounded theory), but her list provides a suitable base to begin an investigation. Although her explanations are succinct, the reader gains a valuable understanding of the various approaches to qualitative research. Lastly, she pairs the chapter on types of research with an exploration of the numerous methods to interpret the information. When any qualitative researcher is asked “What are you trying to study?” Mayan provides a series of step-by-step solutions to answering such a broad question.

For any researcher, the data is as crucial an element as the design of the study. Chapters Five and Six provide a thorough foundation to any student of qualitative research on data collection and analysis. Mayan lists a slew of methods to collect data (Ch. 5) as well as a basic introduction into its analysis (Ch. 6). She begins both chapters by illustrating these concepts through her personal examples of teaching qualitative research to students. Despite the limited example (she does not provide an analysis of each event), it is easy for the reader to project himself or herself as if we were in her classroom. This personalization of qualitative research adds to the approachability of her book and the ease with which she explains complicated topics.

Mayan’s explanations of the progression of qualitative research in Chapter Seven is the foundation for her study. Arguably, a student would be wise to read the chapter before starting any new research project to ensure that the scope is aligned with the process of qualitative research.

Chapter Eight outlines the process of writing and submitting proposals for grant applications. For a new academic (like myself), it is refreshing to read that the process can be overwhelming and that many people struggle with the entire endeavor. However, Mayan’s analysis and explanations provides a “roadmap” for neophytes and experienced researchers alike. Coupled with the proposal process, Mayan offers a brief explanation on the ethics of qualitative research. It is clear that the author stresses the importance of ethics through the comprehensive of common ethical dilemmas for any researcher; however, it is her admission that,

Unfortunately, however, ethics has come to mean narrowly, for many of us...We have become obsessed with the process, so much so, that once the proposal has “gone through ethics,” we falsely believe that we have done our duty to ensure ethical treatment of participants.

Building upon the knowledge that the ethical treatment of participants is paramount to maintaining the integrity of qualitative research as a paradigm, Mayan goes on to explain several common ethical pitfalls of research and how to avoid them. It is clear that each aspect of qualitative research rests upon the assumption that the researcher stringently enforces an ethical code before, during, and after the research process.

The last chapter (Chapter Ten) offers a brief summary on writing and reflexivity in qualitative research. Interestingly, Mayan encourages authors to visit a children’s bookstore to gain insight into the illustrative trends of writing. While many academics may dismiss this assertion, it is likely that some researchers could imbibe certain formatting trends into their own work. She concludes her book with a powerful affirmation of qualitative inquiry. She wrote “In the end, we [qualitative researchers] 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” (p. 139). Statements supporting the utility of qualitative research are commendable and likely to inspire students and academics alike in their quest to pursue and publish quality qualitative studies.

Mayan is at her strongest when she uses personal examples to illustrate her arguments. For a student new to qualitative research, the narratives embedded in the book make the content

more accessible. Throughout reading this study, I often found myself connecting to certain examples as if I were a part of the narrative.

Any weakness of Mayan's work is overshadowed by its strengths. However, the reader documented only minor criticisms. For example, some of the sections on data collection could have used further explanation as well as examples to see how researchers in the field use the information. Also, since the book is designated as an introduction to qualitative research, Mayan could have included a brief list of journals devoted to qualitative inquiry so that any novice could find examples of her descriptions in professional publications.

If Werner Von Braun had been a qualitative researcher, he could have restated his position as "Research is what I was doing before I read *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry*." Professors, researchers, and students alike would do well to add Mayan's work to their bookshelves. Those currently designing dissertations based on qualitative inquiry should consider using this book as a framework for designing their study and to avoid many of the pitfalls students fall into. If I had used this study to aid my own dissertation, I could have circumvented some of the issues that come with any significant study.

References

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Author Note

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