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The Value of Community in Creating Quality: A Review of The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods is a welcomed contribution to the ever-expanding qualitative research reference library as it fills the gap such a standard, comprehensive written compendium should address. Benefiting from the contributions of a community of who's who in the qualitative research world, the two volume work offers its readers easy to read, concise entries of high quality on methodologies, methods, and procedures as well as the evolving contexts in which these studies are conducted and consumed

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Encyclopedia, Wikipedia

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The Value of Community in Creating Quality: A Review of *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*

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The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods is a welcomed contribution to the ever-expanding qualitative research reference library as it fills the gap such a standard, comprehensive written compendium should address. Benefiting from the contributions of a community of who's who in the qualitative research world, the two volume work offers its readers easy to read, concise entries of high quality on methodologies, methods, and procedures as well as the evolving contexts in which these studies are conducted and consumed. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Encyclopedia, and Wikipedia

When working on a text of my own, reading a student's paper, or reviewing a journal manuscript, I often find myself flipping among the many books in my study or browsing through the Internet to find a useful definition or explanation of a term or concept to help clarify a thought, guide a discussion, or help traverse a gap in knowledge. Often I become frustrated in this pursuit because the work I access either does not contain the term for which I seek or when I locate the passage, the material is somehow lacking the succinct focus I desired. In these times of discouraged sojourns I have been prone to lament the lack of a definitive encyclopedia of qualitative research, but now thanks to Dr. Lisa Given's (2008) delightfully edited two volume work from Sage, I am happy to report I lament no more!

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods was just published and it is a welcomed contribution to the ever-expanding qualitative research reference library. It truly fills the gap a standard, comprehensive written compendium should address. The Encyclopedia covers methodologies, methods, theoretical and philosophical perspectives, and important historical and current contexts for understanding the world of qualitative research. In taking this broad view the work serves not only as an introduction to methodology and method, but also to the social, political, and ethical frames within which we conduct and comprehend research.

Volume one of the Encyclopedia contains an alphabetized listing of the 500 plus entries and a reader's guide that breaks down the entries into 16 general topic categories. I found both of these tools to be quite useful in capturing the contents of the work at a glance. Volume two contains a detailed index that not only presents page numbers, but also the volume number in which the page is found. My only major criticism as to the Encyclopedia's structure is that although a list of contributors appears in volume one, there is no author index so you can not readily find which contributor wrote which sections. So for someone like me who is a fan of certain writers, I have to search around the thousand plus pages to find my favorites' contributions. Of course you could argue

that my flipping through the pages is a good way for me to happen upon sections I might not otherwise inspect, but I would like the ability to see who wrote what in a more reader-friendly fashion. Maybe Sage could add such a feature to the Encyclopedia's web page (<http://www.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book229805&>) as a supplemental, web-only feature.

Each entry contains a concise definition of the term along with references to related articles in the Encyclopedia. Many entries also include further readings and websites readers can explore to help continue their pursuit of knowing the concept in greater detail. Locating each article within this semantic web both within the pages of the Encyclopedia and beyond helps beginning qualitative researchers to see the connections between different distinctions and to appreciate the contexts within which these notions can be understood. These features also give the work a hyperlinked quality as the reader is encouraged to link one entry to another and another.

The scientific, artistic, critical, and transformative approaches to qualitative research are well represented in the two texts, as are the variety of “-ism’s” (e.g., positivism, postpositivism, postmodernism, constructivism, and pluralism) that help to organize the conduct and understanding of qualitative research today. Besides the diverse positions represented by these theoretical and philosophical articles, I could also see a diversity of perspectives and positions portrayed within the methodological and procedural entries too. In taking such a varied posture, the authors help their readers gain an appreciation for the rich variety of perspectives that make contemporary qualitative research the multi- and trans-disciplinary phenomenon it is today.

The Encyclopedia's coverage of the major qualitative research methodologies such as ethnography reflects both the central tendencies of the approach as well as the range of variations and hybrids. For example besides “Ethnography” we are also provided entries for “Auto-Ethnography,” “Critical Ethnography,” “Institutional Ethnography,” “Meta-Ethnography,” “Para-Ethnography,” “Performative Ethnography,” “Virtual Ethnography,” and “Visual Ethnography.” If that wasn't ethnography, reading further into the two volumes I also found a type of ethnography that was new to me—Geoethnography!

When surveying through the Encyclopedia's entries I was impressed with the immediate validity I could discern between the content of the contribution and the expertise of the contributor: J. Gary Knowles and Andra L. Cole and “Arts-Informed Research,” Carolyn Ellis and “Autoethnography,” Jonathan Potter and “Discourse Analysis,” George Noblit and “Meta-Ethnography,” Sally Thorne and “Meta-Synthesis,” and Gary Shank and “Semiotics.” Of course this did not happen purely by chance since Dr. Given and her Editorial Board members worked diligently to contact those authors who they thought would do a proper job of summarizing these sections in clear, concise, and easy to understand prose.

Speaking of the prose, I applaud Dr. Given and the Editorial Board's decision to balance consistency with individuality. In reading over her “Introduction” on pages xxix-xxxii of Volume One, Dr. Given makes it overt that although third-person voice was the “standard” prescription for contributors as is typical with encyclopedic format, authors could also use first-person voice if that style worked better for them. The freedom to use whatever voice seemed most appropriate for the author was also in keeping with qualitative research's variety of representational styles and voices. I also thought Dr.

Given's transparency while describing the method used to construct the Encyclopedia was also offered in the spirit of openness we encourage when researchers share the steps of their research methods. In doing so I think Dr. Given helped to make the results of the encyclopedic process more trustworthy for me.

This level of writing found throughout the Encyclopedia also helps to make the work a good one for beginning qualitative research students and for those working with such novices. Whereas many of the handbooks I read are wonderful sources for those with enough background to comprehend the depth and intricacy in which topics are discussed, their complexity can prove to be overwhelmingly difficult and nuanced for those just starting out with qualitative research. Although the lengths of the Encyclopedia's entries vary from a few paragraphs to a few pages, the style remains consistently approachable across the two volumes which is a credit to Dr. Given and her editorial staffers.

The 1080 page, two-volume set costs \$350 (US) which might make it a bit pricy for a one course purchase, but for two course sequences and longer curricular concentrations the cost of the work spread over multiple semesters is worth the investment. I definitely recommend its acquisition for faculty teaching qualitative research and doctoral students pursuing a qualitative research dissertation. Besides the hard cover version Sage also sells the volumes in an electronic version which I think makes the work even more valuable for libraries and readers.

As I continued to peer over the pages of the Encyclopedia I wondered what the next version of the work would be in order to keep up with not only new innovations in qualitative research, but also to incorporate some new technological advances. Will Sage add new entries to the Encyclopedia's web page between new editions of the work? Will the Encyclopedia be available electronically only for its second edition? Will it become an open content, reader-contributed work like Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>); or peer-reviewed, open-accessed like Scholarpedia (<http://www.scholarpedia.org/>); or somewhere in between like Google's Knol (<http://knol.google.com/k/knol#>)? Will it contain entries in languages other than English?

I guess only time, money, innovations, and interest will tell what the next generation of the Encyclopedia will be, although we do have a glimpse of the future from the contemporary landscape. In 2006, Dr. Stuart Shulman, Associate Professor and Founder of the University of Pittsburgh's Qualitative Data Analysis Program, launched the "Great Qualitative Book & Articles: An Annotated Bibliography" wiki (<http://qual-reading.wikispaces.com/>) and in 2007, Dr. Cynthia Russell, Professor at The University of Tennessee Health Science Center's College of Nursing, created "My Qualitative TiddlyWiki: A Reusable Non-linear Personal Web Notebook About All Things Qualitative" (<http://technology-escapades.net/qualitative.htm>). These sites along with the entries on qualitative research in Wikipedia (e.g., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qualitative_methods) all show the promise of creating greater access to learning and authorship. These "next generation" resources also shed light on the challenge of sustaining a useful information source especially when it comes to facilitating a community in its efforts to improve and expand the depth and breadth of work such as an encyclopedia. In other words, without an engaged community, you can not have sustainable quality.

It is this relationship between engaging communities and improving quality which I think was managed well by Dr. Given and her Editorial Board in this project. As she recounts in her "Introduction," the relationship between the editorial leadership team and its authors greatly enriched the Encyclopedia we see in print today. Contributors suggested new topics and helped network potential authors previously unknown to the editor and her consultants thus making the authorship of the journal more diverse and expansive. This constructivist and transformative approach to "author-ity" is a positive sign for encyclopedias and qualitative research and I think foreshadows the next generation of such reference works. The practice also goes to show the value of community in the creation of quality information that the wiki's of today often promise, but struggle to deliver consistently. Hopefully the online, open access reference efforts can learn from Dr. Given's community building success!

I also need to add a disclaimer to my review so you know that I contributed four entries to the Encyclopedia. My experience as a contributor fit well with the process as described by Dr. Given in her "Introduction." As authors we were given ample directions and guidance and we were also encouraged to be creative in the writing. We were also encouraged to let others know of this great writing opportunity. For my efforts I received a copy of the Encyclopedia, but I do not receive royalties for any purchases of the opus. Even if I was not a contributor to *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* I would still recommend it unequivocally to anyone wanting to learn about qualitative research.

Lastly, I suggest taking a peek at the new online qualitative research wiki's and the qualitative research articles in sources like Wikipedia and making contributions to expand and improve these information resources. Those sites like *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* all contribute to the enrichment of our qualitative research community and we deserve the quality we create!

References

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Author Note

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