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Ronald J. Chenail

Nova Southeastern University, ron@nova.edu

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Abstract

Patricia Leavy's new book helps to address the gap for an introductory text for those interested in learning more about arts-based research and other approaches to artistic qualitative research. It may also help to address those researchers and editors who, when seeing an arts-based research report or presentation, ask "but is it research?"

Keywords

Arts-Based Research and Qualitative Research

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**“But is it research?”:
A Review of Patricia Leavy’s *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based
Research Practice***

Ronald J. Chenail

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Patricia Leavy’s new book helps to address the gap for an introductory text for those interested in learning more about arts-based research and other approaches to artistic qualitative research. It may also help to address those researchers and editors who, when seeing an arts-based research report or presentation, ask “but is it research?” Key Words: Arts-Based Research and Qualitative Research

Have you ever been at a qualitative research conference where the speaker is describing a research project in which the findings are being performed as a one-person expressionistic dance, or recited in the form of a haiku, or relayed as a personal coming of age narrative and after the presentation was completed when it came time for the audience to ask questions one person would ponder the question, “I liked the performance, but is it research?” If that query is offered, invariably someone else will make the observation, “So what!”

Such responses to artistic qualitative research or arts-based research always bring me back to the 1980’s in family therapy when the initial qualitative research articles and presentations in my home field were met with similar reactions from our quantitative-oriented colleagues. Their perplexing retorts questioning the legitimacy of our epistemologies, theoretical foundations, methodologies, procedures, and findings left me wondering whether I had done the right thing in pursuing a qualitative inquiry path in my fledgling research career path and whether or not the work conducted and presented by my colleagues and me would ever be accepted by the established editorial and scientific communities in the clinical world. Having gone through that challenge myself I can’t help but think my arts-based researching colleagues must feel something very similar when they face the “Is it research?” questions from their own qualitative research peers.

I am not quite sure where this divide between the more “scientifically minded” and the more “artistically-focused” qualitative researchers begins. If we go back to Elliot Eisner’s 1981 paper on the differences between scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research, he is quite clear in stating he sees the differences as being on a continuum, but for many critics of qualitative researchers who draw more heavily on the humanities and arts the divide seems clear and the reactions quite polarizing. Close observers of qualitative research like Norm Denzin might attribute such a critique to the “conservative challenge” which often greet performative, critical, and transformative minded qualitative researchers when they present their studies (Denzin & Giardina, 2006). Such reactions may be traced back to years of conversing with quantitative researching colleagues, adjusting to feedback from peer reviewers, or simply having little or no exposure to ways of conducting research that do not quite fit a traditional social

science mold. I have to admit I am a bit uneasy saying arts-based research might not quite fit a “traditional” template because I am not sure at least in the qualitative world, if there has ever been such a clear distinction between the social sciences and the arts when one considers the wonderful contributions of ethnographic film (see Loizos, 1993) or the ground-breaking *Return to Laughter* by Elenor Smith Bowen (a.k.a Laura Bohannon). Of course Bowen/Bohannon’s ethnographic tale was published as a “novel,” but the fact remains anthropologists have long used novelistic, poetic, and visual media to re-present the findings of their rigorous field work.

Maybe this strange divide between art and science in research and especially qualitative research will begin to erode away as more readers find Patricia Leavy’s new 2009 tome, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, and begin to realize that researchers conducting narrative, poetic, musical, performative, dance, and visual forms of inquiry employ rigorous methods of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation too. Consumers of Leavy’s book should also find a comfortable introduction to these arts-based approaches and hopefully an invitation to try some of these methodological modes in research of their own.

In her well-written and engaging work, Leavy carefully introduces the world of arts-based research by walking us through the paradigmatic contexts that have helped to shape this approach to inquiry as well as to establish the conflicting perspectives that hinder many to see these methods as being research at all. She also recounts the struggles with monolithic standards of quality in qualitative research and calls for a dialogue to continue regarding the aesthetics and pragmatics of research. By engaging in such conversation Leavy suggests we all could benefit from challenging our own comfort zones and begin to see that we can all learn from our colleagues regardless of the method being utilized.

For her part in this call to conversation, Leavy starts her introduction of arts-based research with narrative inquiry because she observes this type of artistic inquiry may be most familiar to qualitative researchers in general and the one which might help them see connections they may have been missing before. As with the other succeeding sections of the book, Leavy traces the origins of the approach, shows how the arts-based method became to be used in the social sciences, outlines the analytical and trustworthiness issues, and shares great textual and Internet resources for readers to learn more about the process. Leavy’s overview of narrative is paired with an exemplary, published work in which the method was used to conduct a study and to produce some findings.

From narrative inquiry, Leavy moves onto chapters introducing how researchers use poetry, music, performance, dance, and the visual arts to conduct credible research studies. As was the case with the narrative chapter, each of these sections are also accompanied by previously published articles which help we as readers to get a more concrete image of just what a study conducted from these approaches can be in the written and visual form. This structure and style of presentation makes her book an excellent choice in an introductory course to arts-based research or to an initial qualitative research course. Because her approach is also transdisciplinary in nature I would think the book could be used in a variety of academic programs. Leavy’s text also helps address the gap between more advanced treatments of the subject like Knowles and Cole’s 2007 *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, or the many “how to” books

on specific arts-based methods like Denzin's 2003 book on performance ethnography, Pink's 2006 work on visual ethnography, and Chang's 2007 autoethnography guide.

In these sections as well as the excellent concluding chapter, Leavy helps us to see the unique differences of the arts-based approaches, but also allows us to see the connections quantitative, qualitative, and arts-based all have in common. Her figure on page 256 is especially insightful when it comes to illustrating these distinctions of both separation and connections. Leavy's exposition also helped me to see the challenges arts-based researchers face in re-presenting the social and personal were not all that different than the dilemmas quantitative researchers face with their numbers and qualitative researchers face with their words. Like the famous saying, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture," we all must somehow transform what we think and what we observe into a mode of representation and communication that is unlike the thought or sense. Somehow we accept the numbering and prosaic wording more easily than the poetic discourse, dance, or performance.

I have come away from Patricia Leavy's book with a greater commitment to challenge the comfortable either/or sense I had in understanding what I used to call the "Four Forms of Qualitative Research." In my old way of thinking I envisioned one form of qualitative research as that type of research that informs. I used to ascribe this type to the scientific form wherein the researcher would be focused on producing information based upon what was learned in the field. I saw that researchers working from this form would tend to emphasize description, explanation, and/or interpretation and they would tend to use traditional reporting styles from the social or behavioral sciences.

I saw the second form of qualitative research to be that type of research that performs. In my previous conceptualization I only associated this form of research with the arts wherein the researcher would be focused on producing performances based upon what was learned in the field. I saw this form as tending to emphasize description also, explanation, and/or interpretation, but in addition would be focused on aesthetics and evocation. I conceived that these researchers might use elements from traditional social or behavioral science reporting styles, but would more likely tend to use creative reporting styles from the arts, humanities, and technologies.

My third form of qualitative research would be that type of research that reforms. In my neat system this type would be the critical form wherein the researcher would be focusing on producing reformation based upon what was learned in the field. This form too could tend to emphasize description, explanation, interpretation, aesthetics, and evocation, but would also be focused on critique, evaluation, and provocation. These researchers might use elements from traditional social or behavioral science, the arts, humanities, and technologies reporting styles, but would more likely tend to use critical reporting styles from philosophy, political science, investigative journalism, area studies, and interdisciplinary studies.

The fourth form of qualitative Research would be that type of research that transforms. In my world view this type would be the change form wherein the researcher would be focusing on producing transformation based upon what was initiated and learned in the field. This form could also tend to emphasize description, explanation, interpretation, aesthetics, evocation, critiquing, evaluating, and provocation, but would be focused on intervention, change, proscription, and prescription too. These researchers may use elements from traditional social or behavioral science, the arts, humanities,

technologies, philosophy, political science, area studies, and interdisciplinary studies reporting styles, but would more likely tend to use transformational reporting styles from systems thinking, clinical practice, business, economics, management, law, and leadership.

In reading Leavy's book I can now see that all forms of research can inform, perform, reform, and transform what we think we know about the world around as well as ourselves as researchers and readers. In re-considering my own view of arts-based research and the question with which I opened this review I would have to say that my answer would be "Yes" to the query whether arts-based research is research or not, but with one caveat. I think in order for the arts-based approaches to achieve greater acceptance or at least appreciation, there needs to be a commitment to transparency like has been encouraged in the quantitative and qualitative research worlds. By transparency I mean the sharing of the artistic choice-making process through which the art formed. This clarity in transformation would help me appreciate the compelling authenticity claimed by arts-based researchers and value the evocative political, consciousness-raising, emancipatory re-presentations I find in the stories, images, sounds, and scenes. Such clearness would not necessarily be presented in what would be a traditional methods section, but could approximate the forms we see in art gallery exhibit notes, museum guides, Playbills, and DVD director commentaries. All of these performances about the performances would help to provide a partial context to the arts-based process and product and help to "develop a new kind of practice-based language to explain and facilitate these new transdisciplinary research practices, including evaluative practices" (Leavy, 2009, p. 257). In doing so I think all researchers would benefit from the practice and hopefully, be more transparent in their quantitative and qualitative work too.

Lastly, I think those of us who serve as editors of journals also need to consider how we are going to respond to this "Is it research?" question when it comes to reviewing and publishing papers that present the results of arts-based inquiries. Although we have published a number of arts-based articles (see Davis, 2005; Kaufmann, 2008; Klinker & Todd, 2007; Mittapalli & Samaras, 2008; Oleson, 2004; Quinn, Albrecht, Mahan, Bell-Ellison, Akintobi, Reynolds, & Jeffers, 2006; Ricci, 2003; Richards, 2006; Wong-Wylie, 2006; Wyatt, 2007), we at *The Qualitative Report* often seem to struggle with such submissions, but I think after reading Patricia Leavy's new book and learning more about these methods we will be more comfortable with our arts-based research authors and their appealing and provocative works that are both art and research.

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Author Note

Dr. Ronald J. Chenail is the Co-Editor for *The Qualitative Report* and *The Weekly Qualitative Report* at Nova Southeastern University. He also serves as the Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness and Professor of Family Therapy. He can be contacted at 3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314-7796 USA; Telephone: 954.262.5389; Fax: 954.262.3970; E-mail: ron@nsu.nova.edu.

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