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Keeping a Personal Focus When Contemplating a Sense of Home: A Review of Qualitative Housing Analysis: An International Perspective

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Abstract

While calling for a more systematic qualitative research approach in addressing contemporary urban studies' challenges, Paul Maginn, Susan Thompson, and Matthew Tonts's new edited work, *Qualitative Housing Analysis: An International Perspective*, also helps to remind us of the importance of remaining sensitive to the perspective of the people inhabiting these dwellings and to those not so fortunate to be living under a roof they can call their own. The research presented in this excellent work calls attention to the value qualitative research findings can bring to the complex study of housing and the implications of housing policy decisions.

Keywords

Qualitative Housing Analysis, Qualitative Analysis, Policy Development

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Keeping a Personal Focus When Contemplating a Sense of Home: A Review of *Qualitative Housing Analysis: An International Perspective*

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*While calling for a more systematic qualitative research approach in addressing contemporary urban studies' challenges, Paul Maginn, Susan Thompson, and Matthew Tonts's new edited work, *Qualitative Housing Analysis: An International Perspective*, also helps to remind us of the importance of remaining sensitive to the perspective of the people inhabiting these dwellings and to those not so fortunate to be living under a roof they can call their own. The research presented in this excellent work calls attention to the value qualitative research findings can bring to the complex study of housing and the implications of housing policy decisions. Key Words: *Qualitative Housing Analysis, Qualitative Analysis, and Policy Development**

A companion piece to their earlier edited volume, *Qualitative Urban Analysis: An International Perspective* (Maginn, Thompson, & Tonts, 2008b; see Chenail, 2008, for the earlier review), Paul Maginn, Susan Thompson, and Matthew Tonts' (2008a) *Qualitative Housing Analysis: An International Perspective* serves as a series of case studies illustrating the value of systematic qualitative research in addressing contemporary urban studies' challenges. In selecting housing analysis, the editors have chosen a phenomenon that reflects both an objective world of square feet and construction costs, as well as a subjective view of one's sense of home, security, and belonging. The pragmatic synergy of contemplating both perspectives helps the editors to make the case of researchers and policy makers working in this domain to utilize quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies when attempting to study and comprehend this complex arena.

Maginn, Thompson, and Tonts (2008a) also call for a particular array of qualitative methodologies reflecting what they call "a more systematic approach" that emphasizes replication, duplication, quantification, and conceptualization. They advocate such a stance because they hold that these qualities help to bring the strengths of qualitative inquiry –its ability to help investigators to consider complex situations. In making this call the editors firmly plant their flag in the scientific camp of qualitative research. Although some may react negatively to this claim, I can see the value in exhorting qualitative researchers working in this area to embrace some of the more transformational, explanatory methodologies such as ethnography and grounded theory. In doing so investigators can present their research and policy making colleagues a set of results that go beyond separate categorical descriptions by connecting and transforming qualitative differences to form culturally thick descriptions and substantive grounded theories (see Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003, for a more detailed comparison of qualitative methodologies by degree of analytical transformation of data into results).

I also sense the editors call for greater transparency in describing our methodological choices to both instill confidence in the results we produce, but also to give colleagues suggestive prescriptions as to how to conduct future studies of their own. The ability to transfer and translate well-conceptualized research methods from extant studies can help reduce the piloting phase of new investigations and allow the community of researchers to draw upon an emergent set of best practices. Also by embracing some degree of continuity, researchers working in this area can make the consumption of their findings by meta-aggregators and synthesizers as well as policy makers easier to digest and transfer.

After laying out their thesis and purpose in the opening chapter, Maginn, Thompson, and Tonts (2008a) organize the rest of the book into three content-driven sections. In Part I, the authors of the three chapters explore the lived experiences of home and homelessness. What impressed me the most about these contributions was the sensitivity the authors exhibited when conducting these studies in people's homes and with people without homes. These authors' attention to the vulnerability of both of these groups, which seems especially prudent considering our current economic times, helps to put the technical acumen with which they conduct their studies into a very personal light.

In Part II, the focus broadens to explore housing within contemporary urban trends such as gentrification, urban renewal, and migratory patterns. These three chapters are excellent in helping readers appreciate these larger, complex patterns without losing the perspective of people living and surviving in a variety of housing options. As with the first section, I was again struck at how qualitative research can help us to remember the human dimension within this whirl of demographic patterns and figures. The balance created by juxtaposing the objective with the subjective is made quite clear by these authors as they demonstrate the necessity of such a patterning when contemplating global policy decisions which impact people's local sense of place and home.

Part III presents the study of housing within the purview of community as the authors ask us to consider issues of the environment, the social landscape, and community development in relationship to housing and homeless considerations. Consistent with the rest of the volume, the authors of this section start their studies with the discovering of the perspectives of those living within these affected areas and thus help to retain a human factor focus within these larger, complex social networks. This inclusionary posture helps to support a democratic approach to policy making by valuing the voices of those most impacted by policy decisions and by preserving their perspectives throughout the investigations undertaken.

The editors give Adrian Franklin, a pioneer in qualitative housing analysis research, the final word in their book. Franklin does a fine job of reviewing the recent history of ethnography and its utilization in housing studies. Franklin strongly advocates for ethnography's place at the methodology and policy table, but also realistically reflects in the problems and issues which remain. Although Franklin's assessment of the contemporary landscape is tempered somewhat he suggests a more favorable future especially when considering the introduction of new qualitative methodologies into housing policy analysis and the promising findings of the latest cadre of doctoral students' dissertation research.

A true bonus of this book is Franklin's recommendation of the wonderful 2003 movie, *Salmer fra Kjøkkenet (Kitchen Stories)* directed by Bente Hamer. The film, a

comedic presentation of a fictional qualitative field study of Norwegian bachelors' kitchen behaviors, is both an insightful portrayal of one person's sense of home and place, but also a penetrating reflection on ethnographic inquiry and the complex and sometimes humorous relationship between investigator and participant. Besides helping to make the case for the value of qualitative research in putting a human face on housing policy research and policy making, the movie also sheds light on the concerns that can arise when we forget the human factor when conducting our studies. I fully support Adrian's enthusiastic review of *Kitchen Stories* and strongly suggest it become required viewing for both qualitative housing policy analysts and qualitative researchers alike. Taken in tandem, this funny movie and this serious book help us to remember the human being in social research and to appreciate this perspective in housing research in particular and qualitative research in general.

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