
8-19-2018

The Functionality and Usability of Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research: A Book Review

Umair Majid
majidua@mcmaster.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Majid, U. (2018). The Functionality and Usability of Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research: A Book Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(8), 1948-1951. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3665>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

The Functionality and Usability of Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research: A Book Review

Abstract

In this book review, I examine the functionality and usability of *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research* by Mulvihill and Swaminathan by interrogating my own preconceptions of life writing and how they informed my purview. The authors of this book map out distinct life writing methods by building on seminal literary and scholarly work. Through their use of metaphors, theory, and frameworks, the authors paint each life writing method canvas in a way that is tangible and appropriate to both novice and seasoned investigators. By coalescing life writing with critical theory, the authors describe an important perspective on life writing, and how it may be integrated into the research process.

Keywords

Life Writing, Narrative Methods, Qualitative Research, Critical Theory, Methodology

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

The Functionality and Usability of *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research*: A Book Review

Umair Majid

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

*In this book review, I examine the functionality and usability of *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research* by Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2017) by interrogating my own preconceptions of life writing and how they informed my purview. The authors of this book map out distinct life writing methods by building on seminal literary and scholarly work. Through their use of metaphors, theory, and frameworks, the authors paint each life writing method canvas in a way that is tangible and appropriate to both novice and seasoned investigators. By coalescing life writing with critical theory, the authors describe an important perspective on life writing, and how it may be integrated into the research process. Keywords: Life Writing, Narrative Methods, Qualitative Research, Critical Theory, Methodology*

Why Life Writing?

“...storytelling matters; it matters to individuals, it matters to cultures and subcultures, and it matters to our individual and collective beings as we engage our imagination about past, present, and future human experiences.” (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 1, emphasis added)

As with any scholarly jaunt, I began my exploration of this book by acknowledging my objectives, biases, and assumptions. I used these characteristics to orient my focus of the book and determine whether or not it can lead to new insights into how the book may be utilized by novice investigators and integrated in my own work.

As someone who has been immersed in both the positivist and interpretivist paradigms of research, narrative methods have caught my curiosity because of their ambiguity as well as their propensity for illuminating phenomena. I am awestruck by the idea of using interviews with a handful of participants to gain an in-depth view of phenomena. By interviewing each individual, investigators may uncover the attitudes that ground behaviour and choices. However, spending many hours in a discussion with each individual may deepen our collective knowledge about phenomena in a way that emphasizes its minutiae nuances while acknowledging the universality of particular mores. I have also considered the capacity of the *narrative* (“science of the imagination”) to elaborate the *logico-scientific* (“science of the concrete”; Bruner, 1986). The convergence between these two aspects of inquiry, I believe, holds great promise in my disciplinary area.

In my work, I examine the ways individuals may be engaged in decision-making opportunities relevant to health and social policy. However, while immersing in the plethora of research that enumerates this disciplinary area, I am often halted with the problem of *representation* (Contandriopoulos, 2004; Rowland & Kumagai, 2017). In other words: *Who are these individuals who engage in decision-making? What groups do they supposedly represent? How do they represent these groups? Do they actually represent these groups? How can representation be more representative?*

The context of these questions has shifted my attention to life writing approaches. I see these methods as possessing the capacity for explicating what representation entails in the policy context. With this orientation, I started my journey to both clarify the descriptions, tools, and strategies contained in this book, and interrogate how these resources may be capitalized for resolving my philosophical inquiries about the concept of representation.

In *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research*, Mulvihill and Swaminathan use critical theory to discuss how approaches to life writing may be used to question the self, status quo, social action, and normative narratives. The authors provide new methodological tools that support critical life writing, review different approaches and methods to life writing by synthesizing previous scholarly work, construct a guide for researchers to design their own life writing project, and advance the continued learning about life writing.

Functionality and Usability

The authors begin their account of life writing methods with an analysis of the historical nuances of life writing and by locating the conceptual and practical advantages to marrying life writing methods with critical theory. In the first chapter, the authors list the many justifications for employing a critical lens to viewing stories and using life writing in research. They offer ten propositions for using critical approaches to life writing, for example, to reify the nature of “self,” to empower individuals to voice their opinions against oppression, to explain and contextualize life, to document meaningful lives, and to challenge dominant discourses. In a similar way, Greenhalgh, Russell, and Swinglehurst (2005) emphasize the opportunity to use life writing methods to describe and explain concepts such as *cognitive inertia*, a tendency to maintain the status quo by privileging normative discourses (Bartunek, 1984).

The authors offer an integrative discussion about how coalescing critical theory with life writing may open the way to new discoveries, insights, and meanings. The authors espouse the use of their work for investigators, both novice and experienced, to locate their positions and interests in life writing. The structure and content of the introductory preamble supports the authors’ objectives through simultaneous description, explanation, and justification present throughout the book. The authors also reflect the purpose and content of the book using multiple strategies that are relevant and helpful for the novice investigator.

The descriptions of each life writing method are innovative. The authors, for example, attempt to contrive boundaries between life writing approaches, while recognizing that there is a plethora of life writing methods that are conterminous, and the borders between them, illusory (Riessman, 2005). Moreover, each life writing approach is described by situating it within its literary history, which serves to contextualize the practical suggestions they proffer for those engaging in life writing. The use of both history and practice enables neophyte and seasoned investigators to examine the past and present of life writing concurrently. In this way, investigators may use their emergent knowledge to discover their own purposes, objectives, and interests in life writing, while gaining and understanding of their previous knowledge and influences in their life writing approaches.

By building upon previous scholarly and literary work, it appears that the authors employ their own form of life writing to document the distinct life writing methods. This decision makes life writing methods more tangible, identifiable, and edible for investigators, such as myself, who desire a bite-sized methodological resource that clarifies the theoretical and practical underpinnings of life writing. The authors paint the canvas of each life writing approach by describing the multiplicity of ways to conceptualize and operationalize life writing through theory, frameworks, scholarly and literary examples, conceptual metaphors, and practical suggestions. For example, the authors believe that the biographer is both a craftsman and an artist because the biography needs “to be grounded in facts and, on the

other hand, needing imagination of an artist to reveal the inner workings of the subject's mind" (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 26). This metaphor is profound and helps to clarify the approaches to life writing; it enables investigators to internalize the life writing mode by immersing themselves in the art of craft and the craft of art simultaneously because, "We tend to define our reality in terms of metaphors and then act on the basis of those metaphors" (Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2017, p. 18).

The authors find themselves in a unique position to construct a guide for novice life writers and open the doors to new discoveries in different disciplines and research areas through the use of life writing. In their account of life writing methods, the authors substantiate their descriptions with practical suggestions from their personal experiences. For example, in their discussion of biography, the authors provide six suggestions for accessing archival data, which upon serious consideration, I believe are essential for anyone engaging with this form of data. Similarly, in their discussion of educational biography, the authors discuss some of the ethical issues that life writers may encounter such as the difficulty associated with attributing value, importance, and emphasis on certain findings over others. This discussion should encourage life writers to reflect because "through the events the narrative includes, excludes, and emphasizes, the storytelling not only illustrates his or her version of the action but also provides an interpretation or evaluative commentary on the subject" (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004, p. 148). The privileging of particular narratives over others may have overarching effects by determining the direction and relevance of theory, practice, and policy. Therefore, it is imperative for life writers to interrogate their own reflexive practices to determine the approach they use in their life writing.

By focusing on these issues, the authors reorient the reader away from theory and philosophy behind life writing towards practical strategies they have acquired from their experiences. For example, in their discussion about life history, the authors explicate the rationale and approach to choosing a participant. The authors' personal experiences are repackaged into a format that enables investigators to visualize life writing as practical and tangible, enabling investigators to operationalize life writing efficiently by foreseeing future issues that may arise when applying such methods in their research.

Final Thoughts

I agree with the authors that storytelling matters. Stories "are a basic tool that individuals use to communicate and create understanding with other people and for themselves" (Feldman et al., 2004, p. 147). I now see that one solution to my dilemma of representation is to internalize that a particular individual may not be statistically, descriptively, or symbolically representative of all individuals, stories, and experiences. Rather, immersing in the life of any one individual may enable me to see future stories, narratives, and experiences from a new frame of reference. In this way, the focus of life writing could be to explicate stories that support new perspectives to viewing phenomena.

This book, through the union of life writing and critical theory, advances the notions set out by the life writing scholarship by considering the ways to reconceptualize, reconstruct, and reform our interpretations of phenomena. For neophytes and seasoned qualitative investigators looking to life writing for guidance, this book is a must-have. Albeit before reading this book, I was open to grasping how useful this book may be to my own work, I found that the end of this book was met with continuous nodding and moments of realization and inspiration that prompted me to revisit my own work and enhance its theory, transparency, and clarity. This book presents important descriptions of life writing methods in a way that is cogent and tangible.

References

- Bartunek, J. M. (1984). Changing interpretive schemes and organizational restructuring. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 29, 355-372.
- Bruner, J. S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Contandriopoulos, D. (2004). A sociological perspective on public participation in health care. *Social Science & Medicine*, 58(2), 321-330.
- Feldman, M. S., Sköldberg, K., Brown, R. N., & Horner, D. (2004). Making sense of stories: A rhetorical approach to narrative analysis. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 14(2), 147-170.
- Greenhalgh, T., Russell, J., & Swinglehurst, D. (2005). Narrative methods in quality improvement research. *BMJ Quality & Safety*, 14(6), 443-449.
- Mulvihill, T. M., & Swaminathan, R. (2017). *Critical approaches to life writing methods in qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Riessman, C. K. (2005). Narrative analysis. In N. Kelly, C. Horrocks, K. Milnes, B. Roberts, & D. Robinson (Eds.) *Narrative, memory & everyday life* (pp. 1-7). Huddersfield, UK: University of Huddersfield.
- Rowland, P., & Kumagai, A. K. (2017). Dilemmas of representation: Patient engagement in health professions education. *Academic Medicine: Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, 93(6), 869-873.

Author Note

Umair Majid has held appointments as a Curriculum Designer, Program Developer, and Instructor at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. He completed his graduate training in health research methodology with a specialization in the quality appraisal of qualitative research. He has diverse experiences, knowledge, and expertise from the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research traditions. Currently, he is finishing a Master of Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, focusing on innovative curriculum design and program evaluation. He is also an incoming PhD student in Health Services Research at the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, using qualitative research methods to investigate patient and family engagement strategies in hospital planning, service delivery, and evaluation. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: majidua@mcmaster.ca.

Copyright 2018: Umair Majid and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Majid, U. (2018). The functionality and usability of *critical approaches to life writing methods in qualitative research*: A book review. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(8), 1948-1951. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss8/11>
