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## Bringing Research to Life: A Review of Leavy's Research Design

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## Bringing Research to Life: A Review of Leavy's Research Design

### Abstract

In this review, I examine the contents, themes, and possibilities of Patricia Leavy's *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Approaches*. Specifically, I outline the (1) contents of the book in relation to its development of research methodology and potential for use in research methods classes, and (2) the usefulness of this text for bettering and diversifying pedagogical approaches to social research methods. Further, I discuss limitations in the work in terms of possibilities for future additions or expansions teachers may add to the use of this book in courses. In conclusion, I offer overall thoughts on the work and its place within courses concerning the process of social research methodology.

### Keywords

Book Review, Research Methods, Social Research, Methodological Tools, Pedagogy

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## Bringing Research to Life: A Review of Leavy's *Research Design*

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*In this review, I examine the contents, themes, and possibilities of Patricia Leavy's *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Approaches*. Specifically, I outline the (1) contents of the book in relation to its development of research methodology and potential for use in research methods classes, and (2) the usefulness of this text for bettering and diversifying pedagogical approaches to social research methods. Further, I discuss limitations in the work in terms of possibilities for future additions or expansions teachers may add to the use of this book in courses. In conclusion, I offer overall thoughts on the work and its place within courses concerning the process of social research methodology. Keywords: Book Review, Research Methods, Social Research, Methodological Tools, Pedagogy*

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This outstanding textbook demands no less than unequivocal endorsement as the best social research methods guide I have come across in my career. Equally informative and empowering, *Research Design* deftly orients readers to key concepts in research as a general practice before guiding them in discovery of five different approaches to inquiry. Author Dr. Patricia Leavy brings research challenges and opportunities vividly to life through detailed and deeply intersectional example scenarios that center a vast range of different life experiences and social issues. She uses language easily accessible for learners at the undergraduate level, but also presents critical thinking challenges that offer much for readers at the graduate level and beyond. As a researcher with over 10 years' experience in the interdisciplinary sociomedical sciences who now trains other scholars, I found myself brimming with excitement as I progressed through each chapter. This book filled me with the same thrill of discovery I felt in my own days of higher education and coupled that enthusiasm with affirmation of my agency to affect positive change through inquiry. I suspect it will do the same for other readers.

The sense of excitement that pervades this textbook stem partly from Leavy's interweaving of ethical and philosophical concepts with the mechanics of different research methodologies. She begins *Research Design* with an overview of how scholars develop research studies and programs, centering social research principles while also highlighting shared themes across disciplinary areas. Part I of the two-part textbook begins with Leavy's brief introduction to the practice of social research—and moreover, why people see value in conducting this type of inquiry. The book thus begins with an affirmation of readers' potential to build a better world through sophisticated social research. This general centering of opportunity for positive change gives way to specific discussions of ethical principles, focusing largely on how scholars often find ourselves tasked with balancing competing considerations in engaging and protecting study participants. Leavy then progresses to a discussion of research project architecture and mechanics that translates the preceding theoretical discussion of ethical principles into concrete approaches for safeguarding human rights in social inquiry.

Readers then explore a vast landscape of potential approaches to research, learning the finer details of five different strategies for gathering and analyzing information about the social world. Part II of the textbook covers quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based approaches to research. Leavy soundly rejects the idea of these five research methods being mutually exclusive, instead highlighting at every opportunity how they can intersect and complement one another. Learners seeking reinforcement of dichotomous

opposition between quantitative and qualitative research methods will find nothing of the sort here. Instead, readers will discover integrative ways of thinking about different research approaches—and reflect critically on how best to engage these diverse tools for a more thorough and actionable understanding of social phenomena.

One of the best action recommendations from *Research Design* is its emphasis on research ethics as processes and exchanges. Leavy operationalizes these abstract concepts in Chapter 2 by making concrete recommendations for centering participant voices throughout the data collection and analysis process. She also offers concrete suggestions for affirming people in sharing results from research with those who contributed data and explores some of the scenarios in which sharing findings might *not* affirm participants. This discussion concludes with a broader philosophical exploration of what constitutes “community” in research, and the implications of how researchers think about the communities they engage for the approaches that should be used in communication and sharing.

I also thoroughly enjoyed and resonated with Leavy’s thoughtful guidance on building literature reviews in Chapter 3. She not only provides detailed recommendations for writers about guiding readers through the often vast landscape of literature supporting the conceptual framework of a manuscript, but also translates these suggestions into a wonderfully simple visual map of how best to organize and connect different areas of this landscape. Advanced undergraduate learners and beginning graduate students in particular may find this section especially helpful as they begin to develop their own research proposals and study designs for the first time and make their first forays into publishing academic work.

Likewise, each of the ensuing chapters on specific research designs suggests useful language for presenting and interpreting results from a given type of analysis. Leavy thus equips readers with concepts and vocabulary to make the back matter of journal articles as strong as the front matter of the proposals that inspired those manuscripts. In so doing, she also encourages readers to choose phrasing that accurately reflects the scope and depth of study findings—as well as where the limits on those findings lie. For example, in Chapter 5 she offers language for discussing quantitative research results that inspires curiosity rather than certainty, using terms like *relate* and *associate* to balance references to *cause* and *effect*. Among the issues I have raised most frequently in nearly a decade of reviewing quantitative manuscripts for journals is an overstatement and/or overgeneralization of study findings. This common mistake often stems from lack of training on how to talk about quantitative findings appropriately, as well as a broader bias toward mathematical methods that Leavy herself critiques.

*Research Design* shines similarly in its exploration and celebration of arts-based research strategies in Chapter 7. Leavy concisely illustrates the vast array of approaches, techniques, and concepts that scholars can engage in conducting arts-based inquiry. She treats these constructs with the same rigor and precise orientation to detail that she extends to other research frameworks in early chapters, rather than making arts-based designs an afterthought as prior methods textbooks often have. This portion of the textbook will likely make a tremendous impact in fields such as medicine, where both visual and narrative arts-based approaches have just begun to gain traction. As faculty at one of the only medical schools in the United States to publish a humanities journal, I resonated immensely with Leavy’s discussions of how arts-based inquiry can enrich scientific practice. One powerful example is how she guides readers through what they are likely experiencing as they view one of the collages generated from a study centering patient experiences of anorexia. She encourages readers to reflect on experiences like defamiliarization and resistance, highlighting how the power of research to transform thinking often depends on its ability to both trigger emotional reactions and help people manage those reactions.

In a similar vein, Leavy’s discussion of cultural competency and sensitivity in Chapter 8 quickly became one of my favorite parts of the textbook. She provides one of the best working definitions of these interrelated concepts that I have seen to date, whether in methods texts or anywhere else. Specifically, Leavy notes that cultural competency and sensitivity are not merely questions of knowledge about what different groups of people may experience, but rather ones of how researchers translate this understanding into concrete actions that inspire trust. Likewise, she emphasizes a crucial element of this truth that often goes overlooked: the fact that trust must be mindfully sustained and effortfully nurtured once built. She then recommends concrete strategies for power-sharing and mutual learning before providing a visual overview of how different community-based participatory research principles complement with one another. Readers will come away feeling empowered rather than confused about how to center trust-building in community engagement activities.

Indeed, feelings of empowerment constituted the overarching unifier in my experience of all five method-specific chapters. Central to this pattern was Leavy’s inclusion of “review stops” at multiple points in each chapter, offering readers the chance to reflect on both knowledge gained and opportunities for translating that knowledge into practice. I came away from each review stop feeling as if I had a better vocabulary for communicating with students and colleagues about concepts that I often take as a given in my own research projects such as multiplicity and flexibility. Likewise, I appreciated how nearly half of the review stops were accompanied by “ethics in practice” exercises connecting the theoretical content from Part I with the applied content from Part II. These thinking activities will help readers to advocate both for themselves in framing research for submission to journals and conferences and for others in dialoguing with study participants and stakeholders.

My biggest critique of *Research Design* actually stems from how much I enjoyed the textbook. Rather than providing a Part III dedicated to synthesis of multiple research approaches and broad opportunities for application of integrative strategies, Leavy concludes the book abruptly with the community-based participatory research chapter in Part II. Although this portion of the book certainly offers ample context-specific examples of how learners can apply principles of this type of research in practice and notes that any of the other four frameworks presented can fit within the community-based participatory approach to research, it does not give way to a more macro-level assessment of opportunities and next steps. Providing a Part III with a more general view of how readers may wish to integrate different combinations of the five core research approaches would balance the macroscopic concepts presented in Part I nicely. Including such discourse in future editions of the textbook would also lend a sense of closure to readers who will likely feel both surprised and disappointed to see the textbook come to such an abrupt end.

More specific critiques of *Research Design* may also be offered to enrich the textbook’s impressively inclusive approach to inquiry for future editions. For example, although the book as a whole (and in particular the section on subjugated voices in Chapter 2) do a superb job of highlighting and centering the experiences of people of different queer sexualities and transgender identities, the first edition contains no focused information about asexual or intersex individuals. This represents another opportunity for a potential Part III to conclude future editions of the textbook. Offering a broader view of current challenges and gaps in research would provide an excellent framework for illuminating specific populations whose experiences have yet to be explored thoroughly in academic literature. Yet this first edition nonetheless stands far apart from its peers in illustrating and affirming the tremendous diversity of people, societies, and cultures learners may encounter in their practice of research. Frankly, it was both refreshing and joyful to read a research methods textbook in which I saw myself—a queer, agender scholar with a progressive genetic disease—represented in concrete terms.

*Research Design* should be required reading in methods courses across the social sciences, and arguably beyond as well. This textbook sets a new standard in pedagogical engagement of scholars both novice and seasoned. It pairs rigorous exploration of core methods concepts and dilemmas with exciting invitation to think boldly about how we can use inclusive inquiry to transform our communities in positive ways. Leavy leaves readers both hungry for applied research experience and confident in our ability to implement our learning effectively. Just as importantly, she instills at every turn a sense of humility in scholars of every career stage—and a robust awareness that the limitations on our knowledge may be the most powerful finding in any study. Coupled with her consistent centering of how challenges in present research activities can become opportunities in future ones, Leavy’s valuation of curiosity over certainty offers a powerful conceptual framework for future generations of scholars. This textbook will help readers across the interdisciplinary social sciences to build not only the specific skills they need to conduct sophisticated inquiry, but also the broader cultural mindset of making their best possible impact in doing so.

### References

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### Author Note

Alexandra “Xan” C. H. Nowakowski, PhD, MPH is a medical sociologist and public health program evaluator. They currently serve as an Assistant Professor in the Geriatrics and Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine departments at the Florida State University College of Medicine. Their scholarship and outreach focus on health equity in aging with chronic disease, as well as social factors that contribute to the development of complex chronicity. Dr. Nowakowski’s work critically engages their standpoints as an openly queer and agender person living with cystic fibrosis and post-traumatic stress disorder. This history also inspired them to found the advocacy project Write Where It Hurts, focused on scholarship informed by lived experience of hardship and trauma, along with their spouse Dr. J Sumerau. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [xnowakowski@fsu.edu](mailto:xnowakowski@fsu.edu).

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