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## A “Highdeeply” Review of Johnny Saldaña’s Thinking Qualitatively: Methods of Mind

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### Abstract

More than a book about conducting qualitative research, Johnny Saldaña in *Thinking Qualitatively: Methods of Mind* asks readers to think “highdeeply,” so they organize their thinking about how to live their best lives through the process of qualitative inquiry. To do so, Saldaña transforms the concept of person-centered qualitative inquiry into a concrete entity with structured exercises and practical examples. Saldaña contributions with this work all center on the process of conscious qualitative reflection as a tool for synthetic understanding of the world around us.

### Keywords

Book Review, Thinking Qualitatively, Johnny Saldaña, Methods Pedagogy

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## A “Highdeeply” Review of Johnny Saldaña’s *Thinking Qualitatively: Methods of Mind*

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*More than a book about conducting qualitative research, Johnny Saldaña in Thinking Qualitatively: Methods of Mind asks readers to think “highdeeply,” so they organize their thinking about how to live their best lives through the process of qualitative inquiry. To do so, Saldaña transforms the concept of person-centered qualitative inquiry into a concrete entity with structured exercises and practical examples. Saldaña contributions with this work all center on the process of conscious qualitative reflection as a tool for synthetic understanding of the world around us. Keywords: Book Review, Thinking Qualitatively, Johnny Saldaña, Methods Pedagogy*

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Some methods textbooks help readers organize our thinking about how to do research. Johnny Saldaña’s *Thinking Qualitatively* does that and much more: This textbook helps readers organize our thinking about how to live our best lives through the process of qualitative inquiry. The book uses flexible approach to the discovery and implementation of qualitative exploration methods, helping readers with different cognitive styles develop an approach to qualitative questioning that works well for each of us as unique students of life. Although the concept of person-centered qualitative inquiry may sound abstract at the outset, Saldaña transforms this latent construct into a concrete entity with structured exercises and practical examples. Using his own arts background as a lens for exploring the broad sample space of qualitative methods applications, Saldaña brings to life the concept of thinking “highdeeply” in research inquiry. Having never seen this term before reading *Thinking Qualitatively*, I felt surprised and elated to finish the book with the sense that I too could vividly describe how thinking “highdeeply” transforms my life, including but certainly not limited to my practice of qualitative research.

The major contributions of this textbook all center on the process of conscious qualitative reflection as a tool for synthetic understanding of the world around us. *Thinking Qualitatively* resonates with the validation of arts-based and narrative-based approaches to inquiry seen in other rigorous methods texts like Patricia Leavy’s *Research Design* (2017). Saldaña similarly prizes amplifying intersectionally marginalized voices and using qualitative inquiry as a means of centering stories that might otherwise become forgotten. His open celebration of how his personal biography as a gay Latinx man has shaped his research lends credibility to his championing of engaging scholar standpoints explicitly in qualitative inquiry. We see this concept of “lenses” working actively in Saldaña’s own life and scholarship—and often leading to immense innovation in the process. *Thinking Qualitatively* provides a vocabulary for qualitative explorers seeking to achieve similar innovation in our own work. This book offers expansive, powerful language for discussing the value of our research with others, empowering readers in both teaching and learning applications. I especially loved the “for your mental Rolodex” portions of the textbook, which arm readers with useful competencies and techniques for overcoming challenges and forging new territory in qualitative inquiry.

After introducing the intersection of his personal and professional backgrounds and providing an overview of essential skills for innovation in qualitative thinking, Saldaña offers

orientation to his own cognitive processes and how they inform his research. I resonated strongly with this content for a number of reasons related to my own professional practice and family upbringing. Specifically, I was raised in a developmental neuroscience lab and would later engage cognitive neuropsychology concepts strongly in my own work on illness management across the life course. Indeed, conscious qualitative reflection on my own thinking processes has allowed me to contribute innovative content to the hugely diverse existing literature on how people cope with chronic health conditions as we age. I thus found deep meaning and value in Saldaña's overview of "conditions for healthy thinking," as well as the exercises he provides at the end of each chapter for operationalizing these conditions. Moreover, I loved the team-oriented approach to those exercises—a functional illustration of how thinking qualitatively often requires thinking collaboratively.

Other specific examples of content I saw as uniquely valuable in *Thinking Qualitatively* overflowed the pages of my notebook as I read. Saldaña's references to Sherlock Holmes delighted me in their expansiveness, going beyond deduction to abduction, induction, and retroduction. These examples offered a refreshing divergence from many other scholars' framing of Holmes as a purely deductive thinker and hero. Aptly, Saldaña uses these examples as a segue into discussion of the subjective nature of reality. The notion that "categories don't exist" empirically but rather evolve along with our understanding of our data permeates the textbook's cultivation of flexible thinking among readers. I found the content on "qualitative equations" to be one of the most apt illustrations of flexibility in thinking. Having never considered this concept before reading *Thinking Qualitatively*, I found myself enraptured by Saldaña's illustration of how qualitative processes can be described with frameworks we often think of as purely quantitative. I also loved the descriptions of how equations offer one of many ways of telling stories, each of which yields its own unique value.

Saldaña's translation of theory into action through masterful storytelling offers an array of examples of effective qualitative inquiry. I particularly resonated with his illustration of "participatory action research," a needed step beyond the concept of community-based participatory research that pervades the sociomedical literatures in which I write. Similarly, I valued the content on "member checking"—an apt example of how thinking qualitatively means affirming others in reflecting on their own experiences. This general philosophy of encouraging synthetic critical thinking by scholars and the people we engage yielded a number of specific passages that delighted me. The content on fantasies and "thinking deviantly" stood out as a core contribution of the book. Without the willingness to challenge our beliefs through transgressive inquiry little progress can be achieved in advocating for justice and dismantling stigma. Saldaña's advocacy for people of size and people who challenge established norms by literally and figuratively getting in the faces of oppressors hit multiple high notes in my reading. His example of Paul Mack and "aggressive process" especially resonated with my own lived experiences as someone who has raised their voice in pursuit of justice.

In this spirit of qualitative inquiry as progressive action, I also appreciated Saldaña's keen attention to the role of movement in thinking; we often forget that qualitative data can include far more than just words and other static constructs. His explanation and examples of standard versus dynamic diagrams builds beautifully on the work of Edmund Tufte, whose work on visual display of quantitative information always seemed to hold uncharted promise for qualitative exploration that Saldaña masterfully translates. His thematic visualization examples for predictors of success in smoking cessation, the fallacy of "broken windows" approaches to policing, and the empowerment of novice teachers in working with students illustrate the power of applying Tufte's principles about quantitative data to qualitative information. I also particularly appreciated Saldaña's detailed engagement of Kathy Charmaz's work on adapting over time and context for illness management, and his integration of narrative data with thematic visualization on this topic. The incorporation of "poetic inquiry" on chronic

illness oriented new vocabulary for me, complete with powerful description of how scholars long familiar with more traditional narrative approaches can center arts-based thinking in rigorous qualitative analysis.

*Thinking Qualitatively* offers many notable strengths for readers looking to discover creative approaches to qualitative inquiry, both including and beyond thinking poetically. Throughout the book, Saldaña provides detailed examples of qualitative reflection on interpersonal communication, paying strong attention to the nuances of these interactions. The exercises he includes at the end of each chapter create space for inquirers' emotions as well as our thoughts—a unique feature of the text that makes it not only exciting but also deeply affirming. I loved the emphasis throughout the book on “cementing knowledge,” and the concrete guidance Saldaña provides for readers in translating short-term exposure to long-term retention in mastering concepts. I also found the content on qualitative problem solving and public presentation of qualitative inquiry extremely helpful for my own work. The specific, actionable suggestions Saldaña provides in these areas offer clear guidance for application. I likewise appreciated the highly reflective closing sections, and especially their explicit articulation of core principles for qualitative thinking and action. The “codeweaving” content Saldaña includes in this concluding discourse enraptured me, leaving me thirsty for more exposition on this topic. Likewise, I found myself thinking that a future version of the book could involve explicit reflection on team-based thinking beyond the gestalt concept of collaboration.

My critiques of *Thinking Qualitatively* all offer similar prospects for improving upon the present content in potential future editions of the textbook. Saldaña's initial descriptions of inquiry and research could also cover evaluation, something that would increase the value of this text for me as a professional program evaluator. Specific evaluation approaches like success case method and storyboarding hold tremendous power for qualitative discovery. I also felt unsure about Saldaña's amplification of Barbara Ehrenreich's work. On the one hand, this seemed at odds with his otherwise masterful centering of marginalized voices in discourse. On the other, it seemed an apt illustration of how anyone can cultivate empathy with the experiences of people whose lives differ vastly from our own. More on the instrumental side, I thought that certain technical terms (such as “ethnodrama”) would resonate better with students if defined on first use. Likewise, the oral history content could delve into regulatory issues (such as engagement of human subjects committees and/or institutional review boards) in a future version of the book. I found the “thinking summarily” chapter less cohesively organized than others, although I valued its content tremendously. I found myself wondering if “thinking synthetically” would work better as a frame for the “thinking summarily” chapter in future versions. This subtle but significant shift in framing would progress well to concepts of interpretation and more accurately reflect Saldaña's overall aims with this chapter, which read as more of a weaving together of prior content than a linear reiteration of it.

Because of its strong if sometimes implicit emphasis on synthetic thinking across technical skill levels, I believe *Thinking Qualitatively* would be an excellent learning resource for scholars at a diverse array of career stages. Aptly, I found Saldaña's denouncement of the idea that one needs a doctorate to teach effectively at the university level to be both accurate and energizing. I, and other people with doctorates, can learn much from Saldaña's cultivation of qualitative inquiry as an endless conversation. His emphasis on “conversational moments” in communicative thinking offers an excellent model for implementing the lessons of this book. Likewise, the content on “thinking multiculturally” goes well beyond lip service to notions of inclusion. Rather, it offers a concrete roadmap to affirmation that vividly illustrates how the process of amplifying challenges to established norms constitutes a cornerstone of research ethics. In that spirit, Saldaña's exploration of privilege and intersectionality offers profound value for scholars at all career milestones. I found *Thinking Qualitatively* worthwhile for this

content alone. Saldaña gives voice to an essential truth of qualitative inquiry: that it is how we create conversational moments in responding to conflict and discomfort that translates our qualitative thinking into progressive action.

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### Author Note

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