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## Sustaining Learning about Qualitative Inquiry: A Book Review on The Craft of Qualitative Research - A Handbook

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## Sustaining Learning about Qualitative Inquiry: A Book Review on The Craft of Qualitative Research - A Handbook

### Abstract

There are only a handful of articles, books, tools, and resources that are truly accessible to the novice qualitative investigator. The literature contains reams of resources that aid researchers to *launch* the qualitative learning process. However, there are few opportunities to develop the depth, prowess, and creativity needed to *sustain* lifelong learning. *The Craft of Qualitative Research: A Handbook* by Kleinknecht, van den Scott, and Sanders is one resource that assists researchers to achieve this objective. Conceptualized as a “handbook,” this book is meant to be used throughout research projects and professional careers. The practice of qualitative inquiry serves as the focal point for all discussions, and this book creates space and opportunities for learners to acquire experiential knowledge through the vicarious experiences of authors. The vividness with which the cases are presented renders a strong motivation in readers to improve how they conduct qualitative inquiry. Although two minor suggestions would have made this book more useful in the field, this book offers important insight into uncommon or unheard methodological topics that investigators may face.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Methodology, Methods, Teaching and Learning

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## **Sustaining Learning about Qualitative Inquiry: A Book Review on *The Craft of Qualitative Research - A Handbook***

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*There are only a handful of articles, books, tools, and resources that are truly accessible to the novice qualitative investigator. The literature contains reams of resources that aid researchers to launch the qualitative learning process. However, there are few opportunities to develop the depth, prowess, and creativity needed to sustain lifelong learning. The Craft of Qualitative Research: A Handbook by Kleinknecht, van den Scott, and Sanders is one resource that assists researchers to achieve this objective. Conceptualized as a “handbook,” this book is meant to be used throughout research projects and professional careers. The practice of qualitative inquiry serves as the focal point for all discussions, and this book creates space and opportunities for learners to acquire experiential knowledge vicariously through the experiences of authors. The vividness with which the cases are presented renders a strong motivation in readers to improve how they conduct qualitative inquiry. Although two minor suggestions would have made this book more useful in the field, this book offers important insight into uncommon or unheard methodological topics that investigators may face. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Methodology, Methods, Teaching and Learning*

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### **Introduction**

For the longest time, I have felt that there is something missing from the qualitative methodological literature. In a previous book review, I noted that there are only handful of articles, books, tools, and resources that are truly accessible to novice qualitative investigators (Majid, 2018). Almost half a year later, I still believe this to be true, and in particular, the methodological literature by and large is useful for enabling qualitative researchers to *start* the learning process, but the literature creates few opportunities to develop the depth, prowess, creativity that *sustains* lifelong learning. Starting the learning process is easier than sustaining; starting can be achieved by describing fundamental concepts, theories, and ideas. However, sustaining learning is more pertinent for the practice of qualitative research because it requires ongoing internal communication, reflexivity, and adaptation to external circumstances. No two qualitative research projects will be identical, and similar research topics and designs will offer new learning opportunities. Sustaining learning is more difficult for a compendium of reasons, such as the vast diversity in how qualitative methods and approaches may be conceptualized, and the anti-standardization quality inherent in qualitative inquiry. This characteristic makes it more difficult to develop and disseminate resources that aid investigators to continue learning throughout their research careers.

I believe that *The Craft of Qualitative Research: A Handbook* by Kleinknecht, van den Scott, and Sanders helps to address some of the prevailing issues with the qualitative methodological literature. In this book review, I will discuss why this resource supports investigators to *sustain* learning of qualitative inquiry throughout their professional careers.

## Innovative Contributions to the Qualitative Methodological Literature

The *practice* of qualitative inquiry is at core of this book, and this book is conceptualized as a tool to acquire experiential knowledge by engaging in qualitative research. The assumption is that reading this book and practicing qualitative research are necessary and complementary steps of the qualitative learning journey. Hence, the authors emphasize that their book as a “handbook,” a resource that plays a role throughout the qualitative research process and professional careers and invigorates commitment to learning. This characteristic is salient in authors’ beliefs as they assert that the qualitative research journey requires a lifelong commitment to learning. This belief stems from the iterativeness, ambiguity, complexity, and creativity embedded in doing qualitative research. As a result, the resources available to investigators to transition from novice to expert should imbue such qualities: “instead of presenting the research process as recipe-like or formulaic, we emphasize the *craft* of qualitative research” (Kleinknecht, van den Scott, & Sanders, 2018, p. 2).

The book is organized around the personal experiences of novice and experienced investigators who have worked at the frontlines of qualitative inquiry; tackling some of the most challenging aspects of research on topics that are uncommon or unheard of in the canonical academic enterprise. This book provides insight and support on methodological topics that are seldom discussed elsewhere; topics that are usually restricted to the realms of practice because they are highly contingent on the philosophies, objectives, participants, and context of the research. However, this book attempts to transcend the tensions between theory and practice by translating the experiential knowledge gained by investigators into a resource that supports investigators who may struggle with the same challenges but lack guidance. For example, in the first section, *Planning Your Project*, the authors shared a set of vital qualities that investigators must exemplify prior to engaging in qualitative inquiry. The author of one chapter clarified the meaning of *unpredictability* for researchers:

be constantly aware that fieldwork is an uneven social experience through and through: fieldwork not only unfolds through the consideration of one’s own experiences, hopes, aspirations, likes, dislikes, biases, and fears, but also how these aforesaid positions on the world interact and intersect with those with whom one is conducting fieldwork—the participants. (Kleinknecht, van den Scott, & Sanders, 2018, p. 18)

By explicating the definition of unpredictability, the author was able to not only provide a useful mental model to organize how unpredictability may influence the planning of research projects, but also share insight on how unpredictability in qualitative research may affect researchers’ self-esteem and confidence in the long-term. Each chapter also includes a list of practical exercises that guide researchers to practice essential lessons. For example, the author of the chapter on unpredictability recommended forming groups, picking a particular activity or interest (e.g., food), writing down questions independently that are most pertinent to the activity or interest, and then coming together to highlight the similarities and differences between the questions. This exercise, although simple, may motivate investigators to appreciate the complexities of and unpredictability in collaborative activities, which can serve as strong prompts to formulate strategies that navigate the complexities.

I have never thought that reading the methodological literature could be so indulging and inspiring. Reading the experiences of authors conducting research on “pick-up artists” or members of the “seduction community,” or attempting to understand the experiences of protestors while safeguarding their identity in a volatile political climate, or the tensions in conducting transgender research by a non-transgender individual, have had profound impacts

on my qualitative research practice. The experiences I have acquired vicariously from this book have broadened my repertoire of skills, attributes, and knowledge. Although I may not be engaging in the level of sensitivity exhibited by the cases presented in this book, these cases provide vital lessons that may be applicable across research topics, methods, philosophies, and objectives. There is a lot of benefit from examining cases that may be considered as extreme of the “average.” Extreme situations reveal tensions between dichotomies that we take for granted; by making tensions more salient, extreme situations may also motivate behavior change, and in this case, apply the suggestions presented in the book into the practice of qualitative inquiry. Even more important, the cases and the depth with which they are presented builds a strong, personal connection between learners and authors and their personal circumstances. The application of methodological advice acquired from others is difficult; but it is motivating and inspiring when advice creates space and opportunities for investigators to identify with authors’ experiences and internalize their advice into habits of mind.

An important aspect of this book is the focus on natural iteration of the qualitative research process. For example, this book forces tensions between longstanding dichotomies of research such as navigating through insider and outsider statuses. There are benefits to emphasizing this dichotomy because it may support learners in conceptualizing the salient differences. However, the book’s sections on insider and outsider status used the muddling between these two concepts to assert that any researcher is not either an insider or outsider at any given moment in time – there are degrees of both statuses present in every research situation and status shifts in both directions with time.

This book also addresses the “ethics challenge” in multiple chapters. Even though there is a separate section that deals with the ethical dilemmas of qualitative inquiry, the tensions that exist between the research ethics boards/institutional review boards and qualitative investigators is a common theme throughout the book. Authors consistently expressed the inadequacy of boards when it comes to reviewing proposals of qualitative inquiry; this presents a significant obstacle that requires personal and professional development. Dealing with ethics boards is a common challenge that qualitative investigators face. However, books on these topics, especially those available to the neophyte, restrict their discussion to ethical principles, theories, and concepts. Although these aspects of ethics are vital, the book by Kleinknecht, van den Scott, and Sanders (2018) goes beyond concepts and theories; it attempts to create and recreate the craft of interacting with ethics boards about qualitative inquiry.

## Conclusion

This book review discussed the benefits of *The Craft of Qualitative Research: A Handbook* by Kleinknecht, van den Scott, and Sanders to new and experienced qualitative investigators. The focal point of this book is the practice of qualitative research, and as such, this book is framed to serve as a handbook that serves the qualitative investigator throughout their research journey. This book also moves beyond the tensions that exist between theory and practice and attempts to share insight on methodological topics that are seldom discussed in the canonical academic enterprise. Reading the passion and vividness of authors’ experiences creates space, empathy, and motivation to apply their advice to the practice of qualitative inquiry. Moreover, learning through experience is a common theme throughout the book that is exhibited by discussing methodological topics that focus on the natural iteration of qualitative inquiry, longstanding tensions within dichotomies of research, and navigating through the “ethics challenge” of qualitative inquiry.

References for more readings or examples of some of the suggestions and topics mentioned in each chapter would have made this handbook a more useful resource to employ during qualitative research projects. Similarly, summary notes at the end of each chapter that

summarize the authors' main points would support readers to refresh their memories on the content of each chapter, instead of having to read each chapter to search for key ideas in the main text.

If I am allowed to be a bit cynical, it is rare to find a book like this one in contemporary qualitative courses, at least in the field of health care where I am located, because it speaks to issues that conflict with the very assumptions of canonical academia. However, this is the primary reason why such a book deserves reception in qualitative courses; it breaks down the walls that some expert researchers build between them and knowledge discovery and/or creation. *The Craft of Qualitative Research: A Handbook* by Kleinknecht, van den Scott, and Sanders is one among a few resources that I have encountered that creates space and opportunities to sustain learning about qualitative inquiry.

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### Author Note

Umair Majid completed his Master of Science in health research methodology at McMaster University where he investigated the quality appraisal process of qualitative research. Currently at McMaster, he has appointments as a Curriculum Designer, Program Developer, and Instructor, teaching and designing courses on epidemiology, the Canadian health care system, and pathophysiology. He also has diverse experiences, knowledge and expertise in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research, which he uses to provide qualitative evidence to agencies investigating technologies to include under the provincial or national funding mandate. He also has a Master of Education from Queen's University where he examined innovative and effective ways to design and evaluate curricula. Currently, he is a PhD student in Health Services Organization and Management at the Institute of Health Policy, Management, and Evaluation at the University of Toronto. For his PhD dissertation, he is investigating how to strengthen the organizational capacity of hospitals to involve patients and family in planning and quality improvement activities. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [umair.majid@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:umair.majid@mail.utoronto.ca).

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