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## “Qualitative Research as a Public Good”: A Review of Patricia Leavy’s The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research

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## “Qualitative Research as a Public Good”: A Review of Patricia Leavy’s The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research

### Abstract

The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research offers both a retrospective and prospective view of the field. Its 34 chapters provide a wide variety of philosophical/theoretical approaches, research strategies and methodological tools in qualitative research and provide insight into the history of the field, ethics, and innovative streams of thoughts and methods. In this review, several chapters are reviewed to illustrate the wealth and depth of this handbook and its contribution to the field is discussed.

### Keywords

Indigenous Methodologies, Museum Studies, Photography, Coding Strategies, Computer-Assisted Analysis, “Transdisciplinarity,” Public Scholarship

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## **“Qualitative Research as a Public Good”: A Review of Patricia Leavy’s *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research***

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*The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research offers both a retrospective and prospective view of the field. Its 34 chapters provide a wide variety of philosophical/theoretical approaches, research strategies and methodological tools in qualitative research and provide insight into the history of the field, ethics, and innovative streams of thoughts and methods. In this review, several chapters are reviewed to illustrate the wealth and depth of this handbook and its contribution to the field is discussed. Keywords: Indigenous Methodologies, Museum Studies, Photography, Coding Strategies, Computer-Assisted Analysis, “Transdisciplinarity,” Public Scholarship*

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A wonderful ritual at the end of each annual conference of *The Qualitative Report* in Nova Southeastern University, Florida, is an exhibition of books for review by the conference delegates. Many books in different sizes are piled on a counter and each delegate is invited to browse the books and choose one s/he would like to review. Standing in the line, I was hoping that no one would choose the very few large books that caught my eyes. Several minutes later and my turn arrived. I quickly moved the small books and exposed the large ones for no rational reason I could think of. An endless number of chapters were in each one of them and after two minutes I made a decision and took a very heavy book compilation whose number of chapters is 34.

I could not wait for reading the book until I get back home, a long trip of 24 hours, so I started looking at the content to let my eyes fall on an interesting chapter. The titles were replete with concepts that are familiar to many qualitative researchers such as interpretive approaches, narrative inquiry, ethnography, focus group, case study, and so on. Yet, what impressed me so much was the wealth of concepts, models, and approaches that have been accumulated in one volume. I had no doubt I would enrich my knowledge in qualitative research after reading the varied and high-quality chapters.

Maybe because I am interested in recent years in the education of children from traditional societies and developing countries, the first chapter I decided to read is “Decolonizing Research Practice; Indigenous Methodologies, Aboriginal Methods and Knowledge/Knowing” authored by Evans, Miller, Hutchinson and Dingwall. The authors put forwards the need to develop specific methods that emerge from language, culture, and worldview. They expose the sad fact that Aboriginals and other indigenous people have experienced much distress due to a host of researchers who visited their sites and explored their life by traditional methodologies. Personally, I was very glad to come across with multiple indigenous ways of knowing, finding out, and organizing the world and adopted some ideas for how to conduct future research in traditional societies.

When finished, I was surprised to find out a chapter about museum studies as museums have always been considered in my mind as arenas of clay, paintings, sculptors, woods, and many other artifacts, absolutely not sites of research. In this chapter, Tucker describes and discusses the major research methods used to study museums, including gallery analyses, interviews with museum visitors, professional and stakeholders, and ethnography. So what? I

asked myself. Why did the editor devote a particular chapter to understand qualitative inquiry in one type of organization – the museum – while the methods discussed by the author are well-known to every qualitative researcher? An answer to my ponderings I received from the author who probably was aware of the kind of criticism some readers may raise against her chapter. She claims that "qualitative methods can be adapted to the study of exhibits, programs, and museums as knowledge-generating institutions" (p. 341). She further recommends researchers of museums to use qualitative methods discussed at length in her chapter to explore areas of museum work that are not as yet well represented in the literature about this type of organization.

Although I am not going to study museums in the near future, this chapter provided me, a researcher in the field of education, with some ideas about how to study classrooms and schools as places that are replete with artifacts and external signs (e.g., the drawings on the corridors). With this insight in my mind I turned to read another chapter that caught my eyes – and there are so many stimuli when looking at the content of this handbook! This time I decided to read a chapter whose title is – "Photography as a Research Method," authored by Gunilla Holm. The author discusses the development of photography as a research method in social sciences and elaborates on photographs taken by research participants. For me, a researcher, among other things, of emotion in teaching, this kind of method could help me a lot in my attempts to explore teachers' emotion by analyzing their photos in school and the personal and professional meanings they attach to each of them. After all, as Holm indicated, "there is an intention behind the photograph. The photographer wants to see something in particular or wants to send us a message" (p. 383). When the photographer is a participant in a study, the photos are used to answer the researcher's questions. Then, issues of ambiguity, bias, and validity are discussed at length and a couple of pictures are provided to help the reader understand the major ideas in the chapter.

After reading these three chapters, I had to pack up the book and send it with my luggage – it was actually too heavy to carry on board. After a few days of jet leg and only when I could catch up a host of tasks on my desk, I could find the time to read some other chapters from this lovely handbook. Sitting on the sofa and drinking some hot tea in the cold winter this year, I had a chance to take a look at the book structure more profoundly and calmly. Thus, the book's 732 pages (excluding the index) are divided into seven sections; "The Qualitative Tradition," "Approaches to Qualitative Research," "Narrative Inquiry, Field Research, and Interview Methods," "Text, Arts-Based, and Internet Methods," "Multi-Method, Mixed-Method, and Participatory Designs," "Analysis, Interpretation, Representation, and Evaluation," and "Conclusions: Politics and the Public."

The diversity of topics, approaches, methods and so on enables every researcher find what s/he needs during planning and performing their study. S/he doesn't have to seek for and review many books to find the answers to their conceptual and methodological concerns. Personally, I had sought for new analysis strategies and particularly computer-assisted analysis of qualitative research in this handbook.

Johnny Saldaña's paper – "Coding and Analysis Strategies" – seemed to be a good chapter to start with in my efforts to feed my curiosity. The paper displays selected qualitative data analytic strategies with a particular focus on codes and coding. The chapter presents a wide variety of coding strategies (e.g., to categorize, to interrelate, to reason, to memo) and provides vivid examples of the coding process. Lived examples from different qualitative studies illustrate the coding strategies in practice and in doing so clarify the practice of qualitative analysis especially for students and novice researchers in this methodological paradigm.

Personally, I stick to the old ways of coding manually, leaving the use of computer-assisted analysis to younger researchers. But, it does not mean I am not curious about the

benefits that a qualitative research can gain from the programs designed to help analyze qualitative data. Therefore, omitting Silver and Lewins' chapter about computer-assisted analysis of qualitative research was not an option for me. The authors focus on technology and how it assists three main aspects of qualitative research; data collection, preparation, and transcription, bibliographic management and systematic literature reviews, and data management and analysis. While my university's library has already made me an acquaintance with bibliographic management programs (but I insist not using them, to be honest), my knowledge about computer-based data management and analysis is extremely limited. Thus, I learned that there are now some software packages that assist the routine processes of generation textual transcriptions of digitized sound or video files. Although they do not transcribe automatically, yet they assist the researcher very much and the written transcript can remain linked to the associated media file. Wow!!... after years of transcribing data, an admittedly overwhelming and boring task, there is a solution that is not perfect, but at least can help us to facilitate this task. Other aspects of the qualitative research design are also discussed in detail, such as coding and categorizing, tracking analysis, audio-coding of structures and content, and even limitation and constrains of the software packages.

In the final chapter – “A Brief Statement on the Public and the Future of Qualitative Research” – the editor offers some final comments about the future of qualitative research and concludes that “we are in an era of rapid growth, expansion, and innovation” (p. 724) of qualitative researches. Accordingly, the move of higher education toward public scholarship that is accessible to the public has a positive impact on qualitative researchers. Some of this impact, according to the editor, is related to “transdisciplinarity” and to the need to be open to different audiences. Therefore, the editor prefers to call qualitative findings as “shapes,” a very illuminating point of view.

From the editor's concluding chapter, I could learn how qualitative research is issue-or problems-centered, that is, qualitative researchers usually prioritize the problem at the center of research over discipline-specific concerns, theories or methods. For that reason, the editor concludes that “these approaches to research require innovation, emergence, creative thinking, flexibility, and high levels of cross-disciplinary collaboration and integration, all of which are within the purview of qualitative researchers” (p. 725). Will qualitative research benefit practitioners as policy-makers worldwide expect? Is a further development of qualitative research the rejoinder to public demand for more applied knowledge production in higher education? The concluding chapter propelled me to think about qualitative research as a public good rather than just as a methodology used by researchers to conduct their studies.

The book is a wonderful collection of chapters that together cover most of the innovative approaches, methodologies and analyses in the paradigm of qualitative research. Both novice and senior researchers in social sciences and education can benefit a lot from this diversity and improve their research design considerably. Likewise, students in courses of research methods can enrich their skills and competencies in data collection and analysis of all kinds.

But, no text is perfect; sometimes I felt that the authors were eager to provide too much information and the reading of the text was, therefore, somehow a little bit overwhelming. The “how-to-do-it” texts could be easier to read if the authors organized them according to numbered sections rather than long paragraphs and more sub-titles could help the reader follow the ideas more clearly.

## Reference

Leavy, P. (Ed.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### Author Note

Izhar Oplatka is a professor of Educational Administration and Leadership at The School of Education, Tel Aviv University, Israel. Prof. Oplatka's research focuses on the lives and career of school teachers and principals, educational marketing, emotions and educational administration, and the foundations of educational administration as a field of study. His most recent books include *Reforming Education in Developing Countries* (2019, Routledge), *Emotion Management in Teaching and Educational Leadership: A Cultural Perspective* (with Arar, EMERALD Publishing Limited), *Project Management in Schools* (2018, with Yemini and Sagi, Palgrave-Macmillan), *Higher Education Consumer Choice* (2015, with Jane Hemsley-Brown, Palgrave), *The Legacy of Educational Administration: A Historical Analysis of an Academic Field* (2010, Peter Lang Publishing); *The Essentials of Educational Administration* (2015, Pardes Publisher, in Hebrew); *Organizational Citizenship Behavior in Schools* (2015, Routledge, with Anit Somech). Please direct correspondence to [oplatka@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:oplatka@tauex.tau.ac.il).

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