
4-2-2021

“Research for a Change”: A Book Review of Norma R. A. Romm’s Responsible Research Practice: Revisiting Transformative Paradigm in Social Research

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Recommended APA Citation

Wulff, D. P. (2021). “Research for a Change”: A Book Review of Norma R. A. Romm’s Responsible Research Practice: Revisiting Transformative Paradigm in Social Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(4), 1157-1160. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4858>

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Abstract

In the book, *Responsible Research Practice*, the author, Norma Romm, makes the case for actively incorporating social justice initiatives within social research of any kind. Through numerous examples from around the world, using various research traditions, practices, and disciplines, she demonstrates how ethical practices can be implemented in research projects so participants are better off for having participated in the studies. This richly referenced book of research examples and supportive theoretical perspectives pushes the notion of ethical practice into a new gear. Readers of this book will be inspired and energized to see the realistic potential of active social research to change the world, particularly for those most marginalized.

Keywords

responsible research, transformative research, Indigenous research, ethics, participatory, future-forming

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**“Research for a Change”:
A Book Review of Norma R. A. Romm’s *Responsible Research
Practice: Revisiting Transformative Paradigm in Social Research***

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In the book, *Responsible Research Practice*, the author, Norma Romm, makes the case for actively incorporating social justice initiatives within social research of any kind. Through numerous examples from around the world, using various research traditions, practices, and disciplines, she demonstrates how ethical practices can be implemented in research projects so participants are better off for having participated in the studies. This richly referenced book of research examples and supportive theoretical perspectives pushes the notion of ethical practice into a new gear. Readers of this book will be inspired and energized to see the realistic potential of active social research to change the world, particularly for those most marginalized.

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“Research for a Change”

Reading this book was a game-changer for me. It was one of those books that I was ready to read—it provided many engaging examples of research projects that raised the bar in terms of valuing research participants and deliberately trying to make their lives better. While researchers are required to be ethical and respectful, Norma Romm’s book highlights ways to go even further down this road.

In reading *Responsible Research Practice*, I was reminded of a 2017 plenary by Yvonna Lincoln in which she described Reinharz’s “lover model” of research,

wherein the researcher engages in genuine and authentic relationships with community participants, shares findings widely, demonstrates real respect for his/her participants, treats them as she or he would wish to be treated, anchors findings as much in their issues and concerns as in the researcher’s own initial questions, shares in a mode of living with community members, and returns to the site often to understand how these new friends are doing and to make certain they are thriving. (p. 1)

Romm echoes these perspectives throughout her book by using specific illustrations of how these ideas have been enacted in contemporary research. She presents a series of projects from around the world by summarizing their unique qualities, connecting those innovations with theoretical and philosophical ideas, revealing some of her conversations with these researchers about their work, and then placing these projects within the “responsible research” framework of her book. Romm’s idea of responsible research centers around the word “active” in that she insists that research make a difference in the moment—the payoffs for the participants should be clear and present in real time within the context of the study.

In framing her concept of “responsible or active research” Romm highlights the value of a form of reasoning that we do not often hear about—abductive/retroductive reasoning:

. . . imaginative leaps. . . when inquirers/co-inquirers create inferences which admittedly do not relate in any direct logical way to ‘empirical evidence’, but which make sense of interpreted evidence/experience in ways which are in turn inspiring of constructive action. (Romm, 2018, p. 307)

Researchers are familiar with deductive and inductive reasoning as it applies to research projects, both of which take on linear forms—deductive logically traces actions down from theory while inductive tracks data up to theoretical understandings. Romm’s discussion of a retroductive form of reasoning to research in her book opens up possibilities for imagining research initiatives that are not limited by conventional ideas of what research should or should not be. Being “responsible” according to Romm’s version of research carries more weight than simply following a cognitive form of logic/reasoning—it involves being “inspiring of constructive action.”

Romm prominently references the work of Donna Mertens, Ken Gergen, Bagele Chilisa, and Margaret Kovach (and others), creating rich connections with theory and philosophy with which to ground the “responsible research” projects she covers. The breadth and scope of the related ideas she weaves into the stories of the studies produced a feeling of reading a “handbook”—readers will find many nuggets in these other authors’ writings that they will want to pursue. Romm finds great value in Mertens’ work but that does not prevent her from finding ways of stretching the transformative paradigm. An example of this stretching is that to be transformative, one does not need to start from those research designs and models that are overtly and unashamedly transformative (e.g., action research, PAR). Romm provides many “illustrations of how these methods [traditional research methods and processes] can be re-tuned creatively to make provision for an extended conception of researcher responsibilities” (Romm, 2018, p. 34). I see a major contribution of this book to be the inclusion of many examples of how *any* research methodology and process could be modified to include some of aspects of Reinharz’s “lover model” of research. So any researcher of any stripe can build in social justice components—and they should.

Romm embraces Gergen’s notion that “research can be regarded/treated not as a world-mirroring, but as a world-forming process” (Romm, 2018, p. 164). With that world-forming ability, she takes a position that “researchers have a responsibility to gear their research processes toward disrupting discourses and actions which arguably contribute to perpetuating inequality” (p. 14). Traditional research has typically been promoted as a means to make the world a better place, albeit not in a direct way (only after some “translation” and/or “mobilization”). Romm invites us to consider a direct and transparent connection between research and material change in our social world, particularly for those most marginalized. She advises that our research agenda should be action/active rather than simply knowledge accumulation.

Romm sees Indigenous perspectives as foundationally relevant for research because of the attention to “care, relationality, and accountability” (p. vii). Indigenous perspectives stand in contrast to the pervasive implicit theoretical Western notions of individualism and objectivism and how those notions shape research projects. These distinctions are noticeable in the language used from the differing traditions. Romm includes Kovach here:

Kovach also refers to “research-sharing circles” as a method of “engendering story,” in which participants can “share their story in a manner that they can direct.” She argues that many Indigenous authors prefer not to label such

research as FG [focus group] research, but indeed as research-sharing circles, especially insofar as they invite the sharing of stories, which is based on Indigenous cultural traditions for “gathering group knowledge.” (Romm, 2018, p. 64)

The terms researchers use reveal the values and assumptions they hold about the world and the place of research in it.

Permit me to discuss one of the intriguing projects Romm describes that was conducted in Poland by Oczak and Niedźwieńska that built a social justice component into a standard experimental deception research project. The adjustment was to the debriefing procedure after the experimental protocol was completed. This new debriefing procedure went beyond just informing the participant of what “really” was going on in the experiment by giving “participants the opportunity to exercise their (new) knowledge about suggestibility mechanisms and how to avoid them, by inviting them to participate in a re-doing of the suggestibility test” (Romm, 2018, p. 207). The researchers believed it to be their responsibility “to enable participants to better recognize social situations where others are trying to mislead them—so that they can be more attuned to this” (Romm, 2018, p. 239). The extended debriefing becomes educative “[to] provide participants with an opportunity to learn how to master social situations in which others seek to mislead, manipulate, or coerce them” (Romm, 2018, p. 239). This was a great demonstration of a traditional study being executed *and then extended in order to be an instrument to improve the lives of those who participated.*

Romm’s presentation of research projects includes more inclusive ways to build feedback sessions from participants into the data and analysis, ways of creating documents that can be used to circulate the voices of the participants more broadly, and designing questions for surveys or focus groups that promote new understandings of topics that may be useful for the participants. All these ideas (and many more) center the participants more within the research—there is no aspect of research design or processes that is “off limits” to the participants. The research write-ups can also more deliberately discuss the researchers’ sense of responsibility in research

in their ways of relating to, and potentially impacting on, the research participants and also making a difference to the wider discourses that have currency in the society. . . . It should be of interest to readers to be given some idea of how researchers are choosing to exercise their responsibilities as they see them. (Romm, 2018, p. 228)

There is room in every phase of research design and execution that alterations could be made to emphasize one or more aspects of producing the “lover model of research.”

The practice of research is a human act to make the world a better place. Learning and understanding is certainly a part of it, but without enacting/performing that learning in material ways, we shortchange what research needs to be. From my reading of Romm’s collection of illustrations of research projects from around the world that have innovatively built social justice into all manner of research projects, I found myself looking other examples—and I found some. For example, Tor Slettebø’s (2020) research with birth parents with children involuntarily in care (a) had developed relationships with these participants before the study and after, and (b) developed expanded uses for the member-checking process. I see Tor’s study being in sync with the studies Norma Romm included in her book. I am doing a lot of looking around now for examples of the “lover model of research.” I believe readers of this book will become similarly curious.

As you can tell from my review/essay, I strongly recommend this book. Norma Romm's writing instills an excitement and real sense of optimism that research can be so much more than what it is now. She values people and communities who engage with us in research endeavors. Without their collaboration, social research is empty. We have obligations to the people who we include in our research—we cannot let them down.

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Author Note

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Article Citation

- Wulff, D. (2021). "Research for a change": A book review of Norma R. A. Romm's *Responsible Research Practice: Revisiting Transformative Paradigm in Social Research*. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(4), 1157-1160. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4858>
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