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Pushing on in Defense of Qualitative Research: A Book Review of Patricia Leavy's Oral History

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Pushing on in Defense of Qualitative Research: A Book Review of Patricia Leavy's *Oral History*

Abstract

The central feature of Patricia Leavy's book, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*, is the legitimization of doing oral history and, generally, qualitative research in the social sciences. Leavy reviews the foundational philosophies that inform the qualitative practice of doing social research and the methodological tools that affirm the scientific nature of oral history (such as reflection, explicitness, proper coding, and congruence). Leavy instructs the reader through each stage of the methodological process from research design to writing up the research findings. *Oral History* is not only an instructional guide but also a response to the critics of the qualitative approach who believe oral history is too subjective and lacks the scientific rigor of the quantitative.

Keywords

oral history, qualitative research, coding, reflection, feminism

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Pushing on in Defense of Qualitative Research: A Book Review of Patricia Leavy's Oral History

Vaso Thomas

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The central feature of Patricia Leavy's book, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*, is the legitimization of doing oral history and, generally, qualitative research in the social sciences. Leavy reviews the foundational philosophies that inform the qualitative practice of doing social research and the methodological tools that affirm the scientific nature of oral history (such as reflection, explicitness, proper coding, and congruence). Leavy instructs the reader through each stage of the methodological process from research design to writing up the research findings. *Oral History* is not only an instructional guide but also a response to the critics of the qualitative approach who believe oral history is too subjective and lacks the scientific rigor of the quantitative.

Keywords: oral history, qualitative research, coding, reflection, feminism

When I received Patricia Leavy's (2011) book, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*, in the mail I stared at the title on the cover and was reminded of my readings in undergraduate and graduate school on feminism and their idea that the telling of women's life stories can be a legitimate academic practice and even a political act. Decades later, two of these readings, bell hooks' (1984) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* and *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (Gluck & Patel, 1991), still sit on my bookshelf. Indeed, in the first pages of her book, Leavy writes that feminists have highlighted the oral history practice and that it has become characteristically a feminist approach (p. 4). Like the feminists of my school readings Leavy believes oral history is a way for "subjugated voices" to be heard (p. 5).

As I began to read, I thought about how, like the early feminists, Leavy still seems to be an oppositional place as she defends the practice of oral history. A central feature of Leavy's book is this legitimization. In a society that deems the quantitative method of social research above the qualitative, Leavy takes the reader through the steps of the oral history research process, chapter by chapter, strategically justifying the practice.

The criticism against oral histories and qualitative research has been that it is too subjective, apolitical and the project findings are not true. The critics do not trust the subjectivity of the qualitative researcher. In her book, Leavy counters this delegitimization of the subjective nature of oral histories by highlighting practices that support its scientific value such as the transparency (explicit reflections) of the researcher's theoretical orientation, personal connection to the project and methodological choices. Leavy writes, "Reflexivity involves constantly examining one's position in the project, including one's assumptions, feelings and so forth" (p. 140). Before I read Leavy's book, I understood this reflection and the narrative style of qualitative research as merely a way to invite the reader into the project, to make it beautiful, to engage in ways the quantitative method cannot. Leavy reframed my notion by pointing to the way reflection and transparency serve as scientific tools to foster the truth of the research findings. The critics of oral history do not trust the participants either, since, they

argue, the individual's memory fails, and one recreates the interpretation of their life stories through time. Leavy is eager to defend her practice and encourages the researcher to include all cues, such as "false starts," "uhms," "you knows," and long pauses of the participants in the memo notes of the interview transcriptions to ensure the believability of the interpretation (p. 49).

I believed theory was superior to reflection in the social sciences. Yet, reflection and theory are equally matched in Leavy's discussion of the "context of discovery" and the "context of justification" (pp. 70-71). The "context of discovery" refers to the reflection and disclosure of the researcher's role in the methodological procedures, inevitable value laden perspective and emotional connection to the project or participants. The "context of justification" refers to the theoretical aspect of the project, the research purpose, question and the analysis of the sampling, data collection and coding procedures deemed "more scientific" in the research community. That reflexivity and the scientific method is given equal measure, by Leavy, brings credence to reflection and disclosure as a legitimate practice in social science research.

Leavy treats theory as a methodological tool. I have always understood theory and praxis as separate domains in the social sciences. Yet Leavy explains, how the theoretical and the historical context of the oral history project also serves to justify the oral history research findings by making the work believable and valid. By "linking individual (micro level) experiences with cultural, historical and structural (macro level) phenomena" (p. 5), the researcher creates connections that make the project trustworthy and generalizable. Furthermore, this connection between a life story or a collection of stories to larger cultural constructs allays the criticism that oral histories are apolitical or atheoretical.

The structure (congruence) of the writing also legitimates the research project, according to Leavy and the scholars she reviews. Congruence refers to the lining up of the research question, research purpose, methodology, findings, and conclusion. I never thought of this integrity as a way to justify the scientific nature of qualitative research, I imagined it as good writing structure but never as a feature of validity and reliability (p. 139). The truth, that this congruence claims, appeals to our common sense and belief that the reader, academic or nonacademic, can evaluate the validity of the project. This points to the humanistic nature of qualitative research.

Despite the criticism that oral history is apolitical, Leavy explains that stories tell us about the society we live in or foster social change. Leavy explains, the stories people tell about their lives have a moral language that point to larger cultural constructs of the research subject (p. 47). Like the early feminists, Leavy needs to substantiate the political nature of oral history. Oral histories, Leavy writes, "bear witness" and "fill in the historical record" (p. 17). As testimonials of stories not told, oral histories, give voice to people not heard and create new knowledge for our society and scientific community. The engaging nature of qualitative accounts make it accessible to people inside and outside of the academy; this is a political act. Furthermore, Leavy stresses the political nature of oral history research by pointing to the benefits for the group under study, the social policy implications of the research as well as the sense of community created for participants and between participant and researcher (p. 83).

Leavy's step by research step approach provides a practical and effective instructional guide to doing oral history research. She reviews the philosophical foundations of the field, shows us how to identify the collective memory of West Indian immigrants (p. 129), process of identity formation in the interviews of three generations of Jewish women (p. 122), and analyze the data into meta categories that informed the poor body image of participant Claire. Leavy identifies common mistakes, such as, being too analytical or, conversely, too reflective in the write up of the methodology and more. The comprehensiveness of Leavy's book reflects the holistic nature of the qualitative practice she is teaching us about.

Before I read Leavy's book, I narrowly believed that the science of qualitative research stopped at its beautiful engagement, but Leavy's book gave me insight and the language to think about reflection, disclosure, theoretical linkages in scientific ways. As I put my copy of Leavy's *Oral History* on my bookshelf, I feel inspired by having learned something new and for the compassion for peoples' perspectives that Leavy's work exemplifies.

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Author Note

Vaso Thomas is a retired professor of sociology from Bronx Community College, City University of New York. She earned her Ph.D. in Sociology at the New School for Social Research in 2004. Some of her publications include, "Being Cool Is Not Enough: Interrogations on White-Ethnic Privilege and Student-Teacher Relations," in *Humanity & Society* and a book review of Russell Kazal's "Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity" in *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*. Thomas' current project is a collaboration with four women sociologists, *Teaching Race, Feeling Race*, a book documenting faculty experiences of teaching racecourses. Please direct correspondence to vaso.thomas@outlook.com.

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