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“Research Is Not Innocent”: A Review of Thalia Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan’s Collaborative Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Mulvihill and Swaminathan have written a wide-ranging book that takes a close look at how qualitative research can be collaborative and what implications come from how collaborative practices are taken up. While taking an appreciative stance toward collaborative research practices, they do not shy away from the challenges and unrealized potentials that are involved. This book serves as both an introduction to the basics of collaborative qualitative research and an in-depth look at the issues for the more experienced collaborative researcher.

Keywords

qualitative research, collaborative research practices, collaborative qualitative research

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“Research Is Not Innocent”: A Review of Thalia Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan’s *Collaborative Qualitative Research*

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Mulvihill and Swaminathan have written a wide-ranging book that takes a close look at how qualitative research can be collaborative and what implications come from how collaborative practices are taken up. While taking an appreciative stance toward collaborative research practices, they do not shy away from the challenges and unrealized potentials that are involved. This book serves as both an introduction to the basics of collaborative qualitative research and an in-depth look at the issues for the more experienced collaborative researcher.

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With *Collaborative Qualitative Research*, Thalia Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan have written a readily applicable book that explores what it means for qualitative research to be considered collaborative. Collaborative is one of those words that can mean very different things to different people. Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2023) walk the reader through many dimensions of what collaborative qualitative research could entail (e.g., teamwork, designs, methods, forms of activism, evaluating, writing) and gesturing to those places where tension exists that defies easy resolution. Notably, they not only review the state of the art of collaborative qualitative research as it exists today, but they comment on what could be (and maybe even should be).

I chose this title—Research is Not Innocent—to capture a recurring theme that I felt throughout this book. The decisions qualitative researchers make in designing, conducting, and reporting their work always occur within a set of choices and conditions, only some of which may be obvious and/or acknowledged. Time limitations, funding requirements, professional and disciplinary expectations, personal preferences, academic policies or mandates, traditional practices in the field, and career advancement considerations are but some of the shaping factors that create our research projects. A book about “collaborative” qualitative research is well-positioned to examine the lack of innocence in research due to its attention to the relationships among researchers, participants, partners, and communities. The ways we relate to each other in our efforts to conjointly examine our collective worlds is key. We have always known that the qualitative researcher serves as the “instrument” in qualitative research, and in a book like this one we are invited to explore how qualitative researchers never work alone—they are continually in relationships with many others, with many discourses, and with many societal conditions.

Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2023) have created a storehouse of information on collaborative qualitative inquiry, surveying many authors and their work, providing anecdotes, and posing questions in very accessible ways. For that reason alone, if your particular research interest is collaborative qualitative research, this is a book you must read. Having stated the value of this book in these broad ways, I would like to now pull out some specific themes in this review essay that I think add significant gravity to what they have written.

Given our contemporary context that continues to support practices that emanate from a positivist worldview and contain embedded racist, sexist, and colonial epistemologies, collaborative initiatives in qualitative research are positioned to examine the workings of these practices. Not only can these practices be seen and discussed, but deliberate choices can be made to work differently. This awareness does not automatically lead to collaborative researchers deviating from these received knowledges and expectations, but the thoughtful awareness of how these knowledges and expectations work to shape our research affords the possibility of doing otherwise.

Rather than just thinking about collaboration as having partners in doing the research, there are other more far-reaching ways of understanding collaboration. Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2023) state that “(w)hen principles of collaboration are used; they often change the type of research questions used in a study” (p. 44). The conversations among collaborative researchers bring ideas and considerations into the process that materially shape the questions that inform the research/inquiry in ways that may not have been possible with researchers working solo. This highlights the important contributions of collaborations from the earliest imagining and designing stages of research throughout the entire process and beyond.

Collaborative qualitative inquiry can be created for a variety of purposes. A glaring distinction is the desire to produce publications as distinct from concentrating on developing workable solutions. These purposes are not necessarily incompatible, but it is probable that one or the other may predominate. This is also related to the issue of rigorously following a methodology in order to garner professional or institutional approval or privileging the relationships of the collaboration which may require deviations from protocols or plans. These issues are significant ethical/moral issues that collaborative qualitative researchers often face.

Related to the above comments, Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2023) illustrated how this may appear in practice in their describing “gaataa’aabing”—a term that refers to looking or searching in a circular method. In order to be maximally relevant and engaged, qualitative researchers need to make sure their methods are contextualized—sites and their circumstances need to be taken seriously and foregrounded rather than being mere backdrops for the study. Collaborative work embraces the context of all the participants and the context of the issue of interest. Methods are no longer imported wholesale to simply be “run”—methods and procedures must be adapted/transformed to fit the issue/project.

Let me add a couple “teaser” ideas that are in this book, and I will encourage you to check them out for yourself:

1. Transcripts are not innocent either! Transcripts are “theoretical, selective, interpretive, and representational” (p. 173). Transcripts are constructed/created by the process of transcribing itself. What gets transcribed and what does not get transcribed is a researcher decision.
2. Collaborative writing can describe the editing process, particularly as we do it at *The Qualitative Report*. Editors work with authors to find the words and expressions to best express to the reader the substance and value of the study. Seeing editors as collaborators rather than mere administrative gatekeepers to journals can see editorial involvement as value-added.

On many levels, *Collaborative Qualitative Research* is a book to consult—for those researchers exploring collaborative qualitative research for the first time as well as for those who have engaged with these ideas for a career. Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2023) have found a way to present collaborative qualitative research as a broad terrain of possibilities while at the same time providing ways to take a good look at this terrain up close. You can get the big picture landscape and the opportunity to zoom in.

References

Mulvihill, T. M., & Swaminathan, R. (2023). *Collaborative qualitative research*. The Guilford Press.

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Dan Wulff is a Co-Editor-in-Chief of *The Qualitative Report* and Professor Emeritus of Social Work from the University of Calgary. Please direct correspondence to dwulff@ucalgary.ca.

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