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Research within Our Everyday Reach: A Review of Research and Social Change: A Relational Constructionist Approach

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Abstract

I review the 2012 book, *Research and Social Change: A Relational Constructionist Approach*, by Sheila McNamee and Dian Marie Hosking concentrating on two ideas critical to constructionist inquiry. I emphasize and discuss “everyday-ness” (p. 4) in relation to studying one’s own practice as well as the notion of “engaged unfolding” (p. 45) in relation to methodological decision-making.

Keywords

Social Constructionism, Research as Daily Practice, Constructionist Inquiry, Relational Inquiry, Social Change

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Research within Our Everyday Reach: A Review of *Research and Social Change: A Relational Constructionist Approach*

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*I review the 2012 book, *Research and Social Change: A Relational Constructionist Approach*, by Sheila McNamee and Dian Marie Hosking concentrating on two ideas critical to constructionist inquiry. I emphasize and discuss “everyday-ness” (p. 4) in relation to studying one’s own practice as well as the notion of “engaged unfolding” (p. 45) in relation to methodological decision-making. Keywords: Social Constructionism, Research as Daily Practice, Constructionist Inquiry, Relational Inquiry, Social Change*

I read this book by Sheila McNamee and Dian Marie Hosking over a year ago. Now you may wonder what could happen in that year that it could take so long to write a review about a book that I think highly of, assign to my doctoral students, and actively recommend. The easiest and most accurate answer I can provide was/is my attending to the everyday stuff—meeting daily expectations and responsibilities and completing the mundane tasks of living. Most of us are absorbed in our daily lives; sometimes we feel comforted by the regularity and at other times we might become bored or distracted. The daily is always with us, even when we have irregularities or gaps, even when we must improvise.

There are many ideas put forward in the book, *Research and Social Change*, but I want to connect especially to two ideas that go with the daily and the improvisational. Sheila and Dian Marie¹ refer to the daily as “everyday-ness” (p. 4) and to improvisation as “engaged unfolding” (p. 45).

It seems there is a great appreciation for what occurs in our daily lives and the specialness of it. For example, in *Teaching for Social Justice* (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998) there is example after example of what classroom teachers are doing to teach social justice in principle and in practice to elementary and secondary students. What I noticed was that they were rather ordinary kinds of activities such as reading stories, engaging in conversations with others, singing songs, interviewing parents and local business owners, making maps and charts to show the distinctions between historical occurrences and current events both globally and locally. David Silverman (2013) provides another example. He said that good researchers find the extraordinary in the mundane and the mundane in the extraordinary.

Sheila and Dian Marie propose that “research is an everyday activity” (p. xiv). I completely agree. They do not mean that this is only in the domain of those who hold the title and position of researcher, but this is in reference to all practitioners who engage in inquiry to continue and improve their daily practices. They add that, “The ‘everyday-ness’ of the term ‘inquiry’ also seems to connect with the daily activity of reflection” (p. 4), “particularly on how positions (research/researched) are co-constructed” (p. xiv) from a relational constructionist stance. But let me stay with this emphasis on everyday-ness, because this seems quite counter to the research movement in the helping professions of operating only from a scientifically produced evidence-base.

¹ I refer to the authors as Sheila and Dian Marie because they are my friends and colleagues, and I would like potential readers of their book to know that this is a friendly, readable, personal book with important messages to those embarking on formal and informal, situationally-tailored inquiry.

I gravitate to Sheila and Dian Marie's talk of everyday-ness because I too have been concentrating on the value of including everyday questions and practices into inquiry activity, actually producing relevant evidence for immediate use in practice. I am a family therapist and academic who has been working hard (also from a social constructionist, relational stance) to close the gap between research and practice in order to help students see the relevance of research in their practices and to use inquiry to answer difficult questions in my own practice of working with families. I have been doing this in concert with my husband and colleagues with a practice we call "Research as Daily Practice" (St. George, Wulff, & Strong, 2014; Wulff & St. George, in press). I think we all agree that reflecting on our everyday practices is critical to the world of inquiry and is necessary if we want to produce sound evidence that is meaningful to all those who are involved and implicated. It is not something to be shunned or denigrated, or ignored as deficient, insignificant, or unworthy.

To help readers of this book reflect upon their own inquiry projects, Sheila and Dian Marie generously provide reflection exercises throughout the chapters. These exercises invite the readers to stop and think of the myriad possibilities and implications of decisions, approaches, and reasoning as they plan, propose, conduct, and communicate about their inquiries. How often do we reflect on those presumed, routinized, expected processes of daily work? Our daily practices need as much attention, if not more, than those we credit as outstanding and extraordinary. From conducting research as daily practice, I can also add that there is no extraordinary need for outside monies or personnel to look at ourselves, our work, and our work places. This is challenging work because we must become "vulnerable" or open to honest reflection.

Another idea regarding constructionist and relational research that I would like to discuss is method. In Chapter 4, Sheila and Dian Marie present "Inquiry as Engaged Unfolding" (p. 45); this introduces their thoughts on methods. I love this phrase! I love it because of the freedom, care, thoughtfulness, responsibility, and relevance that I interpret it to suggest. Sheila and Dian Marie give much thought to methods from a social constructionist positioning, describing it relatively simply: "What becomes central for the constructionist is *how we practice any particular 'method'* or, more generally, how we 'do' our inquiry" (p. 45). Most of my students begin their research classes admitting that they ignore or bypass the methods section of a research article, preferring to get their information from the abstract and findings or discussion. This is so unfortunate, but also understandable. Often the methodological stories are dry and mechanistic, filled with jargon and pronouncements of what was done and what was accomplished. The "how" is too often missing in the reporting and leaves readers wondering if it was even taken into consideration. For constructionists, attending to and explaining "how we craft our 'methods'—given our meta-theory—in all aspects of our inquiry" and "how we can give space to multiple, local, community-based rationalities" are necessary to develop "ways to practice relationally responsive inquiry (McNamee and Gergen 1999)" (p. 47).

Sheila and Dian Marie stretch our understanding of methods by proposing "'orienting themes' (as opposed to 'methods')" (p. 62). These orienting themes are suggestive of the ways that researchers can think about conducting their inquiry processes. Consider the following:

- opening space for now-ness
- both knowing and influencing
- unfolding multiple local realities in different but equal relation
- respecting emergent processes and possibilities
- centering appreciation
- embracing both inquiry and intervention

- seeing both questioning and listening as potentially (trans)formative
- constructing in both conceptual and non-conceptual performances
- constructing eco-logical ways of being (p. 73)

These themes do not exclude. Hopefully, they stimulate new ways of “transforming inquiries [and] enlarging possible worlds” (p. 61), ways that are reflective of daily ways of thinking and being in relationship with others.

Earlier I alluded to improvisation; a reconsideration of methods and our ways of joining with others in the act of inquiry is improvisational at the fullest. To engage in meaningful inquiry we must attend to context, the nature of the relationships among the people involved, and the degree of and type of social change that is part of the inquiry process, all in order to create “a transformed approach to inquiry [that] can ‘lean’ more toward transformative ways of ‘going on’ in relation” [emphasis mine] (p. 62). This becomes the social change!

I hope that your daily busy-ness does not keep you from reading and taking the messages of this book to heart. I hope that it stirs the daily improvisational capacity in you. Finally, I hope that you will find ways to appreciate the ordinary in the extraordinary in your practice and in your inquiry.

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Author Note

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