

8-1-2007

Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education: Fundamental Elements and Issues- A Book Review

Graham R. Cochran

Ohio State University Extension, cochran.99@osu.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Cochran, G. R. (2007). Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education: Fundamental Elements and Issues- A Book Review. *The Journal of Extension*, 45(4), Article 24. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol45/iss4/24>

This Tools of the Trade is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



August 2007 // Volume 45 // Number 4 // Tools of the Trade // 4TOT1



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education: Fundamental Elements and Issues--A Book Review

Abstract

For many of us in Extension, our comfort is in the quantitative research realm, with only forays into qualitative research. *Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education*, by Susan R. Jones, Vasti Torres, and Jan Arminio, provides readers with valuable guidance and perspectives, and a discussion of key complexities that qualitative researchers must negotiate. It is practical and covers a range of topics that are important for Extension professionals, especially as we seek to improve our scholarship. Add this text to your recommended reading list to strengthen your understanding of qualitative research.

Graham R. Cochran

Assistant Professor and Leader, New Personnel Development
Ohio State University Extension
Human Resources
Columbus, Ohio
cochran.99@osu.edu

Introduction

After reading any good book that stimulates thought and generates questions, I like to share with colleagues. *Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education* will provide readers with a solid grounding in the fundamental elements, issues, and complexities of qualitative research. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) note that most of us have schooling and experience in quantitative research, while few of us have been trained in qualitative research and the philosophy that grounds it.

This is the unfortunate reality for most of us in Extension, and I am a good case study. Eleven years ago, having recently completed a Master's degree in Zoology, I embarked on a career in Extension. Today, I am still enjoying an exciting career in Extension as well as completing doctoral studies in Extension Education. Both my graduate studies in Zoology and in Extension Education included intensive coursework in statistics and quantitative research. Having only one course in qualitative research, I found *Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education* useful and valuable in helping me understand qualitative research, and think you will too.

Reasons for Writing (and Reading) This Book

Jones, Torres and Arminio share two primary reasons they wrote this text:

- **Improve the methodological goodness of qualitative work**--The authors had concerns for the quality of manuscripts submitted to journals.
- **Improve the quality of life; especially for those undervalued**--The ultimate purpose of research is to create a pathway to greater good and social action.

Their goal is to help researchers through the complexities of the research process. The approach used is to emphasize the intentionality in decisions that researchers make along the way and the relationship of these decisions to the research process. *Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education* was written to improve the quality of research for the purpose of improving lives, a lesson important in Extension.

I believe there is a strong argument for Extension professionals in the United States learning more about qualitative research and its application to our field. There is considerable dialogue in the U.S. about "scholarship" in Extension. I recently returned from a national conference where a team of our colleagues presented a workshop emphasizing the need for Extension professionals to be engaged in scholarly work and efforts to redefine scholarship. As faculty of land-grant universities, we have the privilege and responsibility to be engaged in research and apply the knowledge gained to our work in local communities.

While quantitative research can and will remain an important part of the agenda, good qualitative research needs to be an equal partner at the table. As the authors point out, including open ended questions at the end of a survey or using interviews as a method does not mean we are engaged in sound qualitative research. Much of the work we do in Extension is about process and catalyzing change, not product and quantifiable results. Thus, there is good reason to read this book and begin your journey toward being a better qualitative researcher.

Key Content and Useful Information

Early in the book, I found the authors' discussion of the full book title interesting and it set a good stage for following chapters. *Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education: Fundamental Elements and Issues* is the full title. Jones, Torres, and Arminio point out that, by including the phrases negotiating complexities and fundamental elements, the title itself is contradictory and ironic. The words "fundamental elements" refer to building blocks while "negotiating complexities" refers to the ambiguity, challenges and troubling assumptions, which are part of qualitative research.

The book is divided into nine chapters that contain the following key topics:

- **Situating, or anchoring**--The first two chapters helped me understand fundamental terms in qualitative research and apply those epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods.
- **Identifying participants, sampling and connecting elements of the research design**--This section included discussions on sample size, sampling strategies, the complex dynamics at work when participants mirror or do not mirror the social identity of the researcher, and issues of continuity and congruence.
- **Positionality and power**--A good discussion on being aware of your own lens and position, and the responsibility we have as researchers to become aware of our own influence and to take steps to understand others.
- **Criteria for goodness and trustworthiness**--Criteria are presented that apply to all research. Here I appreciated the authors' assertion that part of goodness is convincing the reader that the study findings are important in bringing about informed action.
- **Mixed methods**--Issues involved in mixing methods are discussed as well as what it means to mix methods and how to manage the tensions created.
- **Ethical issues**--Ethical issues are raised and strategies for working through them are provided. Respect--for the research process, the setting, and the participants--is the major theme.
- **Working qualitatively**--The authors' own learning, through writing the text, about what it means to work qualitatively and key lessons they have learned is something readers can apply to their own work.

Conclusion

The authors are successful in their commitment to create a text that is useful and accessible while also engaging readers in the complex issues associated with qualitative research. A good example of making a difficult subject accessible is the authors' use of an analogy to explain the phases of situating a study. They described a study as a journey, so I was able to understand the fundamental elements of a study in terms of a destination (understanding of an unsettled question), territory to travel upon (epistemological worldview), map (theoretical perspective), route(s) to take (methodology), and mode of transportation (method). Exercises at the end of each chapter are helpful for individual reflection or could be used with a group learning together.

Good qualitative research should be an important part of scholarship for Extension professionals. Toward this end, I recommend reading *Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education*.

References

Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2006). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education*. New York: Routledge.

Copyright © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)