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## Review Article

**Janesick, Valerie J. 2015. *Contemplative Qualitative Inquiry: Practicing the Zen of Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press**

The book is about contemplative qualitative inquiry and qualitative methods of research. The author very often refers to a Buddhist Zen. For her, qualitative research is some kind of experience that could be described by using the concepts coming from Buddhist Zen. Buddhist Zen is a spiritual tradition that praises stillness and concentration on the here and now. Meditation practice is very important for Zen; it is used to observe the thinking process and to profoundly understand/feel the connection of the person, as well as his/her mind, with him/herself and with the world. It shows the unity of the world and *interconnectedness* as a feature of the world. It also encompasses ethical principles that generally belong to Buddhism, like compassion and a no harm rule. In the book, Zen is seen as a metaphor to understand qualitative research methods. The author observes the parallels between Zen and contemplative qualitative inquiry. The main parallel is *holism*, and next *relationship in the context, body and mind as instruments of knowing* and *ethics of no harm and storytelling* (p. 34).

What, then, is contemplative qualitative research?

This practical concept is useful for those of us using qualitative methods to make sense of people's lives: we are connected to our participant/s whether or not we wish to be. I call this approach contemplative qualitative inquiry. The contemplative component has to do with the stillness and silence of thinking with a meditative orientation. It is my intention that this book begins a conversation about these ideas. [p. 22]

Another explanation of contemplative inquiry: "I use the term contemplative inquiry to refer to qualitative techniques that place a deep and serious emphasis on thought in every component of a study of the social world" (p. 34).

So the thinking process here is at the core of the analysis. Thoughts create the world and—at the same time—are part of it. Cleaning the mind, for example, through the meditation practice, helps to see what is the base and core of the phenomena that

we experience. Stillness can help the researcher to see his/her participation in co-creating the phenomenon that he/she wanted to investigate. Stillness is also important to listen to the research participants.

Concerning the relation of Zen to research techniques, meditation can be used as a tool for increasing attentiveness during interview and concentration on the here and now, on what the interview can let us know: "We must be attentive and be present, with our focus directed solely to the interview at that moment and in that space" (p. 32). It is advised how to exploit meditation to develop better research skills: "A good way to keep track of meditation progress is to keep a meditation journal" (p. 32). That is the way to increase the researcher's mindfulness. Keeping a meditation journal is also a reflexive way of analyzing the researcher's mind—not for controlling it, but for observing how it works in the complex situation of the research process (Konecki 2016).

Janesick uses the metaphor of meditation also to show how we should do interviews (p. 32). Similarly, she uses meditation and observing the mind as a metaphor of clearing the mind. There is, then, the practical aspect of contemplative research that can be applied in case of some research orientations in qualitative inquires. In my opinion, it can be useful, for example, in grounded theory methodology, where avoiding preconceptualizations is advised (Glaser and Strauss 1967). We can use meditation for "cleaning" (or being aware of) the presumptions and our ideological and philosophical background. In a similar vein, meditation can be used in phenomenological research to practice *epoché*, that is, to see and bracket our assumptions about the world

and phenomena that we investigate (Bentz and Shapiro 1998).

Qualitative research is aimed at understanding, not explaining the causes. It is, then, important to get the meaning of the phenomena. For Janesick, the research is contemplation in action (p. 36). Another parallel that we can see between qualitative inquiry and Zen is that conclusions from qualitative research are tentative—we cannot reach final conclusions that would be valid forever. So, there is a parallel with the notion of impermanence present in Zen. In the qualitative approach, the student learns gradually and, little by little, becomes more experienced and knows how to use qualitative methods. It is the same in Zen, when the student of Zen—after years of mediation practice—becomes more and more open, sagacious, and less concentrated on the self.

The analysis of research techniques, for example, an interview, is very important in the book. The author states that the interview is a creative process. We listen to the participant, and it is a contemplative act where the self of the researcher should vanish (see: Chapter 3). So, we should remember our assumptions and ego that can intervene in the process of interviewing. Emotional management is also important during the interview: "Go to the interview prepared, use all your active listening skills, relax, and enjoy the interview. Put aside any roadblocks obstructing your ability to hear data. Breathe, be calm, and hear the data" (p. 62). At all times, we should write down our experiences in the reflective journal. The author advises to use diverse kinds of art, including poetry, for reporting the research. According to Janesick, poetry helps to clarify the meaning of empirical materials (p. 89).

For the author, interviewing is also the act of compassion (see: Chapter 4). Respect for the research participants and obtaining their informed consent are important, and generally protect them from any harm. These resonate with the Zen principles of compassion and loving kindness (p. 78). But, if the above rules resonate with the Zen principles, does this mean that they are good, effective, moral, or something else? We do not get the answer from the book.

What is important is giving the voice to the participants in research reports, but also giving them a chance to verify our interpretations. Trustworthiness of the story is thus proven (p. 95) and harmony is achieved (p. 102).

Writing is a very important skill, but also a way of achieving the results in qualitative research process. Writing with joy is the way of Zen. Reflective writing helps us to solve emotional problems, "softens the heart and mind," and helps to keep the distance and concentration. Writing, for the author of the book, is part of mindfulness, and mindfulness is a slice of nirvana, "transcendent state of mind wherein all concepts of pain and suffering are extinguished" (p. 105).

Writing poetry is also part of the research practice. Poetry pushes us towards deeper thinking and understanding. It could be written based on our materials and collected data. The inspiration for poetry is included in the data, what resonates with the *haiku* poetry that is inspired by Zen (p. 112). Still, there are many other kinds of poetry that can be used here (e.g., *tanka* or *sedoka*). Phenomenology also referred

to poetry as a tool of knowing and understanding.<sup>1</sup> According to Heidegger, poetry enables us to understand the mysterious aspects of being. It could create the being by using the words. By naming, the poet creates a world and comes to the essentials of being, for example, impermanence. Poetry goes first, and speech follows it (Heidegger 2000).

Poetry is a very important tool when it comes to understanding the self and lifeworld; I agree with the giants of phenomenology, Husserl and Heidegger. However, I do not see any advantage of writing poetry by a qualitative researcher, since one can focus on open coding, creating diagrams (visualization of thoughts), and writing memos (written interpretation) referring to the data and categories created based on these. Still, coding and writing memos can be seen as some kind of *poetry* or *prose writing*. What we, readers, can do is to believe the author that writing poetry by a qualitative researcher is an opening and creative experience, one which is very useful for a new and fresh interpretation of the data. Using poetry in qualitative research makes sense, if it is generated spontaneously by the participants, if it becomes our tool for understanding its creator. If poetry is a way of expressing self and relation to the world by the participant, it certainly should be in the center of the analytical interest of the researcher (cf., Bentz 1995 where the author analyses and tries to understand the authentic and spontaneous but fictional stories by student Paul, who cannot write abstract of texts, and instead writes imagined stories). However,

<sup>1</sup> "According to Husserl, poetry and fiction are primary aspects of phenomenological thinking. Free variations are imaginings designed to clarify essential elements of phenomena. Phantasies are informed by eidetic intuition. Phantasies also clarify such intuitions" (Bentz 1995:49).

for the practice of mindfulness and precise condensing of meaning, the researcher can write poetry.

The above comment does not devalue the reviewed book. After each chapter of the book we have a summary and description of a mindful moment. There is an exercise that explains how to train mindfulness which can be useful during the research. There are also exercises which entail the students to describe some activities or issues from their lives and thus enable them to learn *mindful activities*, for example, "Write two pages about your favorite fruit or vegetable and use a metaphor to describe the fruit or vegetable" (p. 50). Also, at the end of each chapter, there are suggested readings, so we can treat the book as a manual.

The textbook can be useful for teaching qualitative methods. It is a good introduction to contempla-

tive inquiry in many disciplines: sociology, social work, cultural anthropology, psychology, pedagogy, social geography, criminology, and so on. It also gives some practical advice to those who are beginners in the qualitative research, but the advice at hand can also be of use for more advanced researchers who want to become more contemplative.

I recommend the book for teachers and students of qualitative methodology classes. The contemplative research is more credible and ethical. The researcher could stop and *not think* to be more reflexive after such mindful practice of being here and now. Being here and now could become a permanent condition of a researcher. If so, he/she is almost *enlightened* and the research is done without any effort, lightly, ethically, and with joy.

## References

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