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## Book review

Qualitative Research

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LYNN JAMIESON, ROONA SIMPSON and RUTH LEWIS, *Researching Families and Relationships. Reflections on Process*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011. 206 pp. ISBN 9780230252448 £55.00

It is well accepted and known that social sciences, since their foundation, are constantly involved in a renewing debate about their theoretical fundamentals and methodological tools. So far, many studies have highlighted social researchers' skills and behaviors in relation with the best practices of carrying on research projects. We can briefly resume two paradigmatic approaches with regard to sociologists' attitudes in the fieldwork: on the one side, traditional positivism advocates for a fulfillment of objectivity considering the researcher as a neutral observer; on the other side, a more hermeneutic approach shows skepticism about the excessive neutrality of the researcher because it does not allow any interpretative insights.

Following this last position, recent studies focus their attention on the impacts of research activities over social scientists' emotions, beliefs, and ethical accounts. The 40 contributions collected in this book outline these impacts making explicit the role of researchers in empirical-based studies on families and intimate relationships over the last decade in the United Kingdom, particularly regarding qualitative studies. Qualitative techniques provide deep and rich information about the relational nature of social life, and they also imply an important rethinking of social scientists' personal involvement in the research process.

Young fellows and senior lecturers and professors from different British Universities, most of them working in the *Centre for Research on Families and Relationships* (based at the University of Edinburgh with partners across other Scottish universities and research centers), explain how they have dealt with practical difficulties, managed tensions, and found out concrete solutions across different phases of the research projects.

A special attention is drawn to the context of inquiry in order to specify how the fieldwork influences social scientists, both professionally and personally. In these terms, doing research, every sociologist learns more about a specific topic or field and about himself or herself.

Authors' contributions are introduced and commented by overviews that take into account different issues related to the fieldwork. An in-depth analysis of their empathy with research questions, subjects, and duties is carried out in all the papers over these six

chapters. Each contribution is an extract from different research diaries compiled by social scientists recalling back memories and notes about their feelings, impressions, decisions, and choices in researching families and personal relationships.

A common theme for every paper is the importance of acknowledging the researcher's responsibilities in constructing, interpreting, and presenting data in this field. When the analysis concerns information from intimate life, the social scientists have to face many problems and challenges that can interfere in their original beliefs and research settings. Furthermore, the division between formal and informal roles may be confused, while the limits between scientific engagement and individual participation become blurred. Living and working are inextricably mixed in this kind of scientific research for two main reasons: because the sociologists enter private life of people, very often invading their intimate routines and spaces, and because they are inevitably influenced by their own experiences of family and personal relationships.

The comparison between sociologists' biographies and the researched intimacy can be extremely complicated or even traumatic for both participants in the research. Within this perspective, the authors offer critical reflections on how to make judgments and changes about different research styles, needs, and circumstances in order to better manage the interactions between the researcher and the researched. Social scientists' sensitivity is needed not only in undertaking projects about families and relationships but also in dealing with any distress concerning framing research, accessing to the fieldwork, and keeping under control their emotions in the collection and analysis of people narratives as private accounts.

Families are social places where language, individual and social meanings, and practices of reciprocity come together to contrive a specific research context. Researchers should consider how their emotional responses may modify their interpretations and outcomes.

The framing research in a cross-cultural perspective can improve relevant definitions of research topics and a better understanding of researchers' agency in different normative or axiological contexts. Social scientists deal with recent changes in families' organization and composition: new domestic arrangements and intergenerational ties, nonmarital cohabitations, step-families, and homosexual relationships represent some of the main examples that could be currently faced by social researchers. These cases provide an awareness of different perspectives regarding cultural differences that impacted the social scientists' standpoints and previous experiences about the definition of familiar relations between the household members.

The setting of time and space constitutes another important issue referred to the researchers' practices in the accessing to and staying in the field. Emotional impacts are obvious when the researcher is presenting troubled and very difficult cases in intimate surroundings (i.e. researching violent parents, children diseases, or children sexual abuse in the intimate surroundings of their households), or when periods of research are prolonged, and research relationships border on friendships or particular social categories are involved (i.e. accessing children under the age of legal majority).

These accounts raise a number of questions about how relationships with participants are developed, managed, and sustained in a setting of mutual respect, trust, and confidence during the research. Since the very beginning of fieldwork, the strategies to involve

respondents as potential resources in the fieldwork are crucial. In these cases, the researchers should prevent eventual ethical dilemmas with a set of protocols that regulate their professional mission and with a constant control directed by their personal intuition and sensibility. These issues lead to a continued reflexive recognition of research interests and researchers' behaviors and reactions that emerged as the fieldwork progressed.

Further accounts are centered on the shift of research findings' use from a knowledge transfer model to an integrative knowledge exchange model, where the relationships between social scientists, policy makers, and practitioners in social work are more fluid. Starting from the experience of Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), authors explain the establishment of an institutional action plan to address the research findings in the policy field during the last 10 years in Scotland. **[AQ: 1]**

Practical impacts of scientific outcomes suppose an important commitment for social scientists in terms of effective resonance in the research community, great influence in nonacademic spheres, and concrete benefits for the wider society. Most of the strategic decisions to take into account for a better generation, maximization, and diffusion of social research rely on the fundraising process from private and public institutions, on the periodical following-up meetings with stakeholders, on the formal communication with social agents (especially with politicians and with civil servants), and on a credible role as consultant or expert that sociologists often have to play among the public and through mass media.

Final remarks outline the possibility to reach practical benefits from a better interaction between governments and universities. In this account, the dissemination and application of researches' outcomes still produce many tensions and misunderstandings between these two worlds that should be prevented or reduced.

With this edition, the *Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life* offers an interesting compilation of real experiences of conducting research and a detailed retrospective over researchers' attitudes and behaviors that are often less addressed in the literature.

As the editors state in their conclusion, the emotive dense character of fieldwork is a distinctive character of social scientist researching a set of relationships, familial or non-familiar, that may be defined as personal 'communities' or 'configurations'. **[AQ: 2]**

In this book, it is widely shown that social research in these fields is not (and cannot be) a linear process. The ability of social scientists depends on their capacity to understand this intrinsic complexity of the reality and to adapt the research design and their behaviors and emotional dispositions to the specificities of each case study. This goal can be pursued through a high attention in controlling sensitive data and in being flexible, self-confident, and ready even when they have to manage tense or dramatic situations in their researches.

The accounts in this book demonstrate that emotional, desiring, creative, and feeling aspects of sociologists are embodied as part of the research process. These aspects represent the concrete guarantee of the personal commitment displayed by every researcher doing his/her job. From this perspective, the authors are keenly aware of their professional skills and responsibilities. At the same time, their sensitivity in the fieldwork constitutes an added value to the research process and allows them to learn more about themselves and about the best way to disseminate their findings. The interaction between

the research, the researched, and the research context is defined by this reflexive and interactive dynamics. This mechanism improves high quality in social science research.

Anyone reading this collection has the possibility to appreciate the personal engagement and the real efforts of social scientists researching difficult issues about families, intimate life, and personal relationships. On reading this book, one will realize that actually being a sociologist is not an easy job because it requires intense personal and professional commitments, especially when sensitive issues are researched. Nevertheless, according to the authors' contributions, we should admit that it is really fascinating and useful to know better the central meanings of this profession from the very inside of the fieldwork.

**Alessandro Gentile**  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain