

The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Arts-Informed Research

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Arts-informed research is an approach to qualitative research in the social sciences that is situated in sound understandings of qualitative research approaches. Although the focus of the work is not necessarily about the arts, it is grounded in the arts in several ways. First, the researcher is inspired by an art form, an artist, or a body of artistic work to create innovative research processes. Second, these research processes draw from artistic processes characteristic of how an artist works, whether in the fine arts or applied arts broadly conceived. Third, representation of the research (the telling of the research story) relies heavily on art forms characteristic of the arts' preceding defining qualities. Arts-informed researchers are explicitly interested in presenting their work to diverse audiences through means that rely on the arts. This entry describes the goals of arts-informed research and the elements that define it. Then, through an examination of the ways in which arts inform the research process and the research representation, the entry identifies the characteristics of good arts-informed research.

Goals of Arts-Informed Research

Arts-informed research is a mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based in, the arts broadly conceived. The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for purposes of advancing knowledge. Arts-informed research is grounded in creative expressions of qualitative research traditions that are informed by the arts broadly defined. Researchers working in this way can greatly extend and enhance those traditions by placing attention on the development of research processes and representations that are inspired and informed by being situated in one or more of the arts.

Arts-based research and arts-informed research are similar in many ways, including the goal of researching in ways that more fully acknowledge the richness and complexity of human experience. The term *arts-based educational research* is more widely used to describe qualitative research that involves or includes the arts in some capacity

to advance knowledge and communicate research understandings. Arts-informed research attends more specifically to the relationship between form and purpose—how an art form can inform both the research process and representation for purposes of making research/knowledge more accessible to diverse audiences, including but beyond the academy. Gary Knowles and Ardra Cole developed this arts-related approach during the mid- to late 1990s for the purposes of enhancing and broadening the communicative possibilities of qualitative researching involving the arts through the process of inquiry as well as the representation of research accounts.

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Arts-informed research is a way of redefining research form and representation and creating new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, subjectivities, emotion, responsiveness, and the ethical dimensions of inquiry. This redefinition reflects an explicit challenge to logical positivism and technical rationality as the only acceptable guides to explaining human behavior and understanding. Bringing together the systematic and rigorous qualities of conventional qualitative methodologies with the artistic, disciplined, and imaginative qualities of the arts acknowledges the power of art forms to reach diverse audiences and the importance of diverse languages for gaining insights into the complexities of the human condition. The dominant paradigm of positivism historically has governed the way in which research is defined, conducted, and communicated and has consciously and unconsciously defined what society accepts as knowledge; however, it is not a paradigm that reflects how individuals in society actually experience and process the world. Life is lived and knowledge is made through kitchen table conversations and yarning at the wharf or transit station or coffee shop or tavern, in the imaginative spaces created between the lines of a good book or by an encounter with an evocative photograph, or in an embodied response to a musical composition or an interpretive dance. These moments of meaning-making, however, are not typically thought of as knowledge. Knowledge, as society has learned to define it, dwells beyond the realm of the everyday. It is discovered by intellectuals—researchers and theorists—and held by them until its implications are determined and passed on for consumption. Knowledge is propositional and generalizable, and research is the process by which it is generated. According to this paradigmatic view, knowledge remains the purview of the academy, where it can be carefully defined and controlled.

Arts-informed research, with one of its main goals of accessibility (and breadth of audience), is an attempt to acknowledge individuals in societies as knowledge makers engaged in the act of knowledge advancement. Tied to moral purpose, it is also an explicit attempt to make a difference through research, not only in the lives of ordinary citizens but also in the thinking and decisions of policymakers, politicians, legislators, and other key decision makers.

Arts-informed research is part of a broader commitment to shift the dominant paradigmatic view that keeps the academy and community separated, that is, to acknowledge the multiple dimensions that constitute and form the human condition—physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and cultural—and the myriad ways of engaging in the world—oral, literal, visual, and embodied. In other words, such research aims to connect the work of the academy with the life and lives of communities through research that is accessible, evocative, embodied, empathic, and provocative.

Defining Elements

- How can the arts (broadly conceived) inform the research process?
- How can the arts inform the representational form of research?

As a framework for inquiry, arts-informed research is sufficiently fluid and flexible to serve either as a methodological enhancement to other research approaches or as a stand-alone qualitative methodology. For example, as a methodological enhancement, one might conduct an arts-informed life history study, an arts-informed phenomenological inquiry, an arts-informed narrative inquiry, or an arts-informed ethnography. As a stand-alone methodology, situated within a qualitative framework, arts-informed research perspectives enhance the possibilities of information gathering and representation.

Broadly grounded in assumptions that define a qualitative paradigm, arts-informed research has several defining elements. First and foremost, arts-informed research involves a *commitment to a particular art form* (or forms in the case of mixed media or multimedia) that is reflected in elements of the creative research process and in

the representation of the research “text.” The selected art form(s) serves to frame and define the inquiry process and text.

The *methodological integrity* of the research, a second defining element, is determined in large part by the relationship between the form and substance of the research text and the inquiry process reflected in the text. In other words, the rationale for the use of photography, for example, as the defining art form guiding the inquiry or representation must be readily apparent by how and how well it works to illuminate and achieve the research purposes.

Following the emergent nature of qualitative research in general, the *creative inquiry process* of arts-informed research is defined by an openness to the expansive possibilities of the human imagination. [p. 34 ↓] Rather than adhering to a set of rigid guidelines for gathering and working with research material, a researcher using arts-informed methodology follows a more natural process of engagement relying on commonsense decision making, intuition, and a general responsiveness to the natural flow of events and experiences. Serendipity plays a key role in the inquiry process, much as it does in life. Moreover, we infer that researchers can learn from artists about matters of process. That is, the processes of art making inform the inquiry in ways that are congruent with the artistic sensitivities and technical (artistic) strengths of the researcher in concert with the overall spirit and purpose of the inquiry.

Also, as in most qualitative research, the subjective and reflexive *presence of the researcher* is evident in the research text in varying ways depending on the focus and purpose of the inquiry. In arts-informed research, however, the researcher's artistry is also predominant. By artistry, we include conceptual artistry and creative and aesthetic sensibilities, not just technical skills or an externally sanctioned title of “artist.” Extending the idea from qualitative inquiry of “researcher as instrument,” in arts-informed research the “instrument” of research is also the researcher-as-artist.

Although we operate on the assumption that all research is inherently autobiographical—a reflection of who we are—arts-informed research is not exclusively about the researcher. In other words, although the focus of an arts-informed inquiry may be the researcher herself or himself, this is not necessarily so. Arts-informed research differs, for example, from autoethnography and autobiography, both of which focus

on the researcher as the subject of inquiry. Arts-informed research has *strong reflexive elements* that evidence the presence and signature of the researcher, but the researcher is not necessarily the focus or subject of study.

A sixth defining element of arts-informed research relates to *audience*. Consistent with one of the overarching purposes of arts-informed research, there must be an explicit intention for the research to reach communities and audiences, including but beyond the academy. The choice and articulation of form will reflect this intention.

Related to research relevance and accessibility to audience is the *centrality of audience engagement*. The use of the arts in research is not for art's sake. It is explicitly tied to moral purposes of social responsibility and epistemological equity. Thus, the research text is intended to involve the reader/audience in an active process of meaning-making that is likely to have transformative potential. Relying on the power of art to both inform and engage, the research text is explicitly intended to evoke and provoke emotion, thought, and action.

Qualities of Good Arts-Informed Research

Arts-informed research, in process and representational form, is neither prescriptive nor codified. It is the creative meshing of scholarly and artistic endeavors. Nevertheless, like all research, studies following arts-informed research methodology must be subjected to scrutiny to assess, and perhaps help to explain, their worth or value as research. A broad assessment is guided by the following two general questions: How do the arts inform the research process? How do the arts inform the research representation? More specifically, a study imbued with the qualities that follow is one that is likely to both exemplify and contribute to the broad agenda of arts-informed research, that of enhancing understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry and of reaching multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible.

Intentionality. All research has one or more purposes, but not all research is driven by a moral commitment. Consistent with the broad agenda of social science research to improve the human condition, arts-informed research has both a clear intellectual

purpose and moral purpose. Ultimately, the research must stand for something. Arts-informed research representations, then, are not intended as titillations but rather are intended as opportunities for transformation, revelation, or some other intellectual and moral shift. They must be more than good stories, images, or performances.

Researcher Presence. A researcher's presence is evident in a number of ways throughout an arts-informed research text (in whatever form it is presented and, by implication, throughout the entire researching process). The researcher is present through an explicit reflexive self-accounting, her or his presence is also implied and felt, and, the research text (the representational form) clearly bears the signature or fingerprint of researcher-as-artist.

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Aesthetic Quality. The central purpose of arts-informed research is knowledge advancement through research, not the production of fine art works. Art is a medium through which research purposes are achieved. The quality of the artistic elements of an arts-informed research project is defined by how well the artistic process and form serve research goals. Attention to the aesthetics of a particular genre are, therefore, important; aesthetics of form is integrally tied to communication.

Methodological Commitment. Arts-informed research evidences attention to the defining elements and form of arts-informed research. As such, the work reflects a methodological commitment through evidence of a principled process, procedural harmony, and attention to aesthetic quality.

Holistic Quality. From purpose to method to interpretation and representation, arts-informed research is a holistic process and rendering that runs counter to more conventional research endeavors that tend to be more linear, sequential, compartmentalized, and distanced from researchers and participants. A rigorous arts-informed text is imbued with an internal consistency and coherence that represents a strong and seamless relationship between purpose and method (process and form). The research text also evidences a high level of authenticity that speaks to the truthfulness and sincerity of the research relationship, process of inquiry, interpretation, and representational form.

Communicability. Foremost in arts-informed work are issues related to audience and the transformative potential of the work. Research that maximizes its communicative potential addresses concerns about the accessibility of the research account, usually through the form and language in which it is written, performed, or otherwise presented. Accessibility is related to the potential for audience engagement and response. Such representations of research have the express purpose of connecting, in a holistic way, with the hearts, souls, and minds of the audience. They are intended to have an evocative quality and a high level of resonance for diverse audiences.

Knowledge Advancement. Research is about advancing knowledge however “knowledge” is defined. The knowledge advanced in arts-informed research is generative rather than propositional and is based on assumptions that reflect the multidimensional, complex, dynamic, intersubjective, and contextual nature of human experience. In so doing, knowledge claims must be made with sufficient ambiguity and humility to allow multiple interpretations and reader response.

Contributions. Tied to the intellectual and moral purposes of arts-informed research are its theoretical and practical contributions. Sound and rigorous arts-informed work has both theoretical potential and transformative potential. The former acknowledges the centrality of the “so what?” question and the power of the inquiry work to provide insights into the human condition, whereas the latter urges researchers to imagine new possibilities for those whom the work is about and for. Researchers are not passive agents of the state, the university, or any other agency of society. Researchers’ responsibilities are toward fellow humans, neighbors, and community members.

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See also

- [A/r/tography](#)
- [Arts-Based Research](#)
- [Researcher as Artist](#)

Further Readings

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