The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Arts-Based Research

Arts-based research is a form of qualitative research in the human studies that employs the premises, procedures, and principles of the arts. It is defined by the presence of aesthetic qualities (or design elements) within both the inquiry process and the research text. Therefore, arts-based research is quite different in many ways from traditional forms of research that are associated with the social sciences. Arts-based research differs from scientific research both in the process in which the research is conducted and in the modalities used for representing research data. For that reason, social researchers who have been professionally socialized to regard research in the various fields of the human studies as exclusively scientific may dismiss arts-based research as not useful. Over the past couple of decades, however, arts-based research advocates and practitioners have made headway in dispelling the misunderstandings that resulted in earlier marginalization. This entry reviews the types and purposes of arts-based research, elements of the investigative strategies and communicative approaches it employs, and criteria for evaluating such research.

Kinds of Arts-Based Research Texts

Advocates and practitioners of arts-based research have provided two distinctly different sorts of textual products. The first kind is conceptual insofar as it addresses the nature, characteristics, and purposes of arts-based research. This kind of text is found in articles, books, book chapters, and conference presentations that focus on various dimensions of arts-based research. Of course, as with the formation of any novel approach to researching social phenomena, there is disagreement among scholars regarding these dimensions.

The second kind of text offers actual examples of arts-based research. These examples employ any of a number of art forms in the representation of the social phenomena under study. Various forms of the literary, visual, plastic, and performance arts have been represented, including the following: novel, novella, short story, poetry, found poetry, memoir, autoethnography, readers theater, ethnodrama, verbal portraiture, literary case study, literary essay, educational criticism, autobiography, biography, self-narrative, allegory, mixed genres, photography, film and video documentary and fiction, hypertext, painting, sculpture, museum installation, multimedia, dance, and music.

Purposes of Arts-Based Research

In their increasingly successful efforts to legitimate an approach to social research that is dramatically different from social science, arts-based researchers have identified unique purposes for engaging in their projects. Some scholars have emphasized the capacity of the arts for enabling viewers to perceive qualities within the social world that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. They have suggested, moreover, that different forms of art enable a percipient to see the same phenomena in different ways. This purpose for arts-based research, therefore, may be described as one of enhanced understanding through the communication of subjective realities or personal truths that can occur only through works of art. Elliot Eisner, an educationist scholar who coined the term *arts-based research* during the 1980s, has articulated this aim most forcefully. Eisner, a self-identified cognitive pluralist, **[p. 29 ↓]** advocated a kind of binocular vision that results from investigating educational (and other social) phenomena through both scientific and artistic lenses.

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Touching Eternity: The Enduring Outcomes of Teaching

Touching Eternity: The Enduring Outcomes of Teaching, published in 2001, is an example of an arts-based work that attempts to problematize orthodox notions of what constitutes quality in teaching. Using a literary format and writing style, Tom Barone crafted the life stories of several former students of the same high school teacher. The stories were aimed at enabling readers to vicariously experience the student–teacher interactions both inside and outside of the classroom setting. Each student insisted on portraying the teacher as a powerfully influential central character in his or her life. In an ensuing analysis of the life stories, however, Barone raised questions about the possibility of teachers as heroic figures who, operating single-handedly against powerful external forces, can indeed make a significant difference in the quality of their students' lives. The result is a book that offers no final answers but rather prompts readers from

all walks of life to reconsider their own (perhaps deeply held) beliefs about who is a good teacher.

Source: Barone, T. (2001). *Touching eternity: The enduring outcomes of teaching.* New York: Teachers College Press.

A second purpose identified with arts-based research also entails a shift away from the traditional objectivist epistemology identified with most social science research. Social scientists have tended to strive toward a high degree of certainty in securing and disclosing their findings. The publication of these findings sets forth knowledge claims about the phenomena under study. The higher the validity and reliability of those findings, the more likely they will be deemed useful in predicting, and even controlling, future events. However, arts-based research is not usually aimed toward securing (or even approaching) either "objective" or "subjective" truth. Indeed, most arts-based researchers harbor radically different aspirations for their inquiry projects. This purpose involves the generation of doubts about, the potential for disrupting or transgressing against, and the enhancement of uncertainty regarding presuppositions about the social world that have come to be taken for granted as contributing to a final reality.

Arts-based research texts, therefore, are designed in a manner that will promote profound reconsideration of the commonsensical, the orthodox, the clichéd, and the stereotypical. This disturbance by the arts-based research text of the privilege of the status quo may make possible that toward which many artists strive, according to Maxine Greene and others. This is a work that enables the reader or percipient to reimagine deeply deficient social institutions and practices.

What these articulated goals of arts-based social research—the communication of subjective realities and the vigorous interrogation of a commonsensical way of comprehending the social world—have in common is an enhancement of multiple meanings. Indeed, this possibility of entertaining alternative ways of perceiving the world implies the presence of what Richard Rorty identified as one of two fundamental purposes of human inquiry. If the first purpose has been the discovery of truth through employment of the tools of traditional forms of social science, the second is indeed the revelation of alternative meanings through artistic projects.

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Research Design Elements

Research design, of course, involves both investigative strategies and approaches to the communication of research "findings." Elements pertaining to each of these dimensions must serve the shifting purpose of the arts-based researcher. For example, within social science research that is experimental in nature, elements of design are carefully selected to meet the traditional purpose of moving the reader toward certainty regarding the phenomena under study. An experiment that is carefully designed will theoretically result in the most highly valid and reliable truth claims. Within arts-based research, however, radically different design elements may be selected in accordance with their alternative research goals.

These design elements will, of course, vary to some degree according to art form. For works that are literary in character, the inquiry approach may be less systematic than that employed by social scientists. The research process engaged in by playwrights, poets, and novelists, although often extensive and thorough, might not exhibit the highly structured protocols and procedures found in social scientists' methodological toolkit. Most social scientists will, after all, perform in accordance with Rorty's first inquiry aim, a quest for certainty, whereas most arts-based researchers will **[p. 31 ↓]** honor the process through which interrogative art is created. Similarly, the findings of social science will, on the one hand, quite rightly be revealed within a text that honors the orthodoxies of a scientific report. On the other hand, arts-based researchers will configure their "data" into an aesthetic form that is designed to promote the kind of re-visioning that was described previously. For example, an arts-based manuscript designed to promote an understanding of the world of an adolescent with Asperger's syndrome may take the form of a novella, a documentary film, or a cluster of poems that enables the reader/viewer to reexperience the world from a previously unavailable vantage point.

The shape and format of this sort of research text will be the result of a reorganization of aesthetic content ("data") into a form that will entice the reader into a textual engagement where mundane aspects of everyday life are highlighted. Transported into, and repositioned within, an "aesthetic remove," and thus temporarily bracketed off from the "real world," the reader can be enticed into reconsidering the meanings

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underlying the human phenomena being investigated, for the phenomena may now appear strange and unfamiliar and, therefore, in need of reconfiguration within the worldview of the reader. The commonsensical meanings easily attributed to facets of the social and physical world may be challenged, and for the reader the intermediate result may be ambiguity or conflict. However, the ultimate outcome may be increased empathic understanding, that is, a deepened appreciation of alternative outlooks and perspectives—whether those of an emotionally challenged adolescent, members of unfamiliar cultural and/or religious groups, or anyone who dwells outside of what Rorty called the "range of us."

Qualities of Good Arts-Based Research

Because arts-based research participates in an oft-neglected purpose of human inquiry, the question of what constitutes quality within this approach becomes especially relevant. According to most arts-based researchers, judging their products as if they were indeed works of social science represents a profound category error. They would contend that such assessment malpractice may result in the dismissal of extraordinarily useful research as invalid and even dangerous. Arts-based research projects that serve the purpose of raising profound questions regarding the value of particular social and cultural practices may be unfairly and irrelevantly critiqued as failing to offer trustworthy knowledge claims.

Advocates of arts-based research contend that an arts-based research text should be judged in terms of the degree to which it possesses the potential for furthering its own inquiry purpose. What, then, are the criteria for making this sort of judgment about the worth of arts-based research texts?

In fact, there is no final set of standards that may be employed to judge the quality of an arts-based work. Indeed, assessing value within arts-based research implies judging not a static quality inherent in the text but rather the degree to which the work possesses a potential for a certain sort of persuasion of members of its audience.

Tom Barone identified three criteria (among additional possibilities) for judging whether an arts-based text evidences the power to raise significant questions regarding

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commonsensical notions lodged within the prevailing cultural landscape that would otherwise be left undisturbed. First, the research must have reconfigured features of the observed world into a virtual world that is not literally true but plausible, credible, and possible—one that resonates with the experiences of the percipient or reader. Second, the work must be compelling. Does the text have the power to lure the reader into that virtual world so that he or she desires to inhabit it at least temporarily? If the work is not attractive in this sense, it is unlikely to achieve its pragmatic purpose of raising questions in the minds of its audience. Here, most clearly within literary forms of arts-based research, various storytelling devices become important, including (among others) evocative language, strong narrative drive, textured characterizations, and satisfactory sequencing of events. Third, the text must be able to move the reader beyond the constraints of the particular and local, that is, to seduce the reader into seeing the world of the text as analogous to and relevant for situations that reside outside the world of the text and within the more proximate everyday world of the reader/viewer.

The last criterion suggests the importance of a certain sort of "generalizability," although not in the constricted traditional sense of that term. Instead, the good piece of arts-based research must be able to coax the reader into rethinking the conventionally "real" world around him or her. This text may even provoke groups of audience members into conversation about **[p. 32 ↓]** the various possible "meanings" of the text and its implications for their perhaps deficient world-at-hand. Profound interrogation of that real world by its audience is indeed viewed by many arts-based researchers as the sign of a successful work of their brand of social research.

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See also

- Aesthetics
- Arts-Informed Research
- Dramaturgy
- Empathy
- Metaphor

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- Researcher as Artist

Further Readings

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