

Valerie J. Janesick (1998): "Stretching" exercises for qualitative researchers. Thousand Oaks: SAGE

Review by Bo Dahlin, Karlstad University, Sweden

Inner silence

Writing, reflecting, hoping,

Slipping into truth

The poem above is the result of a "stretching" exercise in a course for qualitative researchers run by the author of this book. The exercise was to write a Japanese *haiku* in order "to capture the essence of the individual's role in the particular mini-study undertaken during the semester" (p. 54). The example illustrates the "aesthetic" approach that the author has to qualitative research, and which I very much sympathise with. The basis of this approach is the realisation that in using qualitative methods, the *whole person* of the researcher is involved in a much more intimate way than in quantitative research. In interviewing and in doing observation, the researcher themselves is the main instrument for gathering data: their own senses of seeing, listening, feeling and intuition are involved. From this point of view it is natural to apply the concept of "stretching exercises" in order to develop personal capacities of an aesthetic nature – aesthetic in the sense that they have to do with sensual awareness, feeling and intuition. As the author herself remarks:

...the qualitative researcher has to train the mind, and the eye, and the soul, together. By doing these exercises [described in the book], we allow for an interchange of ideas and practice, self-reflection, and overall evaluation of one's own progress... (p. 2)

However, in spite of this close connection between aesthetics and qualitative research, "the arts have seldom enjoyed a position of respect in the social sciences", as Elliot Eisner remarks in the foreword. This book therefore is a welcome contribution towards establishing the relevance of aesthetics and Art for qualitative research.

The book is rather small, all in all 135 pages, 62 of which consist of Appendixes with illustrations of field-notes, self-evaluations, and dissertation proposals to name but a few examples. The main text is divided into four "cycles": the observation cycle, the interview cycle, the personal development and the role of the researcher cycle, and the analysis cycle. All except the analysis "cycle" contain a series of exercises, starting with very simple ones and gradually becoming more complex. For instance, the observation exercises start with observing a collection of physical objects on a table, like a "still life", and includes observing a live animal before going on to a more realistic non-participant observation of people's behaviour at a café or restaurant. Self-reflective and self-evaluative questions accompany every exercise, such as: what was most difficult for me in this exercise? what did I learn about myself? what do I need to work on? how can I describe my development in this area?

The author makes a point of using "ordinary language" in order to "disrupt" conventional academic writing, to "demystify" the research process, and to make the text understandable to anyone interested in practising observation or interviewing. These aims may deserve recognition and praise. On the other hand I cannot help feeling disappointed at the lack of a more theoretical discourse dealing with the relation between aesthetics and qualitative research, or even with that between Art and Science in general. The lack of such discourse makes the book loose "weight" in an academic context, and its important message and contents are easily belittled, could even be scorned at with irony. We have after all serious academic discussions going on about the relation between Art and Science, see for instance Tauber (1996). An area of particular relevance to relate to would be the historical example of J W Goethe's phenomenological approach to the study of nature, discussed for instance by Amrine, Zucker, and Wheeler (1987). For Goethe (as probably for Janesick), the human being herself is the most precious research instrument of all, in particular because it can be endlessly refined through self-cultivation.

References

- Amrine, F., Zucker, F., & Wheeler, H. (Eds.). (1987): *Goethe and the Sciences: A Reappraisal*. Dordrecht/Boston: Reidel.
- Tauber, A. I. (Ed.) (1996): *The Elusive Synthesis: Aesthetics and Science*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.