

Review:

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**Valerie J. Janesick (2004). "Stretching" EXERCISES for Qualitative Researchers.** Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, xiii + 271 pages, ISBN 0-7619-2815-4 (paperback), £ 27.00

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**Abstract:** If we accept that there are "harder" and "softer" forms of qualitative research, Valerie J. JANESICK's book is part of the softer side. She emphasizes the importance of imagination, creativity and open-mindedness; the "stretching exercises" she presents are likely to appeal to those who see their research and other aspects of their life as interdependent. The analogies she draws between yoga, dance and qualitative research may inspire—but those who are sceptical of artistic approaches to research are likely to find plenty to feel dubious about here.

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## **1. Introduction**

Andrew ABBOTT (1999) suggests that bodies of knowledge are organised such that they tend to be split into halves. The same split tends to be repeated within each half, further splitting those divided sections. The resulting segments may themselves divide yet again to create further subdivisions, and so on. The overall effect is to create a fractal pattern of repeating bifurcations. What is important is not just that bodies of knowledge divide, but that the divisions within the sections lower down the hierarchy follow the principle that governed the original split. For example, ABBOTT states that we can not only think of social-scientific research as split into a qualitative half and a quantitative half, we can also split each of those halves into a qualitative and quantitative half, identifying (within qualitative research) a qualitative-qualitative half and quantitative-qualitative half, with a corresponding division of quantitative research. Qualitative research's more "quantitative" side includes (according to ABBOTT) formal ways of measuring culture and some of the methods of conversation analysis; qualitative-qualitative research includes, for example, interpretive methods such as those found in contemporary sociology of science. [1]

We may or may not accept ABBOTT's principle of how knowledge domains dichotomize (and many qualitative researchers, in particular, expend considerable

intellectual energy in opposing ways of thinking that depend on binaries). Nevertheless, I can think of two broad camps among the qualitative researchers whom I have met. In one camp are those who think that qualitative research is one amongst a number of ways of investigating the social world that enables us to usefully understand social and other phenomena as well as to gauge the need for or success of social policies. This approach typically sees qualitative research as complementing, or able to be complemented by, quantitative and other ways of researching—and by no means necessarily as the supplementary "handmaiden" of quantitative research (with an appropriate understanding of the gendered connotations of that term). [2]

On the other side are those who feel that qualitative research is not only a way of researching but almost a way of life: at least, that researching qualitatively enables them to work in ways that reflect their other values and commitments. These values may include antagonism towards the epistemological and other types of reduction seen to be present in quantitative research. Amongst the strongest proponents of this type of view, being a qualitative researcher may mean totally rejecting quantitative research and anything that suggests quantification—even counting. For example, HARDY and BRYMAN (2004, p.1) describe qualitative researchers who have sought alternatives to page-numbering in an effort to expunge numbers from their work altogether. Ann OAKLEY (2000) has suggested that this type of anti-quantitative approach was common amongst feminist sociologists in Britain in the 1980s and early 1990s (and moreover that it had a detrimental effect on the type of research conducted by these researchers). [3]

Valerie J. JANESICK, in her book "*Stretching*" Exercises, does not discuss the relationship between qualitative and quantitative forms of research. Returning to ABBOTT's dichotomy, though, I suggest that her approach to research is strongly "qualitative-qualitative". In the rest of this document I explain my reasons for supposing this and describe why thinking of her book in these terms is useful in order to place it within the constellation of qualitative research (and "how to" books). [4]

## **2. Stretching Exercises**

JANESICK presents her book as a response to three misplaced ideas about qualitative research that she says workshop participants often raise: that doing qualitative research is easy, that most people can do it—that is, conduct interviews or observations—with little or no practice, and that anyone can write a journal without practice or preparation and without setting aside quiet time in which to do so. (The importance of writing a "researcher reflective journal" recurs throughout the text.) In fact, the book is not so much a rebuttal of these ideas as it is a guide to approaching qualitative research in a reflective and holistic way, and in particular to showing researchers how to stretch—stretching themselves, their minds, and their capacity to take a creative approach—in order to carry out such research. [5]

The book is structured around the "stretching exercises" that provide its title. JANESICK uses these exercises in her own teaching, and, in the course of a 16-week course, she has her students engage with them in four blocks corresponding to different parts of the research process: observations and narrative; interviews and narrative; the role of the researcher; analysis. The themes of these four blocks conform to parts 2 to 5 of this book (part 1 is the introduction). There are no exercises in part 5, though, and the books' exercises relate to the first three of those parts of the research process. [6]

These exercises are the most distinctive element of this book and represent an attempt by the author to make the reader (or at least the teacher or student of qualitative research methods) reflectively engage with the social situations s/he is attempting to understand. Some of the exercises, such as "Interviewing Someone You Know" (Exercise 3.1) are unlikely to be new to anyone who has taken a qualitative research class with any kind of practical component. Other of the exercises are unusual, and their appropriateness and value may not be clear to everyone; reading through them myself (I did not attempt to carry them out) I found myself sorting them into those whose usefulness I could easily see, and those to which I had to give more thought. Looking at a few of each of these in turn should give some idea of the ethos of research towards which JANESICK guides her readers. [7]

Among the valuable exercises is Exercise 2.8, "Non-Participant Observation Assignment". The task set here involves multiple visits to a public setting, such as a coffee shop, shopping mall, place of worship or zoo, with the aim of observing, taking notes and writing a description of who goes there and what people do, the types of relationships that are apparent, the physical layout of the place, and so on. In other words, the researcher is to write a mini ethnography of a place; he or she is also encouraged to be reflective about doing so. The value of doing this for anyone who aims to do similar research on a larger scale (or even on the same scale) is clear, and this seems a worthwhile exercise. What may be less valuable, at least in terms of the book, is the descriptive example that follows—a student's report on a café. This takes up eleven pages, which seems like a large chunk of a book that has, appendices aside, fewer than 170 pages. [8]

Another useful Exercise is number 3.4, "The Focus Group Interview". In this one, a group of eight students (who have done some preliminary reading on focus groups and their use) participates: one plays the part of the moderator and the others are asked to draw one of seven cards with different roles on each. A couple of these simply say "Play yourself", but the others say things like, "Play 'disagreeable' and refuse to answer every other question" or "Say nothing about [the topic in hand] and talk about every and any other question". Remembering some of the trials of focus group moderation, these made me laugh. [9]

Exercise 4.5, "Reflective Journal Writing Practice", also seems worthwhile. The idea of keeping a reflective research journal is a theme JANESICK returns to repeatedly, describing its value to artists as well as researchers. As an exercise, and thus a prelude to keeping a research journal as such, students are instructed

to record "mini dialogues with the self in the present" (p.96) focusing on People, Work/Projects, The Body, Society and Major Life Event(s). This task sounds like a lot of writing to be accomplished in the minimum of 15 minutes per day that students are to devote to it, but the practice of keeping a reflective research journal is undoubtedly a worthwhile one and would be a good habit for researchers to learn early in their research careers. [10]

Those are examples of what I found to be the more obviously useful of the exercises JANESICK suggests. Perhaps inventive teachers of qualitative research methods will already have similar assignments of their own that they set; if not, these seem straightforward ways to encourage students towards good research practice. [11]

Other of the exercises suggested are closer to a "qualitative-qualitative" approach and their value will seem more questionable to those sceptical about such an approach. A couple of exercises, for example, relate closely to ways of drawing that seek to develop underused portions of the mind: these are Exercise 2.7, "Drawing to Become a Better Observer: Drawing Upside Down", and Exercise 4.1, "Variations on Writing Your Name". The first of these is self-explanatory, and the second involves writing your own name upside-down, from right to left, with your eyes closed, and so on, and then reflecting on the process. In each of these exercises there is a bringing together of the idea of stretching oneself as a researcher and stretching oneself as a person—both worthwhile aims, but treating them both within a book about being a qualitative researcher implies that they are the same thing. This may or may not be the case. [12]

Those two exercises involve doing or observing and then reflecting on the results; the same procedure, with a different emphasis, is involved in Exercise 2.6. Here, under the title "Observing an Animal at Home, the Zoo or a Pet Shop", the researcher is required not only to describe the physical appearance of the chosen animal but also to look for inner as well as outer qualities and to think about traits possessed by this animal that are found in people. One should construct a metaphor for the animal, for example: "This cat is a princess. (Then the writer describes physical and behavioural characteristics to convince us that this cat is a princess.) This gorilla is a prize fighter" (p.49; parentheses in original). JANESICK points out that being an above average writer is an important skill for a qualitative researcher. Exercises such as these are likely to develop one's writing skills, but whether one's qualitative research skills are enhanced at the same time seems less clear. [13]

Doubts over the research value of some of the exercises may be even greater when the task set involves no writing at all, as in Exercise 4.4, "Constructing a YaYa Box or Making a Quilt Patch". Adapted from art therapy, this exercise involves making a YaYa box, "a box designed to represent a person's innermost self on the inside of the box and the person's outward self on the outside of the box", or a quilt patch, in which case "the patch will represent some part of your inner self as a researcher" (p.94). It is unclear if the value of doing this as part of qualitative research training is similar to that of doing so as part of art therapy.

These are time-intensive tasks and it may be that not every researcher, or student of research, feels that he or she has time to engage with what one might feel is a marginally useful way of developing one's research skills. Others, of course, will welcome such means of extending their self-awareness and their descriptive and observational skills, and will also welcome JANESICK's holistic and progressive approach to qualitative research. [14]

### 3. Stretching Researchers

JANESICK emphasizes the importance of writing in ordinary language and in one's own voice. Always sound advice, this is of particular importance when trying to broaden one's audience and especially when writing for a non-academic audience. This fits with this author's targeting of this book at students in applied disciplines, particularly in education (her home discipline). She emphasizes the role that ordinary language can play, not only in broadening one's audience, but also in actively disrupting academic language—a form of writing that, JANESICK states, is mystifying, exclusionary and denigrates the experience of the individual reader. [15]

Elsewhere she is explicit about the intended audience for her book. She wishes that her reader might be passionate about disciplined inquiry, tolerant of ambiguity, rich in imagination, open-minded about ordinary language usage, and have a very good sense of humour. It is readers such as these whom the author hopes to stretch through their engagement with her exercises. There may be those who are not up to the task and JANESICK recognizes that some may find what she asks difficult or even impossible: "Not everyone has tapped into his or her artistic intelligence ... I must ask the reader to do something that is very difficult: Give up one view of the world and imagine another" (p.12). This world is "tentative, problematic, and ever-changing", and research that engages with it is "participatory, dialogic, transformative, and educative" (p.10). [16]

Is a book such as this a good way to introduce readers to such a world? I have two concerns about this. First, although some allowance is made for the reader who approaches the book alone rather than in a classroom setting, this would be an especially difficult way to try to come to terms with the ideas and exercises in it. Readers who tackle the book alone will need determination to sit through the observation exercises themselves, since many of these ideally involve sharing and comparing observations with other group members. JANESICK suggests readers who do not have a teacher to comment on their written self-reflections should write a letter to someone whom they trust, but solitary learners may not have anyone suitable around. Although some of the exercises may productively be tackled alone, this is a book whose main value will lie in its use in a classroom setting. [17]

Second, it seems that a book may not be the ideal way in which to present material of this sort. A printed text is not the best form in which to advocate approaches that are participatory and ever-changing. A classroom setting, with the opportunity for dialogue and discussion, would be better; in terms of

broadcasting ideas farther abroad, the Internet provides us with new media. The shortcomings of having certain types of material in a printed text are evident in the appendices of this book. Some of these appendices are redundant: for example, some of the samples of journal writing are students' reviews of, or personal responses to, textbooks, and they seem to be of little value to the reader in this context. Other appendices derive from particular studies and are difficult to generalise from—this might be another reason for supplying materials of this type on a website, where it would be possible to supply far more exemplars. For example, appendices G to Q plus S all derive from a study of educational leaders' perspectives on technology use in the undergraduate curriculum by Carolyn STEVENSON (one of JANESICK's former students). These give a sample schema for a literature review, sample sets of themes and categories, samples of interview transcripts, and so on. It is not clear how such material could be made use of in another context, since they are, in effect, single-case studies of a topic on which it would be of greatest use to see a wide variety of instances and applications. The appendix that gives sample interview transcripts contains edited transcripts, with (it appears) most of the interviewer's questions removed: this reduces their usefulness as illustrations of raw data or work-in-progress. A similar criticism can be made of the sample institutional review board application (which takes up ten pages of the body of the text): it is a single isolated example about which it is not easy to make broader observations. This kind of material would benefit from being presented unedited and in larger quantity—the kind of presentation for which the Internet is an excellent tool. [18]

A lot of this book is given over to providing examples—like the description of the café—yet there is insufficient material from which readers may draw their own conclusions. There are various good reasons for this book to be a book rather than a website, but the fact that it is a book and not a website, nor a dance piece, nor (for most of us) a series of seminars, places limitations on what it can achieve and on the extent to which readers can expect to be stretched by it. The best way to benefit from this book would probably be to have a committed teacher who has read it and who applies its precepts and ideas in teaching. Being amongst peers and advisors who embody some of the ideals JANESICK expounds would certainly optimise the value of these exercises. Those of us not in this situation are likely to benefit less. [19]

#### **4. Conclusions**

I have not touched, here, on the philosophical and intellectual grounding that JANESICK establishes for her ideas: for example, the writings of DEWEY are a source of some of her thinking about the role of imagination and the notion of disciplined inquiry. The central metaphors in *Stretching Exercises* are dance and art, which were central to the first edition, and yoga, which is a new emphasis in this second edition. Others have identified analogies between the arts and social research, including using dance in talking about research (see BAGLEY and CANCIENNE 2001 for an example of the use of dance to present research findings; see also Mary GERGEN's (2002) FQS Review Note of a book that celebrates the blurred lines between social sciences and humanities. JANESICK

goes further in emphasizing the need for researchers to be both mentally and physically prepared to conduct research and presents these stretching exercises as a way to develop "a stronger body and mind" (p.157) for carrying out qualitative research. She tells us that qualitative methods are related to dance:

"in that the body is the instrument of dance and the researcher is the research instrument in qualitative work. Furthermore, in yoga, the body and mind are integrated in all movement work and meditation in order to walk in balance in all phases of living" (p.8). [20]

It is this holistic view, I suggest, that positions JANESICK's approach on the qualitative-qualitative side of things. I can imagine only a limited range of areas in which the author of a guide to research methods aspires that the book will "inspire and prompt my students to lead a better life" (p.xii). Seeing one's research as part of one's whole approach to life goes along with being able to empathise with one's research subjects; both are ways of acting that are important to qualitative researchers in ways that they are not to quantitative researchers. They may also be of greater, or at least different, importance to qualitative-qualitative than quantitative-qualitative researchers. [21]

Whether one thinks of oneself as belonging to one or the other side of qualitative research (if one recognizes any sense in identifying such a difference) is probably an important element in anticipating how one will react to a book such as this one and how important and exciting one will find it. *Stretching Exercises* is likely to appeal to those on the qualitative side of qualitative research who feel that much that is published on qualitative research emphasizes aspects of qualitative research that are not quite in keeping with their own philosophy, practice or teaching. It is unlikely to appeal to those who favour a more scientific approach to research or those who feel that certain forms of social-scientific research lack rigor (of a certain sort—I do not imagine that JANESICK views the type of research she advocates as lacking in rigor in any way). This is, I suspect, a book that one will either love or hate. [22]

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