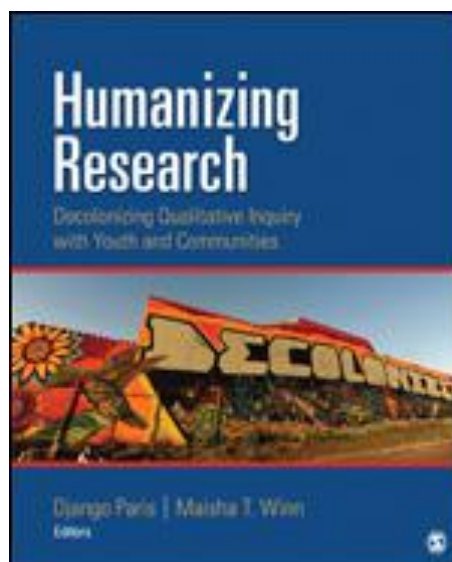


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The Value of Worthy Witnesses: Examining the Decolonization and Humanization of Research

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Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (Eds.). (2014). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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I sat in the Qualitative Research Special Interest Group (SIG) meeting at the American Educational Research Association Conference when Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn's edited volume *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities* earned the SIG's 2015 Book Award. Given the talk preceding the award presentation and the brief discussion following, I was certain that the book offered discussions on a range of topics that both were of interest and of import to me as a qualitative researcher. In my current role as an Assistant Professor of Qualitative Research, I approached the book as both a methodology instructor and student; the book spoke to both identities in valuable but ultimately uneven ways.

The book's Epilogue offers a clear descriptor of the overall work: "[T]his volume of scholarship [is] focused on decolonizing research methods," specifically in relation to each of the authors having "been granted access to the lives of people in various contexts" (p. 250). In terms of how the book works to unify multiple authors' efforts to decolonize and humanize qualitative empirical research, the Preface offers a prevailing theme, which all chapters incorporate at least implicitly, and which several authors discuss explicitly (e.g., Jocson's Chapter 6; Kirkland's Chapter 10). Thematically the text considers the concept of a researcher being a "worthy witness" (p. xiii) and doing the work of "worthy witnessing" (p. xiv), a discussion that extends Winn and Ubiles' methodological notion of researchers as witnesses (2011). In short, Paris and Winn acknowledge that empirical research requires

researchers' physical presences, but they insist that researchers' access to various sites and people demands humanization of both their participants and themselves. The editors consider how researchers might cease being merely watchers or recorders of participant data and insist that, in order to "decolonize [...and] humanize the research process," researchers must work to be *worthy* of the moments to which participants grant them entry. The diversity of chapters makes it clear that there is no one way to be a worthy witness, or to decolonize and humanize research; the chapters consistently do communicate, however, that researchers¹ have a constant responsibility to reflect and to work to be truly worthy of those who contribute to their research.

The editors organized the book into four parts. The first section examines issues of researcher subjectivity and the role of trust in research; the second section offers chapters that discuss participatory activist research approaches; the third section considers the complexities of researcher-participant relationships and the power differentials inherent in such interactions; the final section offers new methodological approaches that the authors argue continue the efforts to humanize and decolonize qualitative research. Throughout the four sections, the interdisciplinarity of the authors, their research, and their methodological approaches accentuate the notion that the discussions in this book are valuable to all fields and all researchers. While the majority of the authors situate themselves within educational research, the book offers perspectives from fields such as anthropology,

¹ Paris and Winn's book, given the title, is focused specifically on qualitative research. However, the chapters work to make individual experiences meaningful to a large body of researchers, which could certainly include quantitative researchers. Therefore, I typically

use the term "researcher" rather than "qualitative researcher" to acknowledge the ways that this book's points could, and I think should, extend to a wide range of researchers and research methods.

linguistics, sociology, and psychology, while examining a broad spectrum of social justice issues, including Indigenous populations' experiences and LGBTQ perspectives (p. xv). The overall effect of a book that attempts to be so far-reaching is that the reader appreciates both the urgency with which the editors and authors discuss their research efforts and the applicability of the chapters to a wide range of disciplines; however, there are moments when the chapters seem to overlap rather than to complement. I had this sense, for example, while considering Diaz-Strong, Luna-Duarte, Gómez, and Meiners' reflections on researcher subjectivities (Chapter 1) in conjunction with Figueroa's examination of researchers' departures from the field (Chapter 7). It was not that these, and other chapters, overlapped too much in content—though both of these chapters did examine undocumented immigrants' experiences—it was instead that the chapters, at their heart, offered very similar discussions. In this case, both wrestled with the complexities of researchers being too personally invested and close to their research. Certainly such discussions are essential to advancing the quality and ethicality of qualitative research, but the degrees of overlap contained in the same volume at times left me wondering what other topics might have been included, to have made chapters' discussions as diverse as the researchers' and participants' backgrounds.

In terms of the chapters themselves, the editors' descriptors of the four sections provided a clear book structure, though there were several chapters that might have fit into another of the three sections due to the aforementioned overlaps. Part I works to humanize qualitative research through acknowledgements and discussions of researchers' and participants' vulnerabilities during and following the research process. This section adopts

Paris' (2011) argument that such openness not only humanizes research, by making vulnerable and accessible those who are both being researched and being researchers, but is also “ethically necessary” and “increases the validity” of qualitative work (p. 1). All three chapters here are personal examinations of the ways that qualitative research requires that researchers and participants put their humanity on the line. Chapter 1 (Diaz-Strong et al.) considers the personal and political implications of shared identities and priorities through youth participants and adult researchers who are undocumented immigrants; both Chapter 2 (Kinlock & San Pedro), through an emphasis on listening to participants of color, and Chapter 3 (Blackburn), with a discussion of LGBTQ youths' experiences, emphasize dialogue and the thematic notion of “witnessing” as researchers and participants co-construct research knowledge through shared experiences.

Part II discusses specific methods that may effect positive social changes and that, due to the methods' natures, require witnessing and deserve worthy witnessing (pp. 59-62). Chapter 4 (Irizarry & Brown) offers participatory action research (PAR) as a method that has potential to empower participants, in this case secondary urban youth, and to make possible necessary social changes. Chapter 5 (McCarty, Wyman, & Nicholas) and Chapter 6 (Jocson) discuss ethnography's potential as a humanizing method. Both chapters emphasize the importance of research *with* rather than *on* participants, as researchers situate themselves in specific contexts already populated by knowledgeable participants. The section as a whole acknowledges that because PAR and ethnography are methods that demand close and constant contact between researchers and participants, with the lines between the two roles sometimes blurring, such research approaches can become messy and

complex (e.g., p. 63). Neither PAR nor ethnography offer the seeming safety of researcher detachment; for either to work, researchers must be in the thick of the action, with no clear rulebook on how to engage with the intricacies of human interaction within a research project.

The next three chapters continue considerations on “messy” research. This section contemplates the complexities that arise from working to humanize research. Dispensing with any pretense of researcher objectivity, a common stance adopted by most contemporary qualitative researchers, all of this book’s authors find themselves personally connected to people and topics that they had not foreseen. Part III considers the implications of such relationships. Chapter 7 (Figueroa) offers what I believe is a much-needed and long-overdue discussion on the complexities of researchers exiting their research sites. As Figueroa points out, researchers arrive to various locations to conduct research and then, when finished, typically have the luxury to leave “without attending to the complexities of departure” (p. 143), while participants must stay behind. She examines the damage that such exits deal to both the participants and the researchers, particularly when the research interactions built relationships and trust that the researcher simply discontinues. Chapter 8 (Greene) offers the metaphor of double dutch jump roping as a means by which she considers her researcher positionalities, both as a novice researcher and as a present-day experienced researcher. Chapter 9 (Romero-Little, Sims, & Romero) was an odd inclusion in this section, as its discussion of giftedness in Indigenous Pueblo youth seemed a better fit in Part I than III. Certainly the authors examined their subjectivities and the ways that their understandings and relationships shaped the research and themselves, but no more so than other

chapters in earlier sections. The chapter clearly advanced the book’s purposes, but it did not advance this section’s goals.

Part IV worked to reimagine existing methods and to offer new methodological approaches to conducting humanizing qualitative research as a worthy witness. Like its preceding chapter, Chapter 10 (Kirkland) did not seem to belong in its assigned section. Kirkland discussed ethnography as a means by which researchers might examine issues of race and racial identity in research. Again, a worthwhile topic in keeping with the overall book but not far removed from Chapter 5’s use of ethnography in discussing Indigenous youth in Part II or Chapter 8’s ethnographic approach in examining undocumented parents’ efforts to protect their children in Part III. Chapter 11 (Souto-Manning) discussed a new method, critical narrative analysis (CNA), by combining critical discourse analysis (CDA) and conversational narrative analysis. The method “encompasses the experiences of participants” by offering discourse-focused analysis of interview narratives, intertwining “language and the [participants’ and researchers’] social world” (p. 207). Chapter 12 (Tuck & Yang) was an essential section in this book, as the authors took on tasks that most of the other chapters seemed to actively avoid—acknowledgements of research’s and researchers’ limitations and abuses. Tuck and Yang argue that there are times when, if researchers truly want to humanize and decolonize research, they must necessarily refuse to do research (p. 223). There are times, they point out, when even the best-laid, most well-intentioned research either further fetishizes participants (such as when researchers focus on oppressed populations’ narratives of pain and loss, thereby maintaining mainstream deficit understandings of those communities as only victimized) or strays into topics that, as the authors

put it, produce “some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve” (p. 232). There are topics which simply should not be made available for public consumption, through publications and conference presentations. Importantly, they point out that researchers’ and participants’ refusals to participate in some research “is not just a ‘no,’ but a redirection” for both a particular project and for qualitative research as a field of knowledge (p. 239).

The book’s chapters collectively offer important topics for consideration, many with which I continue to struggle as a researcher and with which my students wrestle in their own projects. However, there were inconsistencies in whom the editors seemed to understand the book’s primary audience to be. At the end of each chapter, authors offer reflection questions—arguably a useful tool for both novice and experienced qualitative researchers. The authors, though, did not seem to have a clear notion of who they were targeting with their questions. Chapter 1, for example, asked readers to consider why they were “engaging in this research project? Whose lives will it impact?” (p. 18)—questions that at least assumed research in-progress. Chapter 2, however, asked the question, “What is the dialogic spiral,” a term that the authors had discussed in detail in the chapter, and how “could it [the dialogic spiral] operate in your research?” (p. 41)—questions that required careful reading and at least theoretical application, but without the assumption of in-motion research. Chapter 4 asked readers what “beliefs about and dispositions toward youth must adults have in order to effectively conduct PAR [participatory action research] with K-12 students?” (p. 79)—a question that seemed most useful to experienced researchers whose familiarity with PAR might allow them to examine the power dynamics at work when research involves adults and children,

but less useful to researchers who had no or limited experience with PAR, beyond reading the chapter.

In returning to my efforts when reading the book to examine the text as both an instructor and student of qualitative research, I do believe that both identities were ultimately served. Given the complexities of the topics and the inconsistencies of chapters’ placements and reflection questions, I found my instructor self benefitting more, as I imagined both my own students and my former novice student self being at least somewhat confounded by the range of discussions and issues. However, I do believe that the text offers a necessary extension of already-in-motion conversations in qualitative research of the purposes of empirical research and the responsibilities of researchers, both in relation to participants and to knowledge production. Additionally, the breadth of disciplines, research foci, methods, theoretical considerations, and ethical implications offered here are rare and important. Paris and Winn’s point that all empirical researchers are witnesses is an important one, and given the relationships that often spring from qualitative human subject research, I agree with their assertion that all researchers should strive to be worthy witnesses. Researchers are formally only beholden to their institutions’ internal review boards (IRBs), but any research that involves others informally makes researchers responsible for considering the ways that their research matters to their participants, to themselves, and to the larger academic community. This book’s discussions of the ways that researchers might take on those responsibilities as humanizing and worthy of all involved are timely and necessary, making this edited collection a valuable resource for any person learning about or engaging in qualitative research.

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