



# *Qualitative Sociology Review*

Volume VI, Issue 3 – December 2010

---

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.6.3.06>

Piotr Bielski  
University of Łódź, Poland

## Book review:

Method meets art. *Arts-Based Research Practice* by Patricia Leavy. New York – London: The Guilford Press, 2009

Probably most of you got to know at least few social sciences students or researchers who are also in their other social role artists – writers, poets, dancers or visual artists. However, usually they think of their artistic activities as something that should be kept separate or they just take advantage of this identity as it facilitates an easier entrance into artistic social worlds which they explore with a scientific „free form art” methodology. Social science methodology, even in case of most qualitative research, is still to significant degree inspired by positivist science which developed strict criteria in order to draw a definite border-line between the structured and based on methodology objective or intersubjective science and free and fully subjective artistic creation. If young researcher hears a comment of a senior researcher that his or her work resembles „more a work of art than sociology” it means that chances for a success with current work in an academic world are rather small. Patricia Leavy, Professor of Sociology at Stonehill College (Easton, Massachusetts) and a story writer in her methodological book invites us to make the two worlds meet and provides us with lots of examples of successful incorporation of art into the research.

What Patricia Leavy advocates is the integrity, overcoming divisions between social roles of artists, researchers and teachers as in the concept of *A/r/tographical work* which merges „knowing, doing and making” proposed by Pinar (p.3). The author prefers to speak rather of the art practices than methods, as this term expresses a support for a „break with methods convention” and because it „rejects the notion of tools that are neutrally implemented” (p. 3). The practices which are outlined in the book include literary, visual, performative arts, as well as music and show multiple possibilities of employing them in a research. On the paradigm level, the author situates the art-based researches in the frames of the qualitative paradigm, advocating its merging with the critical, social justice and feminist perspective which concede voice to the marginalized. She also credits Foucault, Derrida as important contributors to the advancement of art-based methods, because of the postmodern „arguing that form and content are inextricably bound and enmeshed within shifting relations of power” (p. 8). The art-based methods or practices have to some degree different goals than the traditional ones as they mostly aim at reaching the general public and concentrate on the social and psychological side of the research process. In this approach there is a focus on processes and not on facts and aim at building empathy and compassion, fostering identity building, challenging stereotypes,

promoting dialogue, evoking meanings instead of denoting them. They also tend to serve better for switching from the monovocal perspective to plurivocal, depicting complexity with multiple meanings. The author aims at renegotiation of „one-size-fits-all” model of evaluation of qualitative data, opening also a space for heart, emotions and beauty instead of just „truth” and „knowledge”, promoting using art in Sinner's words „to unsettle ossified thinking and provoke imagination” (p.16-17).

The book is written as in a form of a manual which offers us opportunities to explore questions around use in social research: narrative inquiry, poetry, music and performance-based methods of inquiry, dance and visual arts. In the chapter about narrative inquiry, Leavy challenges the concept that the researcher could be a neutral transmitter of stories or experiences of other people. Researcher is an active agent that can even „regenerate” or rewrite (using the *ghostwriter* metaphor) the narratives told by other people, in case of trauma survivors the researcher may for example develop a coherent, chronological narrative out of disordered pieces told by the victims. The researcher observes how the people telling the stories reframe them and replot them, applying continuous reflexivity. Leavy invites readers to get interested in autoethnographic narratives, the researcher should not be excluded from telling about their own experiences and could be seen as a „viable data source” (p. 37), possibly taking advantage of forming a reflective teams with colleagues. The author provides with moving examples of researchers who endeavor on autoethnography, describing difficult emotional experiences such as death of relatives, pain and their own serious illness, grieving or exploring such delicate questions as spiritual experiences. Autoethnography seems also to be relevant for describing major „life markers” such as partnering, parenting, decoupling or pregnancy (p. 41).

The author also advocates of using fiction writing by researchers finding in a fiction story a proper mean of transmitting the message to general public. Leavy criticizes dualism existing in the academia, placing a division between the truth and fiction between those false oppositions that the qualitative research should leave behind. „There are truths to be found in fiction- she argues- and nonfiction also draws on aspects of fiction in its rendering of social reality” (p. 48). Nonetheless, she does not provide qualitative research with a firm ground on which such research „beyond truth and fiction” could be based. The provided in the book example of short story by Karen Scott-Hoy about her own reaction and her children reaction to September 11 2001 assault is an example of a ethnographic story which can enrich the research with the emotional aspects.

In the chapter on application of poetry in the social research, the author justifies the role of poetry as a powerful mean of transmitting values and experiences of those who are disenfranchised and accessing subjugated knowledge (p. 74). Such research study was made by Faulkner who gave voice to the Jewish people who have alternative sexual identity (p. 69) or by Cynthia Cannon Poindex who used poetry to tell about how a gay couple copes with an HIV diagnosis (p. 85). Leavy also mentions the examples of writers-researchers who, basing on the individuals narratives, write a „collective biography”. She describes use of poetic transcription in the expanded version of grounded theory, where the selected words and phrases spoken by the respondents become the basis of the poem which the researcher writes using the narrator's speech patterns (a technique developed by Glesne and Faulkner, p.75). An example which Leavy provides are the parts of narratives of girls about their code category of „Breasts” which occurred in 5 out of 18 interviews about the „body image”. The resulting poem tries to transmit their emotions and experiences challenging the sexism. Among the advantages of the poetic criteria in

the research the author names „embodied experience, discovery/ surprise, narrative truth and transformation”.

In the case of music, Leavy explores it as a mean of groups and individuals' representation, its narrative character (generating direct semantic or semiotic meaning), its capacity of empowerment and generating cultural capital and challenging hegemonic ideologies. It is very interesting that the author finds it useful to employ in the research the temporal and ephemeral art of performance. The performance artists can enrich the research as they have enhanced sensory awareness and observation skills and enrich the ability to infer objectives and subtext in participants' verbal and nonverbal actions (p. 136-137). Leavy cites Denzin who promotes Critical Pedagogical Theatre as a method of empowerment of the oppressed and overcoming its submission to oppression (p. 140). Drama is presented as the method of „data collection, analysis and (re)presentation” (p. 141) and brings examples of researchers who write ethnodramas basing them on the respondents' narratives similarly as in the before mentioned case of poems, as well as form fieldnotes and observations. Ethical issues arisen by the drama method are discussed along with an interesting example of popular theater as Participatory Research Method. Also dance-based research is discussed as a new promising discipline which can serve for the therapeutic means as well as serving for representation and new insights (discovery, p.185). There is also a chapter about visual arts but their successful application in the research have been already widely discussed in our Journal.

The book is an interesting guide of the quite recently discovered common ground between the social research and arts. Summing up, what the author defends is a holistic approach to research and „bridging the art-science divide” citing the title of the final chapter. The Art-Based methods can definitely enrich the qualitative paradigm with sensory aspects, serving the representation, authenticity and emancipation, expanding the trans-disciplinary character of the research (p. 256). The poetry as well as other art can say what the mere words just cannot say and the use of the arts fosters better representation and inclusion of voices that do not fit into traditional research repertoire. Well, after reading this book I got the impression that the hegemony of „I think, therefore I am” is over, now it is time to give voice to the variety of „I dance therefore I am”, „I play therefore I am” or of „I feel therefore I am” .

### **Citation**

Bielski, Piotr (2010) “Book review: Method meets art. Arts-Based Research Practice by Patricia Leavy” *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. VI Issue 3. Retrieved Month, Year, ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php))