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Book Report

Responsible research practice: Revisiting transformative paradigm in social research by Norma R. A. Romm

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Avivit M Cherrington

Research Fellow: Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (CriSHET)

Nelson Mandela University

avivit.cherrington@mandela.ac.za

How would research methodologies change if we started our work with the premise that we are all connected and that we have a responsibility for ethical work that is respectful of all who came before us, who are here with us (living and non-living), and who will come after us? (Romm, 2018, p. 510)

I begin this review with the quotation from Cram and Mertens (2015) with which Norma Romm ends her book because I believe it perfectly encapsulates everything that this publication is about. According to Akena's foreword (2018, p. vii), the value of Romm's book is how it "articulates a new and diversified direction to research which uniquely shifts from the dominant ways of doing research." Romm does this by adapting and expanding on Mertens' numerous writings on the transformative paradigm and integrating these with the underlying principles of indigenous research to emphasise that research practice can and should be based on relationality and accountability.

I first came across the transformative paradigm in my doctoral journey when I was introduced to Mertens' (2009) book, *Transformative Research and Evaluation*, to direct my interest of designing a research process that would incorporate a critical lens, a participatory methodology, and especially serve to further the social change that I believed was inherent when working authentically and collaboratively with communities. Therefore, I was eager to delve into Romm's examination of the paradigm that played a significant role in shaping my research identity and practice. She begins by revisiting Mertens' paradigm and unpacking the underlying ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of such research. But soon Romm intricately adds her own interpretations of how these connect well with emerging indigenous research approaches and critical systemic thinking. As the author explains:

I add what I see as additional angles, primarily with reference to a number of authors . . . I focus on considering how research as an endeavour carries specific responsibilities, arising from our recognition of the involvement of social research in shaping the social and ecological worlds of which it is a part. (Romm, 2018, p. 1)

As such, Romm builds on Mertens' theoretical work that the transformative paradigmatic perspective emphasises research as emancipatory, participatory, and inclusive. The author sets out very clearly,

from the first chapter of the book, that her philosophical starting point is that research is a form of intervention that cannot be avoided or ignored. She therefore strongly advocates that it is the responsibility of social researchers to connect the process and results of their inquiry to social action, activism and, most importantly, to furthering issues of social justice and inequality—a viewpoint that Mertens focused on extensively in her writing too. Romm therefore continuously reminds the reader that an essential element of responsible research practice (and, thus, of pursuing the principles of transformative research) is to be consciously reflective of one’s own role as an agent of justice and social change in social inquiry:

My argument in this regard is that researchers should not shy away from recognising their influence in shaping the world of which they are part (and not a part); it is this recognition that should prompt them to try to energise action (their own and that of others) in a responsible way, rather than denying that research is already—wittingly or unwittingly—an impactful event. (2018, p. 24)

In fact, the author herself rarely shies away from pressing her argument in the book that social researchers “have a responsibility to gear the research process towards disrupting discourses and actions which arguably contribute to perpetuating inequality” (2018, p. 14). She does this by frequently challenging and revising various terms and concepts offered in Mertens’ writing, which she believes is necessary for fully embracing indigenous ways of thinking. The result, she claims, is to move thinking and knowing towards creating “understandings of research (re-exploration) as an enterprise linked to the development of social and environmental justice” (2018, p. 18). In that regard, Romm makes extensive reference to the numerous writings of leading indigenous authors (such as Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999, amongst others), which grounds her arguments in substantial scholarly work and demonstrates a keen understanding of cultural responsiveness.

The book is presented in 10 chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the book and outlines some of the central tenets and philosophical assumptions underlying transformative research. Chapters 2 to 6 provide practical examples of various research studies and community-based engagements (some conducted in South Africa and others in international contexts) carried out by Romm or her colleagues to demonstrate how all studies (no matter what design, paradigm, or methodology it is framed within) can be practised in a responsible way, with a view to recognising the shaping effects of social research. These examples include:

- Active focus group research on race and class relations (Chapter 2).
- The active use of questionnaires for generating knowledge about educational inclusivity (Chapter 3).
- Exploring gendered relationships through individual and focus group narratives in an active manner to foreground African women’s economic empowerment (Chapter 4).
- Using quantitative experimental design to review an intervention for creative thinking and agency (Chapter 5).
- A presentation of three development-oriented studies that focused on social and environmental justice through participatory decision making (Chapter 6).

The golden thread through all these case examples is Romm’s emphasis on shifting the business-as-usual discourses of traditional research towards the *active* and *conscious* decisions made by the researchers throughout the engagements to enhance the sense of responsibility and accountability that exists in social research. According to Romm (2018, p. 25), “research is not innocent in its practice”

and, thus, her intention with the book is to “spell out options for proceeding accordingly in terms of an appreciation that research is never neutral in its social and ecological impact” (p. 26). This promotion of responsible research practice is adequately demonstrated through direct reference to practical examples of research projects in which Romm has been directly involved, as well as through her subjective interpretations of, and personal communications with, others’ work. As Romm explains:

I selected research cases with the intent to illustrate how the initiating researchers could be considered as operating (with research participants/participant researchers and others involved) in terms of an “expanded” sense of responsibility, which I highlight and further extend as I engage with their texts and other communications. (2018, p. 34)

The two chapters that follow seem to divert slightly from the flow of the book to present theoretical explanations on responsible generative theorising, based on Gergen’s account of generative theory (Chapter 7), and an interesting critique and reconfiguration on the Belmont Report, which poses alternative views on practicing ethically responsible and culturally appropriate social research (Chapter 8). This leads (somewhat clumsily for me) to Chapter 9, which outlines the paradigmatic considerations of mixed methods research and a deliberation on how such a complex design can also effectively integrate a transformative lens. The final chapter concludes the book with a methodological wrap-up of how Romm believes the four Rs of responsible research (relationship, respect, reciprocity, responsibility) can be woven into multiple methodologies and data collection methods—she even touches on emerging methods such as Mmogo-method, photovoice, and performance theatre. I assume that Romm is trying to win over the more traditionalist social researchers by focusing her key practical chapters on methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups while relegating the visual participatory methods (which are often discussed as more fitting for relational and indigenous contexts) to such a small section at the end of the book. However, it is fitting that the author wraps up her book with a chapter that strongly brings together the underlying message that researchers should pay closer attention to storying their co-responsibilities as part of the methodological write-up; thus, being more intentional and critical throughout the inquiry on finding ways to exercise a sense of relational accountability towards furthering the spirit of generative inquiry.

Overall, I enjoyed how Romm demonstrates, through the various discussions, the practical implications of responsible research practice—providing examples of research designs and engagements where knowing and acting are seen to be intricately bound to each other. I found her pragmatic unpacking of the various paradigms and methodologies informative, and she skilfully weaves together the theoretical discussions with practical examples that link the concepts of transformative design, ethical responsibility, and generative theorising as presented in the case studies. For that reason, I believe this book would serve well as a resource for graduate students wanting a practical guide on responsible research practice, and to spur on creative and critical thinking around research designs that serve a transformative agenda. However, reading the book from beginning to end, I found it somewhat repetitive and at times cumbersome, especially the last three chapters. I am not a fan of the organisation of the book where each chapter has several subheadings and sub-subheadings, which I felt disrupted the flow of the writing. I wonder if the author intended for readers to selectively read specific chapters relevant to their own study, which then makes more sense that there is so much repetition and recapping of what has been covered in previous chapters? I also mused that while the chapters on generative theorising and revisiting the ethical principles of the Belmont report were fascinating and offered insight for further discussion, I found them unnecessarily lengthy and difficult to follow at times.

In conclusion, the book offers both practical discussions of varied research case studies and engages well with the reader to promote critical reflection, offering insight as well as challenging researchers to actively reshape or rearticulate their own engagements. Ultimately, this book promotes research

that is founded on relationship building, critical questioning, and responsible practice by all involved in generating opportunities for co-exploration and mutual learning. As such, Romm has attempted to contribute to the limited available literature that provides in-depth explorations and critical discussions on the research implications of social inquiry framed by the transformative paradigm. I find her work to also be valuable in its advocacy of the close relationship between transformative driven research design and indigenous research agendas.

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