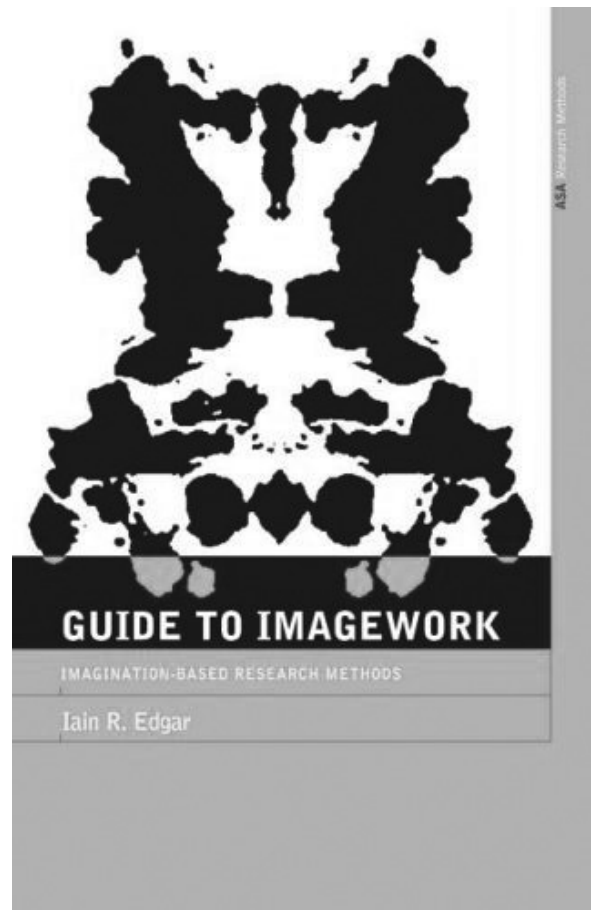# Book Review

Guide to Imagework:
Imagination-Based Research Methods

Edgar, I. R. (2004)
New York, NY: Routledge
176 pp.

We are immersed in imagery. We have images of ourselves and images that we portray to the world. We rehearse future action and decision by imagining how things would be if we did this or that. ...We can read intensity of mental imagery as compelling us to act, believe ourselves in love or to be at one with the divine.

Dr. Iain R. Edgar – an expert in the anthropology of the imagination – uses the above statement to convince readers of the importance of imagery and introduce a new approach of qualitative social science research, called imagework. The imagework approach is defined as "an active process in which the person 'actively imagining' lets go of the mind's normal train of thoughts and images and goes with a sequence of imagery that arises spontaneously from the unconscious" (Edgar, 2004, p. 7). Edgar strongly believes that imagery influences us in all activities we create, and imagework can discover and evoke our hidden knowledge and self-identities in a way that other methods in social sciences cannot.

At the beginning of the book, Edgar states that imagework is one of the highly powerful research strategies derived from the humanistic human potential movement; however, it has hardly been used in social science research. Thus, his main purpose to write this book is to introduce and clarify imagework to the social science community. He basically uses case studies based on his research to illustrate the concept, details, and potential benefits of imagework. To facilitate readers' understanding of the new research approach, Edgar organizes the content by beginning with introducing the concept and definition of imagework, locating its position within the qualitative research context, and summarizing anthropological interests in inner imagery and interpretations. Afterward, he addresses methodological issues of and arguments against imagework arising from his studies. Edgar also shows a variety of groupwork-based methods employed in his imagework studies to present details in procedures and analyses as well as

support his argument to those who doubt the imagework approach. Finally, he discusses ethical issues of imagework to be guidance for safe usage. Based on the chapter organization and content, it seems to me that Edgar tries to avoid showing weaknesses of imagework. He mentioned a few arguments relating to methodological issues against this new approach, even though these arguments are critical in social science research. On the other hand, Edgar persuades readers of benefits of imagework through a number of case examples with in-depth information that he collected from participants. For instance, in a "household" case, Edgar asked participants to imagine walking into their house where they lived when they was young, and then imagine walking into their current house. After that, each participant described his/her imagery. Edgar claims that narratives gathered from the participants importantly reflected their attitudes and experiences from childhood to presence; this helps us better understand complex phenomena in studying the household. Nevertheless, other researchers with more scientific viewpoints have questioned the study's validity, reliability, and replication. Responding to the critique, Edgar explains that he promotes validity and reliability of imagework by recording narratives, interviews, and discussion sessions when conducting imagework studies, and other researchers can access and assess all records. However, it is probably difficult for others to gain the same information from the records as he does.

Another important issue about imagework is related to ethical and practice aspects, which appear in the final chapter. Since the imagework approach may cause difficulty, emotions, and uncomfortableness to participants, Edgar outlines a set of guidelines for researchers who are interested to employ imagework. He emphasizes necessity of appropriate process ethics and also stresses that it is important for researchers to seriously consider the ethical issue and practice facilitation skills before conducting a study using imagework.

After reading this book, I have gained insight into imagework as a new and innovative approach in social science research. Edgar is clear and consistent to argue for this approach by using case studies and emphasizing his hypothesis throughout the book. Case examples based on his studies help facilitate readers' understanding of imagework and clearly show Edgar's way of thinking and position at the opposite end of the scientific traditional perspective. Lastly, although I am relatively interested in the imagework approach, I still doubt procedures and analyses of Edgar's studies. I agree with those who argue that imagework as a new research strategy has been faced with methodological issues about its reliability and validity. More clarifications from Edgar on this issue, maybe in his next book, are needed to make imagework and its benefits more acceptable in the social science field.

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