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There has been a growing dissatisfaction with the apparent dominance of quantitative empirical approaches to the social sciences in general and to social work practice research in particular. This paper suggests an alternative or complementary approach which is based on modern hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. These interpretive methods are discussed in terms of their more promising applications to select areas of social work practice and research.

There has been a growing restiveness with the evident prevalence of quantitative empirical methodology as the norm for scholarship in the social sciences. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, entitled "Questioning the Science in Social Science, Scholars Signal a 'Turn to Interpretation'" made the following point:

> A growing number of scholars in anthropology, economics, history, political science, and sociology are questioning just how scientific the social sciences can and should be. They are using such words as "interpretation," "hermeneutics," and "rhetoric" in calling for a new mode of inquiry that draws as much from the humanities as from the natural sciences, if not more (Winkler, 1985, p. 5).

This "turn to interpretation" seems to have been most extensive and successful in anthropology, where Clifford Geertz's (1983) interpretive approach has had a major impact. This is perhaps understandable in light of the fact that qualitative research methodology has not been eclipsed by quantitative (i.e., statistical) methods to the same extent in anthropology as it has in the other social sciences. In psychology, on the other hand, it has been over 20 years since Amadeo Giorgi (1970) called for

a focus on *meaning* rather than *measurement* in that discipline. Yet, psychology remains overwhelmingly quantitative in orientation, if one is to judge by its leading journals. Still, there is movement in that field as well as sociology, and even in education, with respect to the application of interpretive methodology to practice as well as research concerns (Darroch & Silvers, 1962; Reason & Rowan, 1981).

There has been not only a call for "new paradigms" for research and knowledge-building in the social sciences, but there has been increasing reference to "human" science as opposed to "behavioral" or "social" science approaches. The latter two are seen as following the predominant paradigm of the natural sciences in their emphasis on experimental and quasi-experimental methods to yield quantified behavioral measures that are more appropriate for the study of animals (e.g., the old "rat vs. humans" debate in psychology).

There has been a similar call for alternative paradigms in social work research and scholarship in response to the heavy emphasis on quantified empirical studies in the professional journals (Heineman, 1981). This paper is an attempt to offer one alternative methodology for the development of social work knowledge in the context of both practice and research. These methods are not intended to replace the objectivistic empirical methodology but rather to supplement, or even complement, that methodology by providing a perspective on the experiential, subjective, and meaning side of the social work equation. Thus, it is intended to fill in the experienced (internal, subjective) dimension of the observed (external, objective) configuration we refer to as person-problem-situation. Although these interpretive methods, called hermeneutics, have some promising new applications in social work practice and research, it will become evident that some of these methods have in fact been applied in social work practice for quite some time. Much of this application has been implicit, and it is hoped that what follows will help to explicate this.

Interpretive Methods: Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics can be most simply defined as "the science of interpretation" (Webster's, 1983, p. 851). It was originally

applied to the interpretation of the Scriptures, that is, exegesis or finding the meaning of the words, phrases and passages of the Bible and explaining them to others. Hermeneutics has been and continues to be taught in many theological schools. However, in most recent usage the meaning of the term hermeneutics has been broadened, largely as a result of the highly influential work of Wilhelm Dilthey at the turn of this century. He used the term hermeneutics to denote " . . . the discipline concerned with the investigation and interpretation of human behavior, speech, institution, etc., as essentially intentional" (Dilthey, 1979, p. 136). It was Dilthey who proposed the use of the term "human sciences" so as to distinguish them from the natural sciences. He proposed this not only because of the fundamental difference in the perspectives of the two kinds of sciences, whereby the natural sciences use an external (i.e., objective) perspective and the human sciences use an internal (i.e., experiential) one, but also because humans are essentially "intentional" (purposeful and determining) rather than simply reactive (determined) as are animals. Thus, he clearly eschewed the thoroughly deterministic bias of most modern behavioral sciences. Further, he felt that the supreme category of the human sciences is that of meaning, so he obviously opted for meaning over measurement in the study of human behavior.

Dilthey was most influential in historical research, but it should be evident from his broadened definition of hermeneutics that its methods could have application in anthropology, psychology, and sociology, as well as other fields. To focus on historical research for the moment, his approach emphasized the "reliving" or entering into the subjective, experiential worlds of those who lived and originally wrote about the historical events under study. Furthermore, in reading historical (or any other) texts the words in a sentence had to be understood in terms of their total context. There was a whole/part relationship in which parts could not be understood independently of the whole (i.e., total context). Dilthey saw that the same whole/part relationship existed in the social world generally, so that in order to interpret the social world it was necessary to develop methical rules to systematically take this relationship into account. While attempting to develop this methodology Dilthey

became aware that " . . . there are no absolute starting points, no self-evident, self-contained certainties on which we can build, because we always find ourselves in the middle of complex situations in which we try to disentangle by making, then revising, provisional assumptions" (Dilthey, 1976, p. 11). Thus, his methodology of hermeneutics moved in a circular and iterative fashion toward an increased understanding of the phenomenon under study. This general strategy became known as the "hermeneutic circle," and it has been the centerpiece of hermeneutics ever since. In reality this "circle" is more like a spiral in which each movement from whole to part and back increases the depth of understanding.

The actual experience of understanding which is inherent in the concept of the hermeneutic circle is a common one in social work practice. Most practitioners have experienced the process of going from the whole (total context of person-problem-situation) to parts (aspects of the problematic siltation as experienced and described by the client) and then reinterpreting the whole on the basis of this information. Obviously, the process does not end there but continues on in the iterative way described by Dilthey. This is apt to be the actual, though implicit, process of understanding what is gained in taking a case history or in hearing a client's "story," as will be discussed next.

Interpretive Methods for Social Work Practice

One of the best descriptions of a hermeneutical approach to social work practice has been provided by a British social worker, Michael Whan (1979). He conceives case narrative to be a central element in direct social work practice, and he contends that the social worker's task in relation to narrative is to enable clients to develop a sense of "their own story." He notes that the importance of such narratives for practice can be comprehended when we consider children who have dislocated life histories because of disrupted or incomplete families, multiple placements, and so on. Practice with such children has shown that they need special opportunities to describe their experiences and impressions in order to sort them out and reassemble them into some kind of meaningful whole. Whan goes on to say, "This whole is their story" (1979, p. 486).

It is noteworthy that Whan refers to the "whole," for in practice this whole eventually becomes the client's story as arrived at by the circular or spiral-like process of the hermeneutic strategy. The initial narrative of the client at intake is first heard by the worker in its totality, then this is related to the parts (aspects described by the client) in the continuing narrative during subsequent contacts. The interpretation of the whole changes in the process and forms the basis for understanding and making sense of the parts yet to come in the ongoing narrative.

The story is not only a definition of the events the client describes but is also an event in itself. That is, the story is told in an ongoing relationship as it unfolds and changes. Now, this dialogic process and relationship between client and worker is obviously beneficial and even therapeutic in its own right. This has been variously referred to as "the healing dialogue in psychotherapy" and "the heart of the helping process" (Friedman, 1985; Perlman, 1975). It should be added that this relationship allows for a mutual process of interpretation and understanding of the client's story. This mutuality is central to the hermeneutical approach to case history, and it is one way in which this approach differs from much current and past social work practice.

Client narratives and case histories have, of course, always been open to interpretation, and social workers have always engaged in such interpretation. Workers sometimes engage in it explicitly on the basis of some theoretical practice framework (e.g., psychodynamic, behavioral, etc.) or implicitly on the basis of a "seat-of-the-pants" or personal "common sense" framework. However, the hermeneutical approach requires that the worker initially *abstain* from interpretations based on such preexisting frameworks. The worker needs to hold these preconceptions in abeyance and *hear* the client's story openly and emphatically so as to understand the way in which the client subjectively experiences it. Now, despite much current practice emphasis on empathy and listening skills, the hermeneutical approach is still somewhat different in that it takes this experiential data *as data*, not simply as a way of relating. There is a conscious effort not to extract from and objectify (to later quantify) these data as would happen in behaviorally-oriented practice.

Nor would there be an attempt in the course of the narrative to make sense of the client's story on the basis of a preexistlng theoretical framework (e.g., ego-psychological, object-relations, family structural, etc.). There is an attempt to remain open and experience *with* the client so as to better understand *with* the client.

Now, this is not based on a naive type of empathy, nor is it based on intuition:

> We do not directly invite another person's subjective experiences, but we intentionally (in the phenomenological sense) grasp them because we assume that facial expressions and gestures are a "field of expression" of inner life. In face-to-face interaction we sense that the other person's stream of consciousness is flowing in a manner temporally parallel with our own, and as we interact with the other person our experiences become interlocked. In these "we-relationships," one person comprehends (*versteht*) the other person's subjective meaning. Such comprehension is different from the comprehension of objective meaning, which focuses only on the meaning of the context of what is said instead of why this particular person has made this particular statement at this particular time (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 209).

This reference to "the phenomenological sense" needs some further elaboration. Some of the most important methodological work in modern hermeneutics has been done by phenomenologists. One of the most influential of these has been the German philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer (1984). His hermeneutics have been described as "the understanding of life-experiences as they are given in linguistic expression" and as "the method of empathic understanding". (Howard, 1982). Gadamer's hermeneutics seem to this author to be particularly relevant for clinical social work practice and could have considerable potential for enhancing the heuristic value of empathy. The French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (1981) has also been a major figure in the development of what has been called "hermeneutic phenomenology" (Ihde, 1971). His work seems particularly promising for moving hermeneutic understanding from the immediate practice arena into the research and knowledge-building realm.

Phenomenology, as the modern school of philosophy founded by Edmund Husserl (1970, 1977) represented an attempt

to develop a method that avoids preconceptions by focusing purely on phenomena themselves and describing them. Anything which is not immediately given to the person's consciousness is excluded. This method also begins by looking at phenomena as wholes (holistically) rather than as parts (analytically) in order to discern patterns among the parts. It can be seen from this that the subjective and experiential dimensions of modern hermeneutics, as well as the holistic initial phase of the hermeneutic circle, have been strongly influenced by phenomenology.

So far this discussion of the application of hermeneutical and phenomenological methods to practice has dealt with case history and narrative. There are also certain intervention approaches in current social work practice for which hermeneutic methods are particularly promising. Among these approaches are crisis intervention and the more recent cognitive approaches. In crisis intervention theory the *meaning* of a critical event for a person or a family is a major determinant of the nature and outcome of the crisis itself (Hill, 1965). It is essential that the worker deal not only with the coping capacities and resources.of the client but to help the client make sense or meaning out of the event within the whole context of the client's current life situation. Clearly, the hermeneutic strategy described above has particular relevance for helping the client with this meaning dimension of the problem.

Cognitive practice theory also focuses on the meaning of events and experiences in the lives of clients. Much of the therapeutic work in this approach consists of understanding and then helping the client deal with the factor of subjective meaning, which mediates the behavioral and emotional outcomes in the client's life (Beck, 1976). Here, again, the potential contribution of hermeneutic interpretive method should be apparent. This has in fact been done and reported very effectively by Howard Goldstein and his colleagues in their social work practice with various client groups (Goldstein, 1984). In describing this approach, they allude to "the interpretive functions of mind or schema," and state that "it is this cognitive function that makes ultimate sense of and imputes meaning to experience" (Goldstein, 1984, p. 292). The author of this paper has also

used this approach in social work practice with elderly clients in various community and agency settings (Sherman, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1991). It has particular relevance for the use of reminiscence in helping older clients tell their life story and to work on unresolved issues in the life review process of old age.

Interpretive Methods for Social Work Research

Roberta Wells Imre (1982) in her book, *Knowing and Caring: Philosophical Issues in Social Work*, has claimed that current efforts to establish a scientific base for social work on logical positivism and the empirical methodologies borrowed from the natural sciences has eroded the caring element in social work practice. For one thing, the process of objectification in the scientific paradigm has made clients and their problems into objects for study in a way which has served to extrude the caring element. The interpretive method of hermeneutics as described above very consciously attempts to avoid this trap contained in the objectifying aspect of the positivist thesis. It would not be too much to say, as one writer has, that "contemporary hermeneutics sets the positivist thesis on its "head" (Howard, 1982).

Imre contends that in academic social work circles there is a prevailing "tendency to consider knowledge to be only that which can be known through empirical science," and proposes that we should attempt an approach to social work knowledge that emphasizes "the integral relationship between the person who knows and that which is known" (Imre, 1982, p. 1). The remainder of this section will be devoted to ways of knowing and methods for pursuing social work knowledge which take this integral relationship into account.

Case Study Method

The case study is an old and formerly valued social work method for the study of individuals, families, groups, agencies, programs, communities, and so on. Case studies were commonly seen in social work journals of the past but they have been almost entirely displaced in the last two decades mostly by quantitative empirical studies which are now seen as, more legitimate knowledge-building contributions to the literature.

There are some social work researchers and scholars who claim that the case study method is still viable. William Runyan (1982) contends that the case study is probably the most effective single method to describe the experience of a single person in order to develop "ideographic interpretations" and explanations of that experience, not only for intervention or action purposes but also for *knowing* more about such experiences. He goes on to indicate that the case study method has been the most prevalent and productive approach to clinical research outside as well as inside social work, so that much of the knowledge common to most clinicians was discovered by it.

"Idiographic" method means simply to study and describe things individually, and it stresses uniqueness and variability in single cases rather than attempt to generalize to many cases. Now, most current empirical research, even in clinical social work practice, tends to utilize representative samples of individuals drawn from a population of interest for the purposes of making generalizations about intervention in that population. This type of methodology, called "nomothetic," is currently seen as the legitimate form of knowledge-building in the behavioral sciences. Kerlinger (1973) maintains that this is so because nomothetic means law-making, that the basic purpose of nomothetic research is to set up general laws, and that this generalizing purpose means its "results are always statistical."

Now, there has been an attempt to utilize single-case (N=1) statistical studies in recent clinical social work research, and this is indeed an idiographic method of study. However, it has not had any knowledge-building impact, and its primary rationale has been to objectify (i.e., quantify) outcomes for the purposes of evaluation and accountability. In all fairness, the proponents of this methodology would not be apt to claim that it is knowledge-building in Kerlinger's sense, but even in the idiographic sense it does not meet Imre's criterion that there be an "integral relationship between the person who knows and that which is known." Although such a practitioner-researcher might claim that the client has an integral part in determining and counting the overt and covert behaviors that are important for the clinical problem presented, it is precisely because such (measurable) behaviors are deemed *by the worker* to be the

supreme category for both knowing and acting that there is no
such integral relationship present.

Other Methodological Proposals

A number of new qualitative research methods are being
developed in the human sciences which attempt to capture the
essential experiential dimensions of a study problem by includ-
ing the subject or person studied as an integral participant in
the research process. (Elden, 1981; Heron, 1981). Some of these
new qualitative methods have immediate clinical practice as
well as research applications, so there might be a tendency to
utilize them only within the confines of one's own professional
practice. It is essential that any new insights gained from the ap-
plication of these methods be brought into the general arena of
research and knowledge-testing in social work. This may mean
being willing and able to quantify some of what we have found
with our qualitative and interpretive methods. Eugene Gendlin,
for example, did this with his experiential methodology when
he and others at the University of Wisconsin developed and
tested an Experiencing Scale which was then applied systemat-
ically in a series of practice research studies (Gendlin & Tom-
linson, 1965; Klein, Mathieu, Gendlin & Keisler, 1970; Klein,
Mathieu-Coughlan, 1984). They not only found the Scale to be
consistently and highly reliable but that it also showed a sig-
nificant difference between more and less successful treatment
cases as well as between more and less seriously disturbed per-
sons in treatment. This author has used Gendlin's method of
"experiential focusing" in an empirical study which tested the
use of group reminiscence to enhance the social and emotional
functioning of certain elderly persons in community settings.
The practice method of experiential focusing and the research
method of the Experiencing Scale both showed promising rela-
tionships to other variables of adjustment, morale, and coping
(Sherman, 1987).

One other method of social work research and scholarship
which has been sadly neglected of late and which can benefit
greatly from interpretive methods is social work history. Dilthey
contended that the interpreter in the historical sciences is part
of the historical flow he or she is attempting to understand. It

is extremely important, then, in reading and interpreting the historical materials, texts, and narratives that the researcher be aware of how his or her own place in the flow of history from the point in time of interest to the present. Furthermore, every effort needs to be made to immerse oneself in the sense of the time and place under study so as to get feel for the experience of living and acting in that place and time. So much of what has been done in histories of social work has shown a tendency to read and interpret practices and policies about the social work past from the perspective of present or recent history. For example, a current history of the Charity Organization Movement is apt to reflect a type of social welfare thinking that was formed and influenced by events of the 1960s and 70s. This can serve to lose or distort much of the texture, richness, and understanding of the nature and spirit of that movement in the social and cultural context in which it was developed, lived, and experienced. Needless to say, interpretive methods could prove to be an antidote to this tendency and could serve to enrich our understanding of much valuable social work history.

Finally, it is important that we get on with the business of applying these interpretive methods in both practice and research. There has been a great deal of criticism of the dominant empiricist paradigm in social work, so what is needed now is a vigorous and systematic development, description, and application of the alternative or "new paradigm methods" to current social work practice and scholarship. Some of the interpretive methods described here have been applied in very few instances, and these limited efforts are in new and highly formative stages. It is crucial, therefore that those of us who are attempting to apply these methods make a concerted effort to disseminate reports of our efforts and findings in the social work literature.

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