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Qualitative Research and Social Work Practice: Partners in Discovery

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The methods, outcomes and distinct characteristics of qualitative research are presented to establish the relevance of this mode of inquiry for research in social work practice. The phenomenological foundations are outlined and the various methods including ethnography, participant-observation and life history are illustrated by the use of an array of qualitative research projects. The same studies also disclose the forms of knowledge generated by qualitative research relative to the importance of values, ethics, culture, spirituality and aesthetics.

A survey of social work research literature for information about qualitative methods would turn out to be a brief venture. Even among the few references that might be located, one would not uncover a wealth of information. First, it would be found that discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of this method are somehow locked into a continuing and peculiar debate about the scientific foundations of professional research. The casual inquirer might be entertained by the volume of passion in the polemics generated about an otherwise neutral topic.* Or the reader might be impressed with the erudition of the various antagonists in this controversy and may learn something about "heuristic paradigms," "epistemological foundations," and other rare concepts. But little information about practical applications would be gained.

An occasional article might indeed say something informative about possible uses of qualitative methods. But at least in one instance, an apologetic tone is heard in, the author's confession that "the concept of qualitative methodology is still evolving" and that these methods "have in common their nonreliance upon quantified measures of statistical analysis" (Reid and

* Editor's note: See Haworth article in this volume

Davis, 1987). Whether these statements are indeed valid, the curious reader is again detracted by having to grapple with comparisons between methods—comparisons that I will show are misleading.

To the extent that this debate creates a forum in the journals of the profession, it is useful: a much-needed arena is opened where certain provocative and probably unresolvable questions about inquiry and knowledge might be aired in scholarly ways. I say “probably unresolvable” advisedly since, at the root of the controversy, one finds competing allegiances to one version of reality or another—to ideologies of scientism *or* humanism, objectivism *or* subjectivism, positivism *or* phenomenology or other opposing forms. Beyond the values of a scholarly forum there is not much reason to hope for much more than tolerance of, if not respect for, these well-nurtured differences.

Research of any kind is a means, not an end in itself. It may be seen as a set of procedures, a device used to discover, reveal, define, explain or in other ways increase knowledge and comprehension. Thus, we must be wary of putting the proverbial cart before the horse—that is, allowing our preferred method to determine not only how we approach the problem we wish to study but how we define it in the first place. If we are in fact either unaware of alternative approaches or driven by a commitment to a singular methodology, we may very well wind up warping the problem to get it to fit the method—or, as sometimes happens, entirely dismiss the research question because of the limits of the research tools we have available to us.

The intent of this article, therefore, is to cast more light on the nature of qualitative research as a mode of inquiry in its own right. The reader familiar with the principles and methods of social work practice will, I believe, detect a reasonable kinship between practice and this form of research: variations of the qualitative methods of participant-observation, in-depth interviewing, and life-history gathering are commonly used by social work practitioners in their work with clients, although, to be sure, for different purposes.

Similarly, just as the principles of social work practice are best understood not as abstractions or a set of free-standing techniques but as a dynamic in the dialogue of helping, the

methods of qualitative research become more understandable when their applications can be demonstrated. Thus, in this overview a case study format will be used, drawing from illustrations of representative types of qualitative research. References are offered to direct the inquisitive reader to a more comprehensive literature concerning specific approaches in this form of inquiry.

What is Qualitative Research?

The risk in attempting to define qualitative research is to consider it as the opposite of quantitative research; doing this distorts and confuses both methods. Although naturalistic or qualitative methods have considerable status in sociology and anthropology, as already mentioned, they receive scant notice in the literature of social work. For this reason, I will offer a working definition of the method, its underlying principles and the major modes of inquiry that constitute this form of investigation. In the lengthier section that follows, I will attempt to give life to the major qualitative procedures by drawing illustrations from a variety of types of social work research projects.

A basic definition of qualitative research is suggested in the subtitle of Filstead's book (1970) on qualitative methods: "First-hand Involvement with the Social World." "Firsthand" connotes the context of investigation, the immediate, on site setting where qualitative methods are employed. "Involvement" refers to the actual participation of the researcher in the social world that is being studied; the researcher is not a detached or dispassionate observer but is *in* and becomes *an active part of* the event that he or she is investigating.

In some instances, qualitative methods have been underrated by being typified as "exploratory" or "prescientific" and therefore recommended when too little is known about the question at hand to formulate the hypotheses required for more "rigorous" forms of research. A more enlightened definition, however, would accent the unique power of this method to reach beyond mere description and to discover and explain the meanings and intentions that shape the nature of human and social conduct. In Geertz's terms, this approach involves the search for and analysis of "the symbolic forms—words, images,

institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another” (1983, p. 58).

Although selected instruments and questionnaires may be used for data collection, the principal medium for analysis and interpretation is the reflective mind of the researcher. Within the scientific canons of objectivity, this may seem to be a heretical position. Yet, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, pp. 14–15) put it, the common-sense fact is that we are part of and cannot escape from the social world we wish to study. There are no external, absolutely conclusive standards with which to judge the social phenomena under scrutiny. Thus, we must work with what knowledge we have but with a willingness to subject that knowledge to systematic inquiry and careful reflection where there is a hint of doubt or error.

Thus, the findings generated by the use of qualitative procedures do not pretend to be absolute, conclusive or, for that matter, necessarily replicable. The human circumstances that are the focus of study are in constant process of emergence and change; for that matter, they may shift by a few degrees because of the presence of the researcher. Second, the research intent is not to test or prove some preliminary assumptions about the question. Its purpose is to discover, explain or interpret or to fashion a more systematic way of understanding what, at the outset, appears to be an obscure, perhaps ambiguous human event or situation. A final reason is a comment on good research: better questions are as desirable a result as good answers. Given the unpredictable qualities of the human state, new discoveries will allow us to be a bit more intelligent about the questions we ask in the next phase of research.

In effect, this mode of research may enable us to *do*, to engage in practice, more knowledgeably. But its special character also enables us to *know* in a more profound way. The talent of social work is not solely technical: it is, as well, artistic and philosophic. Entry into the complexity of the human situation may be eased a bit by what we do know; at the same time, we quickly learn that the peculiar dilemmas and moral questions we encounter call for fresh and creative ways of understanding.

The openly subjective character of the qualitative method may invite charges of "researcher bias" and "lack of rigor." Bias in some form is evident in all forms of social research: the researcher's preconceptions, personal aims and values are bound to be influential, as they are often the compelling motives for undertaking the research project in the first place. Because of these subjective elements, the question of *rigor* in qualitative research is treated very seriously. Vigilant reflection is required as the researcher must be alert to the extent to which his or her perceptions and interpretations reasonably correspond with what is actually going on "out there."

The rationale for this definition of qualitative research derives from the following underlying principles. (a) Reality is a construct and not an objective fact. In the course of daily living, people shape their respective realities to make sense of and give order to their experiences (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These constructions may take myriad forms. Cognitive style or how one thinks, perceptions of previous experiences, acquired learnings, one's values and beliefs, and the felt influences of environment and culture are just a few of the interplay of forces that shape one's constructions. (b) In phenomenological terms, this personal construction is called one's *natural attitude*—the unquestioned definition (either individually held or intersubjectively shared) of aspects of the world as they appear to the person. This attitude is a focus of qualitative inquiry. (c) The processes of inquiry should be acutely responsive to the person-in-the-situation and involve forms of conversation, dialogue, involvement and observation. In important ways, the research enterprise is a *collegial* enterprise in which the researcher joins with respondent(s) in the effort to discover meaning in and to make sense of the experiences in question. (d) The research effort needs to be flexible and creative. Advance thought and planning must be thorough but not rigid; when unpredictable events arise or new knowledge is forthcoming initial plans or previous conceptions may require modification.

These principles are expressed in the range of procedures or plans of action subsumed under the banner of qualitative research. For our purposes, and because of the limits of space, two major sets of procedures—ethnography and life histories—will

be described using sketches of selected qualitative case studies in social work.¹ In the section following, we will consider examples of the particular types of knowledge and understanding generated by these methods.

Ethnography

Broadly speaking, ethnography refers to the entry of the investigator into the action of a social field or situation to search out understanding and meaning of behaviors and attitudes. The field may be characterized by its cultural, national, or ethnic character and/or people engaged in particular activities, roles, relations or circumstances. Expansive as ethnography is, a number of examples are required to illustrate just a slice of its range and diversity.

Kassim's study (1988) involved the question of the influence of Indian culture on social casework. The author was aware that the education of social workers in India generally was based on British and American models; practice, however, was responsive to specific problems and attitudes indigenous to the Indian culture and society. To discover if and how Eastern and Western ideas were bridged in practice, Kassim queried twenty six students and employed workers. Because of the many facets of the question, a variety of methods were used: a *structured questionnaire* gathered pertinent demographic information; an *interview guide* elicited individual's views on religion, education, and socio-cultural factors; and a set of *critical incident case studies* invited the respondents to comment on how they would deal with some typical examples of family and personal conflicts that might be found in the Indian community. Unexpectedly, Kassim found that the workers innovatively and imaginatively bridged some sharply contradictory concepts—for example, what they had learned in their education about the Western value of self-determination and what they personally knew about Indian beliefs in fate and karma. As one respondent put it, "I tell my clients that although their illness is governed by fate, there is still something productive they can do in the meanwhile." In subtle and informal ways, casework teachers were seen as mentors who enabled students to weave together the two divergent systems of belief and thought in useful ways.

Sun's study (1987) focused on relations between culture and social problems specifically concerning Chinese parents of problem adolescents in Taiwan. The researcher was curious about the growing social problem of juvenile delinquency in Taiwan. Uncertain whether Western theories offered a pertinent explanation of this novel problem, Sun decided to search for insights that might be found in parents' own "definition of the situation"—their explanation of the meaning and cause of their children's troubling behaviors. Documenting the social and cultural context, Sun used the method of *participant-observation*, spending extended periods of time gathering impressions of neighborhoods, schools, homes, and the patterns of interactions of fifteen families. A loosely structured, open-ended interview guide was then used to gain the parents' perceptions of the cause of and the source of responsibility for their children's difficulties. Among other findings, Sun's doubts about the irrelevance of Western delinquency theories for the Taiwanese culture were confirmed. Within the bounds of her study, she found that Taiwanese culture comprised three familial subcultures: the traditional family that clung to ancient Chinese beliefs about parent-child relations; the modernized family that aspired to assimilate Western notions of child rearing; and the family in transition, caught between the ancient and modern. The first attributed the problem to the disobedient child; the second assumed blame as parents who "hadn't got it right yet"; the third group were confused and uncertain.

Taylor's study (1983) of discharged mental patients living in a half-way house shows that the ethnographic method is equally pertinent to the investigation of seemingly "alien" groups or cultures in our own society. Since relatively little was known about the lives of people in such transitional circumstances, ethnography, in this instance, required almost total immersion of the investigator in the life circumstances of these people. Participant-observation in this instance took the form of Taylor's residence in the half-way house for a five week period where she openly identified herself as a researcher. In addition to constant observation and note-taking, the researcher used both structured and unstructured interviews, questionnaires, census taking, and the mapping of psychosocial networks to gain as

rounded a picture as possible. A rich array of findings included the confusion about *time* as a governing force in her respondents' difficulties in adapting to the community. A sense of "futurelessness," spawned by controlled institutional life carried over into their aimless and pointless existence in the half-way house and in the community where it was located.

Bohngel's medical field study (1982) centered on a group of renal patients selected for kidney transplant surgery. She wished to determine their styles of coping with a medical problem over which the patient has little control over its progress and outcome. Research was an extended process, beginning with the patient's notification that a kidney was available and their anxious wait for cross-match results and ending with discharge from the hospital some time after transplant surgery. At crucial points in the course of treatment, the investigator began her inquiry with a simple question, "How is it for you?" to elicit the fluid meanings patients gave to their changing experiences. Redefinition of their reality by the patients was an ongoing process. And the struggle to ground their experience in something dependable became especially poignant at the point that the patient had to face (and some did not) a startling fact: no one could predict whether the transplanted kidney would take and therefore what life after surgery might be like. The study generated a diverse and fascinating array of patterns of adaptation as patients tenaciously and creatively attempted to find meaning in and surcease from their plight.

Also within the realm of medical care, but with an interest in caretakers' participation, Rottman (1985) sought to determine whether parents of premature, extremely low birthweight babies were capable of making ethical choices in decisions bearing on the lives and treatment of their newborn. The exceptional nature of the neonatal intensive care unit required many months of preliminary observation of (a) the unit's medical and nursing procedures, (b) the patterns of the visiting parents, and (c) the styles of interactions that developed between parents and their infants and between parents and staff. Once she gained some impressions of the ethos of the hospital unit, Rottman could then devise appropriate guiding questions. She waited for timely opportunities to talk with these parents, sensitively taking account

of their readiness to reflect on and talk about their crises. Irrespective of their diverse cultures and backgrounds, parents generally were well-equipped to participate in serious decision making; unfortunately, medical protocol, the ambiguities of informed consent and other factors militated against active participation. Unexpectedly revealing were the oblique and subtle things parents needed to do to establish a bond with their frail infants including the names they bestowed, tokens, poetry, and prayer.

Urda's action research (1984) was more concerned with how things work than with problems of living. Her research centered on generating knowledge and building theory about the ending phase of the small group experience. Urda focused specifically on twelve task-oriented groups including boards of directors, staffs and committees in a variety of settings. Participant-observation placed her in the flow of events including premeeting activities, interventions, interactions, the task process and closing. A questionnaire gathered demographic information about the group members as well as self-reports of the group experience and the closing phase. Urda discovered certain patterns in the ending phase of groups but also found that each member's need for confirmation and feeling of self-worth transcended the importance of the task the group was designed to accomplish.

Life Histories

A second method of qualitative research involves the collection of self-reports or personal narratives that build into a type of life history. The medium of research in this instance is conversational discourse (which may be entirely open-ended or focused by an interview guide, depending on purpose or the nature of the circumstances). The respondents are invited to tell their stories about their lives or specific events and experiences they have encountered. The study is a search for themes, plots, and patterns in these stories and the meanings respondents attribute to them.

Hilbert's study (1986) illustrates how life histories can illuminate the diverse meanings people give to a shared momentous or tragic event (in this instance, the Vietnam war).

Although the veteran has been the focus of much empirical research, little was known about the subjective meanings of the war experience held by the veterans themselves (other than what can be found in autobiographies and novels). Of special interest to Hilbert was how the veterans in his sample interpreted the Vietnam experience in narrative and metaphor and how this portrayal affected versions of both their pre-war and their postwar lives. Lengthy discussions were held with eighteen veterans in a variety of familiar settings—homes, offices and coffee shops, for example. Hilbert's findings essentially controverted the tendency to see the effects of the war experience in linear, cause-effect terms. The variety of meanings revealed by the study and their linkages with pre- and postwar factors point to the need to set aside our preconceptions and hear the veteran's (or any client's) story as it is told and in terms of its own meaning.

In contrast with the exploratory breadth of Hilbert's life history approach, Kunin's (1985) study concentrated on a specific life experience—namely, what it meant for one's life to seek and receive therapeutic or counseling services. Fifteen clients of a community mental health center willingly responded to the opportunity to tell about being a client and what it meant to them. In minimally structured and lengthy interviews that began with the open question, "What made a difference for you?" they offered rich impressions of painful events that led to their seeking help, the conditions of the helping experience that they believed made a difference in their lives, and how they thought these changes might affect their futures. In significant ways, their interpretations of the helping process contrasted with the received professional view of therapy. For example, the importance of the "presenting problem" (whether, for example, divorce, depression, or career) is secondary to a sense of low self-esteem accompanying feelings of failure about not managing life's problems. The respondents had little awareness of or interest in the therapist's methods or theoretical orientation: what counts is the client's impression that the therapist cares and conveys the belief that the client is indeed worthwhile. As this impression is internalized by the client, he or she gathers strength to "take charge" of life. A successful termination does

not imply the problem is solved; rather, the client feels empowered to resume control and responsibility.

King's life history study (1985) centered on modes of life adaptations to a particular physical condition. The inquiry involved congenitally blind adults' versions of their sexual development, taking into account the assumption that vision is one of several senses involved in sexual development. Not knowing what to expect, King properly avoided warping the inquiry by formulating preliminary questions. Instead, the dynamics of open group discussion and interaction were used as the medium for sparking memories and sharing experiences. Depending on the degree of sight impairment, the respondents' experiments and discoveries took a variety of forms: some reported learning about the opposite sex by close scrutiny of magazines such as *Playboy*; others relied on tactile investigations. The pivotal finding was that sexual adaptation was a part of a general adaptation to blindness and that its success often had to do with whether respondents had the benefits and guidance of a caring mentor (usually not a family member) in their young lives.

Despite the diversity of qualitative modes of inquiry, they share common pursuits: to bring to light new knowledge about obscure or enigmatic social phenomena; to enrich and sensitize our work with problems of living; and, if possible, to discover and generate what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call *grounded theory*.

Such theory is systematically derived *from* (or *grounded in*) real-life data in contrast to theory that is logically deduced about human events. Drawing from Bruner (1986), the former might be considered "bottom-up" theory built from the morsels of lived experience, whereas the latter is "top-down," based on *a priori* abstractions about life experience.

This does not mean that qualitative research is practiced in a theoretical vacuum. In the examples noted, the researchers did not ignore available knowledge and research. Like many practicing social workers, these researchers used available knowledge mainly as informative maps of the terrain to be explored rather than as a recipe to be followed to the letter or to be tested in some way. Urda, for example, relied on gestalt theory to organize her thinking about the organicity of the small group in general but carefully balanced these views against the data

emerging from her groups. King found the theory of personal constructs helpful for thinking about the way people fashion their individual realities; at the same time, she did not allow the theory to obscure what emerged in her respondent's own constructions and meanings. Others saw symbolic interaction theory as a useful means for gaining an orientation to the interpersonal exchanges that occur among people.

The Outcomes of Qualitative Research

The findings of qualitative research often are compelling and sometimes startling since they capture the unforeseen, often overlooked, and cryptic minutiae that, in inexpressible ways, contribute to the spirit and vigor of living. The research endeavor, not constrained by a host of controls or presumptions, invites the event in question to unfold naturally. The inquiry is open and responsive, resisting the tendency to screen out what may at first seem irrelevant. As already indicated, it is *natural attitude* that is the focus of inquiry.

Because of its ample and inclusive boundaries, it is likely that the researcher will amass a diverse and seemingly baffling assortment of data: these include material directly gathered as well as related incidental data in the form of personal field notes and journals, memos, and observations. Because of the rich quality and depth of the information subject to careful analysis, samples are comparatively small. Although claims cannot be made about generalizability or representativeness, the insights gained from careful study of the more obscure and elusive human perspectives produces its own brand of persuasive and fertile knowledge.

The following categories are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive or discrete.

Ethical and Moral Dilemmas

Once people are asked (even in ordinary discourse) to report on their lives and problems of living, it is quite likely that we will find their narrative shot through with moral doubts and questions. For example, in Kunin's study of clients' reflections on treatment, the moral equation of their problems was evident in the way they framed their problems: a sense of moral failure

attended their inability to manage their lives; a feeling of moral strength embellished their feeling that they had made progress. In the Vietnam veteran study, the subtle but pernicious feelings of moral anguish about killing and the war itself often transcended the more apparent traumas of war. Even in the renal transplant study, patients caught in the hiatus of uncertainty about their futures, turned inward or toward a divine being to question their "goodness" or whether they deserved special consideration.

Value Questions and Conflicts

Qualitative studies often verify the centrality of values in human action and intention. Equally important, these studies show that values neither fall into neat categories nor measurable distributions. Kassim's study of social work in India, for example, shows that competing cultural values can coexist and even be resolved in confounding and imaginative ways. As Urda discovered in her study of task-oriented groups, what may appear to be an obvious, accepted value may, on inspection, turn out to be a nominal social convention. The expressed commitment of members to the group's task was overshadowed by personal values concerned with preservation of self-esteem and opportunities for self-expression. And without exhausting the examples of the vagaries of values, Hilbert's study of veterans cautions us that some personal values are not necessarily enduring; they are vulnerable to catastrophic events that may drastically alter one's priorities.

Spirituality

Apart from manifest religious beliefs and identifications, the deeper spiritual dimension of persons' lives often is inarticulate and therefore difficult to discern. The qualitative researcher frequently depends on metaphoric and symbolic behaviors to unveil the cardinal role of faith and dependence on the divine particularly when one faces calamity, anguish or loss of control. The narratives of parents of premature children in Rottman's study suggested how faith in a greater power helped these parents redefine the devastating crisis, discover new meanings, and thereby find dependable support for their endurance. Likewise,

Bohnengel found that renal patients, caught in the darkness of uncertainty about whether their bodies would accept or reject the transplant, relied on creative notions of a divine purpose—beliefs that transcended the conventional supports of formal religions.

Aesthetics

The importance for one's well-being of the presence or absence of beauty, harmony and balance is scarcely mentioned in social work literature and theory. Yet, as some of these studies show, the human narrative often is colored and enriched by allusions to the aesthetic side of the routines of living. In Rottman's work, parents needed to meliorate the sterile, technological environment of the neonatal intensive care unit by decorating and brightening the bare isolettes of their babies in delicate and touching ways. Members of down-to-earth, task-oriented groups used various symbolic terms to depict the harmony and balance of a positive group experience. And many of the Vietnam veterans would temper their memories of the horrors of the war with gentler images of the tranquillity and beauty of the tropical wilderness.

Just we find that the products of qualitative research alert us to the inner world of subjects, they have much to say about the imaginative and complex styles people rely on in approaching the more active tasks of living. Creative improvisation may be evident in how they define themselves, explain and cope with their predicaments, and otherwise manage their lives.

Identity and Culture

Kassim's investigation of social work in India and Sun's study of delinquency in Taiwan suggest that culture is not an isolated variable or a direct cause of certain behaviors. Culture may be a force to be reckoned with, a part of the *tension* and *imbalance* arising when people struggle to integrate changes in or between contradictory cultural expectations. For example, with their identity at stake, a few Taiwanese parents struggled to cling to traditional values in a society undergoing rapid change, whereas others pursued modern practices in the same society

that has not entirely given up its traditions. Examples of *passivity* or *resignation* abound in Taylor's account of discharged mental patients who allow themselves to be defined by society and therefore, without resistance, slide into membership of a deviant sub-culture. On the other extreme are some of the veterans in Hilbert's study who aggressively defied the brand that society attempted to impose on them, And in various positions along this continuum, King's congenitally blind respondents indicated that impairment was not necessarily the major force defining their identities. Family values and pride as well as the presence or absence of a mentor had a place in the shaping of a personal self-image.

Adaptation and Coping

Studies of people's lives confirm that in everyday living people do retreat to familiar patterns to accommodate to or attempt to overcome adversity. But these patterns are not necessarily fixed; creativity in redefining crises allows for imaginative solutions to them. In Bohnengel's search for definitive patterns in the course of patients' adjustments to the transplanted kidney, she found some radical transformations in patients' perceptions of bodily changes, hopes and expectations, and their feelings about their control over their lives and bodies. The ability to reorder and reappraise one's definition of the situation also is poignantly evident in the narratives of the Vietnam veterans. Many of their stories reveal how noxious and disabling episodes were transformed into symbols of resiliency and strength, proofs of the ability to endure and gain pride and wisdom.

Life in Process

The researcher as a participant and observer has a first-hand view of life in progress and interaction rather than life as a series of static episodes. This was evident in many of the studies: in the peculiar ways that supportive networks evolved among former mental patients in their half-way house; how closure in task-oriented groups unfolds out of the quality of certain antecedent conditions; and how people develop their social roles as, for example, patients, parents, and help-seekers.

Important in the processes of living is the person's perceptions of *lived time*. In contrast to measured time or a chronological rendering of events, lived time refers to the way individuals reconstruct the past by arranging life events in certain sequences and periods to explain their conceptions or understanding the "hows" and "whys" of their present reality. The story that is fashioned not only creates order out of chaos but also gives meaning to existence. In a positive sense, Kunin's study shows how counseling enables clients to edit and rework their lived histories and thereby devise a more productive and adaptive version of their current worlds. In starker terms, Taylor found an absence of meaning in mental patients' attempts at survival since their jumbled past deprived them of working explanations of life as it is, thus leaving them with a view of the future as aimless.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The conception of the practitioner-researcher has long been a hope and vision of the profession. But the expectation that the typical worker should be able to contribute to the profession's knowledge base has not been realized. This failing is due, I believe, to the standard requirement that the worker learn to rely on objective quantifying devices to describe and measure the real-life, subjective, and narrative qualities that characterize the helping event. Such an effort turns out to be as rewarding an enterprise as the attempt to determine which of Shakespeare's sonnets are the most romantic by counting the frequencies of the poet's use of the word "love,"

Qualitative research is not only pertinent to the study of practice but is in harmony with the principles and talents of practice. As such, they are mutually reinforcing: the development of the research skills and artistry involved in interviewing, participant-observation and history gathering can be translated into their counterparts in practice. Home visits or community studies, for example, can be enhanced by skills of participant-observation. Reciprocally, the practitioner's interpersonal skills and sensitivities can help ensure that research techniques will be used in prudent, respectful and empathic ways. The correspondence of these methods therefore offer some promise for

merging the researcher-practitioner roles in a more consistent and coherent fashion.

In more instrumental terms, qualitative methods are useful for single case, longitudinal and follow up studies. For example, in addition to learning something about the frequency or types of changes of certain behaviors, qualitative methods would help sort out important personal themes and transactions that could be followed over the course of several interviews or family meetings. Such knowledge would explain and enrich understanding of the workings and processes of change. Likewise, a worker might infer that some common characteristics are shared by a cohort of clients. These themes or patterns also could be traced across the board and/or longitudinally over the course of service. And open-ended follow-up interviews (as illustrated by Kunin's study) can evoke some revealing reflections on the meaning and qualities of the helping process. Not the least, a valuable dividend of these efforts would be the refinement of case recording (a fading skill) for current or future research purposes.

The ultimate beneficiary of qualitative research is the domain of social work *practice wisdom*, the organic base of professional proficiency and accountability. Far more than just knowledge and skill, practice wisdom embodies the union of a heritage of ideas, ethics and values, experiences of success and failure, and the processes of reflection in action. It is this sense of organic wholeness that qualitative forms of inquiry strive to advocate and support.

Finally, there are certain pleasures in doing qualitative research. For those who have not settled for specific schools, frameworks, models, or methods of practice, the spirit of qualitative inquiry stirs wonder and curiosity. It assures that practice remains robust and open-ended, always alert to fresh insights and discoveries.

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Notes

1. Among other variations of qualitative methods are those that are unobtrusive; that is, they involve methods of lesser impact on the social world studied. They include content analysis of personal or public documents, historical manuscripts, and observations or audio or visual recordings of events.

