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Post-it Notes: Social Workers and Research Participants Sticking Together

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Abstract

This autoethnography reflects the author's perceptions of a collaborative social work process called qualitative inquiry. Using a quilting metaphor, the author creates a recipe for collaborative learning between qualitative researchers and study participants. The metaphors associated with quilting reflect a participatory action research model, and encourage qualitative researchers to stretch their creativity and collaboration skills.

Keywords

Participation, Collaboration, Quilting, Creativity, and Empowerment

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Post-it Notes: Social Workers and Research Participants Sticking Together by Judy Heitzman[±]

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Abstract

This autoethnography reflects the author's perceptions of a collaborative social work process called qualitative inquiry. Using a quilting metaphor, the author creates a recipe for collaborative learning between qualitative researchers and study participants. The metaphors associated with quilting reflect a participatory action research model, and encourage qualitative researchers to stretch their creativity and collaboration skills.

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In the mid-20th century, a child was born in the southeastern United States. Early in her life, so the story goes, she exhibited an unusual creative ability. Like most children, she was curious, innovative, and observant. Perhaps unlike many children, the creativity in her life was admired and nurtured. After all, her family reveled in music, laughter and dance.

Fast-forward fifty years. Now she has written volumes of papers, wrestled tigers in quantitative research and statistics, and is about to complete the doctoral program coursework. But one question remains: "how will clients and research participants she serves benefit from this knowledge?"

I pondered this topic for two weeks, and after writing three pages of American Psychological Association (APA) formatted lingo, trashed the whole thing. Looking for a more innovative way to approach the task, I put a post-it note pad in my pocket. Each word that I read, heard, or saw that reminded me of "qualitative inquiry" was written on a post-it note. I stuck them all in one place. Earlier this week, I began looking through those words.

Even yesterday, I was still saying things to myself like "this is going nowhere," or "why can't I get a handle on this?" As with many of my creative endeavors, I do my best work by mulling over things for a while. Like yeast rising, it has to sit a bit. This morning the dough was rising out of the pan. It came together so clearly. The post-it notes ... *sticking together* is what social work practice and research are all about. After all, sound social work practice is done in tandem *with* clients, not on clients. The word *tandem* is defined in Microsoft Word as a synonym for two-wheeler. In other words, it is *two* synchronized entities (e.g., clients and social workers) working together towards a similar goal.

I found myself pondering the image of a quilt; the large tapestry created out of fabric scraps that makes a beautiful and treasured keepsake. I chuckled as I considered the post-it notes as a technological computer-aged scrap heap, which I had serendipitously used as the quilt pieces.

Qualitative Quiltmaking

Okay, now that all the scraps are in one place, time to take a look. Like the process of quiltmaking, where many scraps are sewn together in a fashion that liberates new significance, I look for a pattern to emerge from this hodge-podge of paper scraps. In the conundrum of words, one theme is clear. I believe the qualitative inquiry process reflects the values of social work theory and practice far better than the quantitative model. It is not abstract, but fleshed out. The process of qualitative inquiry captures the essence of participant experiences that no statistical analyses can touch. Qualitative inquiry minimizes limiting creativity in the problem solving process.

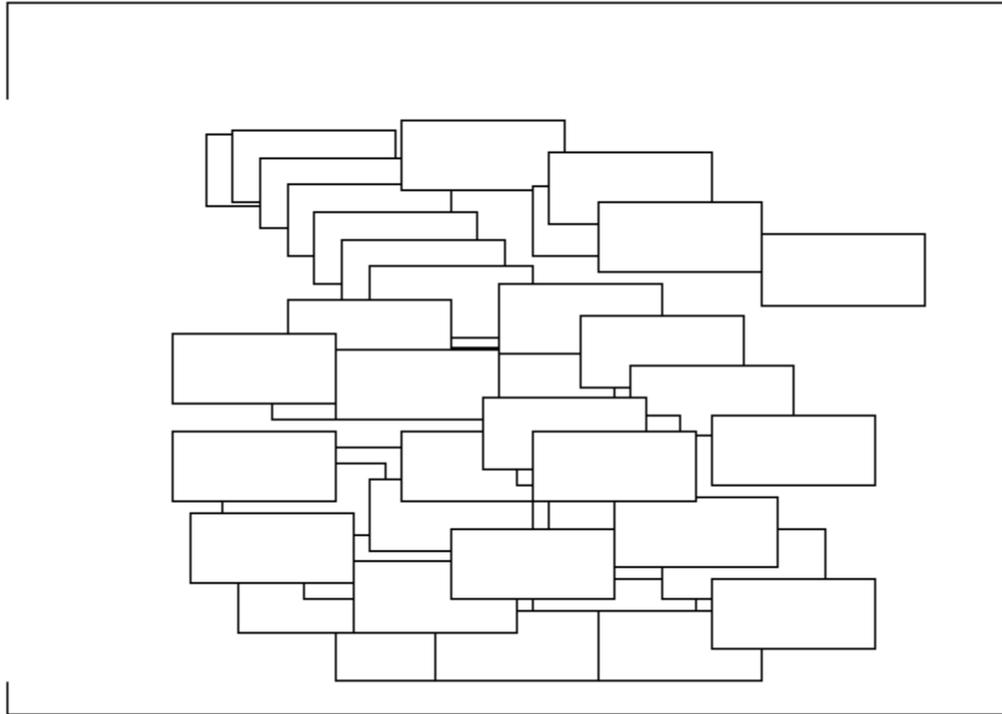
Spreading the scraps out on the table, I itched to see what expressions, assertions, and affirmations for qualitative inquiry that I had chosen. Perhaps a list would be easier to read. Nah, just spread them around.

Figure 1

Claims making	Validate	Ebb and flow of life	Untainted	
Life is messy	Reflexivity	Breathing	Experiential	Living
Contextual	Privilege	Melody	Picturesque	Fluidity
Whose voice	Cyclical breaks and ruptures		Pragmatism	
Reportage	Language	Matrix of uncertainty	Motif	
Polyvocality	Replete	Reflective of resistance	Messy	
Reconstructing self	Mystery	Real Images		
Tensions	Voces Novae	Collaborative	Rhythm	

What a mess. Hmmm, just like life can be. Okay, now to sort. Oops, not as easy as I thought. The sorting function on this computer needs cards first, then words. Okay, re-think this. Wouldn't it have been smarter of me to *consult an expert* in word processing *first*? Novel idea, especially since I thought I had all the necessary information to use *Microsoft Word*.

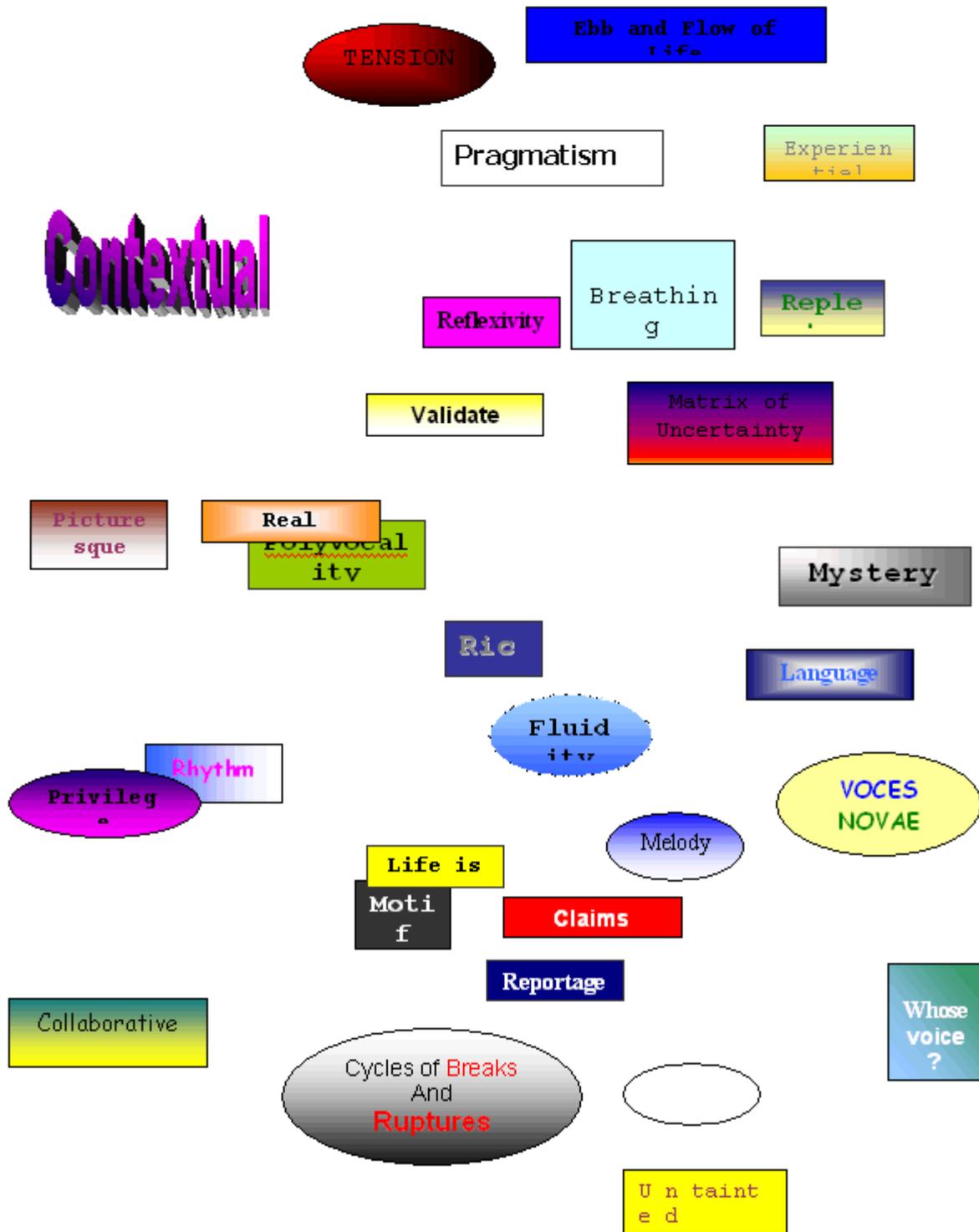
Figure 2



Whoa, this is all over the place. Messy. Confusing. Scary. Like life. Another insight comes. This process of creativity, of giving shape and life to ideas, is one I have used since high school. But ... I never told anyone how, much less demonstrated it, until now. It was the process of qualitative inquiry that gave credence to *my* process. Another surge of ambivalence comes. This is definitely scary. What if the qualitative inquiry professor suddenly takes a turn towards rigidity and this disclosure doesn't make the grade. Ugh, the vulnerability flares in my face. Will this be called "stream of consciousness thinking and not at all worthy of doctoral level scholarship?" Perhaps but I still *do* trust this process. But more significantly, I trust *myself*. And, as I write, I begin deconstructing the sense of snobbery in which scholarship has wrapped itself. Isn't this measure of "doctoral level scholarship" more kin to advanced game playing than courageous license? When did creative thinking become an anathema to learning? It is, after all, *the* tool we humans come with.

Okay, back to sorting. Next, I'll lie out this quilt. Make some connections. Put the groupings together. Design a pattern, from my perspective, of course. Acknowledging the researcher bias is part of the qualitative inquiry process; I ask myself, "What else can I bring?" Let's see, add shading, texture, perhaps movement. What would it look like in living color?

Figure 3



Now I notice that the shapes are not uniform. Oh dear, how can I make it all work together? Perhaps an ANOVA?. What if I look at the quilt in a different way? I'll be a word weaver for today, and let the *contributors* of the words, the real experts, create the new shape. To do that, I

have to trust the process. I'll leave a few blank swatches for what might surface. Or, perhaps the emptiness will add depth to the finished product.

So it is with qualitative inquiry. First, social workers have to be willing to trust clients or research participants as experts on their own lives. Second, we have to give up the need to "form" the quilt, and rather be the table on which participants spread out and examine their pieces. Third, we have to become the conduit through which participants may redefine themselves. That process is more of a mystery than a puzzle, not something to be solved, but rather something to be experienced and cherished. Serendipitously, social workers who honor the voices of clients enrich the research process with a quilt-like myriad of dimensions or viewpoints. Clients or research participants bring more than their swatches. They bring unique multi-cultural perspectives that can enhance the process of quilting (e.g., practice or research). Sometimes participants may enlighten social workers of the need to deconstruct the quilt and re-quilt in a fashion that is more representative of all the participants. While this may be time consuming, the outcome represents a blaze of color that can only be derived from such a diverse quilting extravaganza. Such a process enriches social workers and participants alike. Since both are equally participating, both clients and social workers have access to viewing the development of the quilt, exploring its potential, and are privy to the illumination that comes from such a process.

Finishing Touches

So, (sew?) as the quilt is completed, I decided to write a recipe for qualitative quiltmaking, an extraordinary adventure when served with a heaping helping of compassionate and empowering social work practice.

Bring together pieces of several lives. Ask participants to bring their own swatches.

Prepare yourself as a qualitative researcher by embracing a not-knowing stance.

Listen to the themes presented through the multiple swatches.

Clarify the patterns that are emerging with participating members.

Arrange in a fashion that speaks to group members. Use focus groups, narrative ethnography, participatory action research, or other means of qualitative inquiry.

Stitch together with careful attention to the equitable sharing of all participants.

Inspect the finished product and use this control step to check for errors in assumptions, interactions with participants, or interpretation of outcomes by researchers or participants.

Prepare yourself to be pleasantly surprised by the quantum leap in the outcome. Its shape, design, and character will surpass the imagination of any one quilter.

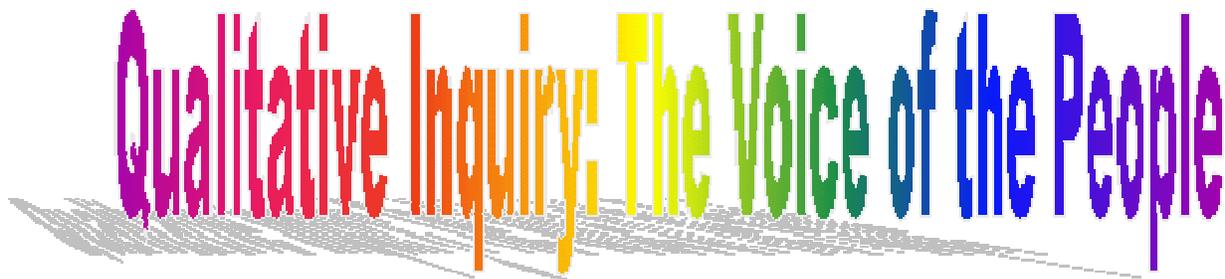
Share the quilt. It won't give warmth, comfort, and satisfaction unless others can experience its extraordinary properties.

Enjoy the process. Quilts like this are one of a kind. The good news is that each new quilting experience will create another unique treasure. Social workers can access this experience by sticking together with research participants. Like other metaphors such as collage (Janesick, 1998) and kaleidoscope (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000), quilts encourage the blending of ideas and perceptions of social workers and clients and/or research participants, bringing added dimensions and depth to any project.

Note: If, after the quilting process is finished, you decide that it is too complicated, go to your local quantitative department store. There are several standardized models of coverlets from which to choose. They will still keep you warm, but their story may be lost in the volume.

P.S. See beyond the pieces to the finished version of the quilt.

Figure 4



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