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AFTA Interest Group Discusses Qualitative Research

by Anthony W. Heath

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Hotel del Coronado, San Diego -- On June 20 a group of about 40 people crowded into a room to discuss qualitative research at the annual conference of the American Family Therapy Association. I arrived late and squeezed myself into a corner near the back.

Celia Falicov welcomed us and told us that this meeting had been conceived at AFTA's recent conference on family therapy research. I remember seeing an announcement of the conference; it had no presentations on qualitative research, per se.

At the research conference a group of people discussed this oversight (my word) over lunch and decided to hold an interest group on qualitative research at the San Diego conference. In AFTA parlance, an interest group is a session for the discussion of a topic. Usually no one presents.

As Dr. Falicov spoke, I looked around and realized that many of family therapy's most respected scholars and researchers were present. To drop a few names -- and risk offending everyone else - - Carol Anderson, Brent Atkinson, Dick Auerswald, Bob Beavers, Pauline Boss, Celia Falicov, Robert Jay Green, Rachel Hare-Mustin, Jay Lebow, Phoebe Prosky, Bob Ravich, Bernice Rosman, Peter Steinglass, Karl Tomm, Froma Walsh and Lorraine Wright were all there.

An animated discussion ensued. The group discussed the compatibility of qualitative and quantitative research, paradigms of research, the history of qualitative research in family therapy, ways to promote qualitative approaches, and AFTA's and AAMFT's respective roles in the process. Diane Sollee was watching closely.

I loved it. Everyone, it seemed, had a chance to say something. Names and manuscripts were exchanged. Stories were told. But most of all, I enjoyed the energy in the room. Many of us didn't want to leave.

The voltage generated by this interest group apparently reached others at the conference in the next two days. There was talk of developing a plenary session on qualitative research at the next AFTA conference, rumors of changes in the AAMFT conference research track structure, and suggestions of whole conferences on qualitative research in family therapy.

It reminded me of the excitement of my first family therapy conference.

Then, at the formal dinner dance, Lorraine Wright told me that the AFTA Board had decided to devote its one day pre-conference workshop to qualitative research in June, 1992. In addition, qualitative research will be integrated into the program for AFTA's next research conference.

A year ago I was amazed by the degree of interest shown in qualitative research at the AAMFT conference. Now I am starting to anticipate the crowded rooms, the hallway methodology talk, the enthusiastic descriptions of research projects, and the doctoral students who like their dissertations.

I'm still fascinated, though, by the strange sight of researchers sitting next to clinicians. What does this mean?

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