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## Past, Present, and Future: An Interview with Ralph LaRossa on Qualitative Research

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# Past, Present, and Future: An Interview with Ralph LaRossa on Qualitative Research

by Pat Cole

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Ralph LaRossa, Ph.D. was selected for an interview because of his contributions to the advancement of qualitative research, especially as the coauthor (with Jane Wolf) of the seminal article, "On Qualitative Family Research" (*Journal of Marriage and the Family*, August, 1985) and as founding editor of the *The Qualitative Family Network*.

Dr. LaRossa, professor of sociology at Georgia State University, is the author of *Conflict and Power in Marriage: Expecting the First Child*; *Transition to Parenthood: How Infants Change Families* (with Maureen Mulligan LaRossa); *Family Case Studies: A Sociological Perspective*; and *Becoming a Parent*. He is currently working on a social historical study of American fatherhood.

**QUESTION:** How did you become interested in qualitative research?

Dr. LaRossa answered by tracing his introduction to qualitative research back to his days at The New School of Social Research in New York City. While pursuing a masters degree from 1968-70 at the New School, he studied phemomonology and symbolic interaction and was encouraged in this qualitative work when he entered a doctoral program at the University of New Hampshire.

His decision to use qualitative research in his dissertation proved a lonely journey. With few colleagues for support and information, he relied on two books to guide him through the "cookbook" method. The intense anxiety generated by working on his own led him to publish an article for the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* entitled "Ethical Dilemmas in Qualitative Research."

**QUESTION:** Your 1985 article, "On Qualitative Research" pointed out the exclusion of qualitative research in the field. Where do you see it today and why?

Dr. LaRossa believes "qualitative research is in better shape today than five or six years ago, at least in the world of sociology." This belief comes from three observation:

1. The Qualitative Family Network, started in 1985 with 15 interested readers, today has grown to over 300 subscribers.
2. More presentations on qualitative research are now offered at the National Council of Family Relations. Students attend these presentations, return to their universities asking for more courses on qualitative research, and professors then have to decide if they will encourage or discourage

these courses. Regardless of their decision, the issue of qualitative research has "moved to a level of consciousness that wasn't there five or six years ago."

3. The feminist perspective has helped increase the level of consciousness. Some feminists are more likely to pick qualitative methods for ethical and ideological reasons. With this trend, feminists "may have more of an impact on the growth of qualitative research."

**QUESTION:** You mentioned The Qualitative Family Research Network. How did it start?

"It started unexpectedly," according to Dr. LaRossa. He presented "On Qualitative Family Research" at a 1984 National Council of Family Relations Conference, and the room was packed with colleagues demanding, "Yes, what you did is what we suspected. Now what are we going to do about it?" What Dr. LaRossa did was to point out between the discrepancy between the acknowledgement of qualitative research's importance in the field and the infrequency of published articles in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. This discrepancy troubled the assembled participants, and fifteen of them signed up for future networking.

From this show of interest, Dr. LaRossa started the newsletter with an emphasis on "not discrediting quantitative research, but encouraging qualitative research." That accepting spirit had carried over with the new editor, Jane Gilgun, Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota and treasurer, Katherine Allen, Ph.D. at Virginia Tech University. When contacted for comments, Dr. Allen confirmed a membership of over 300 subscribers, and Dr. Gilgun believes, "Although qualitative research is not solving all the problems in family research, it is certainly useful for developing knowledge we do not currently have."

**QUESTION:** What is the future of qualitative research?

Dr. LaRossa predicts, "The more healthy qualitative research becomes, the more disagreements there will be. Stage one was 'us against them', and stage two will include more disagreement." He believes that people in quantitative research battle all the time, so as qualitative researchers start arguing among themselves, these differences of opinion should be encouraged and appreciated as signs of increasing health in the field.

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