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Workpoints: Research Provocations-Part II

by Barbara A. Kaufman

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After my article (Kaufman, 1992) about designing project-specific methodology appeared in the Fall issue of *The Qualitative Report*, I continued to receive inquiries from students and colleagues who asked for additional details. I was flattered that some were referencing portions of the article to substantiate their own methodology. I was delighted that the editor of *Voices* expressed interest in publishing an updated version.

I am frequently asked: "What exactly went on behind-the-scenes?" "What was the process like?" "How did you originally conceptualize it?" "Did your perspective change?" "Do you think I could do it too?" To address these questions, I will delineate my specific decisions and reflections about the project, suggesting a way to appraise the methodology.

My interpretation of this process points to the recursive relationship between interacting with project participants and delving into the field's literature. In lieu of a series of hierarchical steps, I intertwined bits and pieces of the process to formulate a project-specific methodology (Chenail, 1992).

My research focused on the use of literature in family therapy training at the graduate level. I expanded upon previous suggestions to turn to fiction for conveying key family therapy concepts (Gale, 1990; Henry & Storm, 1984; Rambo, 1989; White, 1989/90) by designing a didactic module based on literary excerpts from *The Alexandria Quartet* written by Lawrence Durrell (1961a, 1961b, 1961c, 1961d). Beginning second-year doctoral students read passages from the *Quartet* that illustrated two concepts, multiplicity and uncertainty, frequently identified with family therapy epistemology. I interviewed students three times--before they read the module, after they read it, and again, after they re-read it, sharing my interpretations with them. Emphasis on themes and narrative descriptions of participants' perspectives about the module provided me with a way to understand what is involved when trainees experience an epistemological shift and learn new concepts.

Methodological Design

As I perused article after article about family therapy training, evaluation appeared to be an intricate endeavor indeed. Traditional research efforts to objectively measure various factors often yielded surprising results, highlighting the complexity of quantifying trainees' experiences. It seemed to me that such studies implied new alternatives to evaluate training. I decided, therefore, to focus on trainees' views, complementing previous empirical research in the field.

I began the creative process of designing my methodology. I discovered clinicians who reconceptualized training contexts as opportunities to co-generate meaningful learning

experiences with graduate students in a narrative fashion (Anderson & Goolishian, 1991; Anderson & Rambo, 1988). From this viewpoint, shared resources foster a way for students to exchange their stories and accept multiplicity and uncertainty in therapeutic interaction.

I integrated this perspective into my approach and likened my methodology to a similar process of an interchange of stories between myself-as-researcher and trainees. This entailed connecting the themes of our conversations and an evolving narrative understanding with a respect for discovery and ambiguity (Anderson & Goolishian, 1991; Robinson & Hawpe, 1986). The cooperative nature of my project encompassed collaboration between participants and myself, creating textual narrative patterns for analysis (Hoshmand, 1989; Kvale, 1987; Mishler, 1986).

In order to obtain a rich descriptive base of data, I conducted extensive interviews by following Hopper's (1988) suggestion "to re-present data richly" (p. 57). I requested that trainees reflect upon and relate their experiences with the module as they unfolded. They did so with unanticipated enthusiasm. They were permitted to talk about these and other related training activities until they expressed their feelings and thoughts.

Researcher's Reflections

Participants eagerly discussed their reactions, particularly how the research project compared with other training experiences. "Unmotivated listening"--or listening repeatedly to tape recordings without chasing particular phenomena" (Hopper, 1988, p. 59) led to a series of serendipitous discoveries.

Since the initial focus of my project was to explore how literature can be useful in family therapy training, other contextual factors were not originally emphasized in my "mind's eye." I originally formulated background questions as part of my data gathering process. This led, unexpectedly, to an elaboration of students' private lives that was rich in detail. The entire process encouraged them to extend their responses and initiate discussion. The result was a quasi-metamorphosis in terms of conceptualizing methodology.

The interview sequence itself became a didactic experience for both the participants and myself. Multiple readings of interview transcripts and co-participation in the interviews allowed themal patterns to evolve for analysis. I compared my research experiences to an open-ended, spiraling activity. It was exciting to become part of this process and to conceive of it in terms of spirals. Bateson's (1979) metaphor of a spiral readily came to mind: "A spiral is a figure that retains its shape... as it grows in one dimension by addition at the open end. You see, there are no truly static spirals" (p. 12). This implied "a possibility of a continuously deepened understanding of meaning" (Kvale, 1983, p. 186) about family therapy epistemology and using literature to assimilate new concepts. It also resulted in an open-ended view about my methodology.

During the interview process, the opportunity for students to express themselves about the interpretation of themal and narrative descriptions created additional space and information encompassing the training experience and epistemological shift from their perspective. This, in turn, enriched my understanding about my research, raised new nuances and innuendos in my methodology, and clarified the meaning of themal material originally interpreted.

Many researchers whom I studied regard collaborative, discovery-oriented interviews as contexts for unavoidably co-determining the results (Kvale, 1987). This project encompassed an alternate view that acknowledges reciprocal influence as an integral part of methodology (Kvale, 1987). Respect for trainees' digressions and individual stories enabled the complexity of the experience to emerge as well as the patterns of interrelationships between reading literature and a myriad other experiences.

Analysis of the extensive base of data from the interviews was an intense process. The copious amount of material initially seemed overwhelming and exhaustive. The similarities, variations, and differences among themes gradually emerged in a narrative way after simultaneously listening to the tapes and reading the transcriptions. Each interview contributed to a cumulative understanding of the research. This was similar to the experience of reading the different volumes of the Quartet's descriptions and interacting with its framework of multiple perspectives and uncertain outcomes.

The open-ended nature of the epistemological shift for students foreshadowed the shifts in my methodology as well as the lack of closure to the narrative text of the interviews. Throughout this process, I experienced ambivalent feelings, alternating between clarity and confusion. As noted by van Maanen (1983), descriptive methodology often entails an additional discovery to the one involved in the inquiry itself. These fluctuations led to a re-presentation of unique ways that students learn new concepts.

This perspective coincided with Fischer's (1980) view about description of aesthetic and clinical experiences: "Ultimately, one should feel comfortable about the written assessment, but ought not ever experience complete closure; all individualized understandings are rightly ambiguous, unfinished. Each reader contributes to filling out meanings" (p. 97). He recommends that artists, teachers, and clinicians avoid succumbing "to portraits of permanence or predictability" (Fischer, 1980, p. 99).

Methodological Appraisal and Critique

In this light, the experience of the project became a shared experience of multiple and unpredictable views regarding family therapy epistemology and integrating literature into family therapy graduate programs in order to understand new concepts. It seemed logical that the next step was to suggest a way to appraise and to critique the narrative themes emerging from my research.

By placing emphasis on the meaning, complexity, and context of the learning experiences, I integrated the concept of connoisseurship, or "the art of appreciation" (Eisner, 1985, p. 92) of the subtle similarities and differences of these experiences and relationships with an interactional, qualitative process of appraisal. I encountered comparisons between research and aesthetic criticism: "The educational critic believes the researcher must draw on his or her background of... knowledge and experience in order to make sense of what is happening, to determine what is unique... and to make valid critical judgements (Ross, 1988, p. 165).

Expressive outcomes, conceptualized as non-prescriptive thematic ways to interpret educational encounters, are one example of an aesthetic approach to appraisal (Eisner, 1979, 1985). They suggest rather than designate the type of learning students might experience (Eisner, 1979, 1985). These outcomes are not formulations about how students will perform after engaging in a particular activity. By acknowledging the importance of personalized student- and content-specific outcomes, they "are essentially what one ends up with, intended or not, after some form of engagement" (Eisner, 1979, p. 103).

In terms of this project, life experiences, interests, and convergent as well as divergent perspectives contributed to the meanings students derived from the project. Reading the excerpts was one way to tap into these outcomes for perceiving new patterns and understanding the concepts of multiplicity and uncertainty. Similarities, variations, and differences in the themes provided data to design several expressive outcomes for reading fiction and understanding new family therapy concepts as well as an opportunity to critique what was meaningful about the research.

Embracing this view of appraisal, a review of my thematic and narrative analysis suggested a list of appropriate expressive outcomes for the project. The list was by no means complete and simply reflected an initial attempt to imagine an array of training possibilities when integrating fiction into family therapy programs.

Continuing The Narrative

One year (and 46 days) after completing my project, I continue to explore how literature can be useful in a variety of didactic contexts. Currently, I find the expressive outcomes to be useful tools when designing undergraduate and graduate level courses. As adjunct faculty at several local universities, I ask trainees to illustrate theoretical concepts with a literary work of their own choice. Students initially react with a mixture of uncertainty and apprehension. Upon completion of the project, however, feedback is unanimously positive--they are enchanted by the assignment, finding it to be most enriching in terms of learning abstract theory.

Isomorphic to Durrell's (1961a, 1961b) Workpoints sections creatively listing additional interactional sequences that might continue the story at the end of two of the Quartet's volumes (i.e., *Balthazar* and *Clea*), I similarly view this article as additional methodological workpoints or parts of the ongoing narrative of my research. As Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) note in their study of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*: "Present purposes will not permit exhaustive clarification and analysis of all possibilities, and we are left with what Lawrence Durrell called 'Workpoints'--a virtual infinity of revolutions and new views" (p. 155).

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