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A Simple Qualitative Paradigm: The Asking and The Telling

by Loni O. Shelef

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Although apparent to some, it is important to affirm that it is a researcher's wanting to know, wanting to understand that can be the basis of a research question. Much of discovering and knowing is how we, the researchers, experience both questioning and answering. The following discussion will include the formulation involved in asking a particular research question, the consequent rationale for the application of a heuristic component, as well as exemplars of contextual qualitative data analysis. The integrity of both the researcher's heuristic work, the asking, and the co-researcher's contextual experience, the telling, can create a scientific paradigm supportive of qualitative research.

The Formulation of The Research Question

A study of the experience of married women who were primary wage earners (Shelef, 1994) is presented to illustrate the integration of both heuristic questioning and qualitative description.

Personal Interest and the Research Question:

This research question developed from an earlier interest in the psychological components of employment. As the researcher examined employment as a factor in the family system, particularly in clinical practice, the researcher observed that stresses developed in families where women had the primary financial responsibility. In some of the families the change was due to the husband's sudden job loss. One such couple experienced marital stress from the time the husband lost his job. Seven years later, the stress level had become chronic. Although working, he had not regained his financial or corporate status. The wife would encourage him to look for a good job, but the husband seemed immobilized and did not succeed in securing a better job. She was angry and he was depressed. Was this related to personality factors or a discomfort zone regarding the wife as primary wage earner?

When the marital therapy of another such couple concluded in the wife deciding to divorce her husband, the question arose as to whether this configuration of the female as the primary wage earner might be so awkward as to contribute to disappointment, separation, and sometimes divorce? What of those couples where the female earned more than the male yet they stayed married? These questions were personally relevant because the researcher was the primary wage earner in her family, although at the time she would not have defined herself as such.

Then during a professional meeting, the researcher was discussing the difficulties experienced while simultaneously studying and supporting a family. Several of the other women expressed similar concerns. As the talk proceeded, many women in the group acknowledged that they were all the primary wage earners in their families. I, the researcher, was surprised by the intense

outpouring of emotions. These women described feelings of anger and betrayal towards husbands who were not earning their equal share and not helping at home. I noted that some excused their spouse's difficulties as temporary and viewed their wage-earning as assisting their husbands success. It was as if the prescribed social order of the male as the primary wage earner would set things right and alleviate this stress and anger. Suddenly, it struck me as curious in the midst of this group of talented and competent women that we did not assess ourselves simply as successful women? Why was that not part of our self definition? Why the anger and sense of betrayal?

In this process of problem identification, self questioning and the reaction of a community of peers, a research question had been formulated. It would read as follows: "How do married, professional women experience their roles as primary wage earners?" And as such it would fit the scientific paradigm of qualitative research. Yet, I was aware that I began as the questioner in this system. Not once but upon reflection I learned that I had asked this question hundreds of times without ever really answering. In its simplest form it might be why do boys do "X" while girls do "Y". From the awareness of my confusion, I wanted to know how did other women who, while fulfilling the role of mother and care-taker for their homes, earned the larger share of the income experience their roles.

Thus gestating from the study of my own experience was the impetus to research the experiences of other professional women. In order to learn the most about the experience, a qualitative research paradigm seemed to allow the broad and open-ended study. As such, the research would deal with the interrelationships between researcher, co-researcher and context. Now as a researcher, I set out to understand and elucidate this phenomenon apart from myself, the individual, and as integral to the field of psychology.

Procedural Components

The research method utilized in this study can be looked at in three components: 1) heuristic incubation; 2) research interviews to generate data; 3) contextual and thematic analysis of data.

Heuristic Incubation

At the onset of some qualitative studies, the researcher engages in self-reflection, since personal understandings and interpretations from the researcher's experiences contribute to the incubation of a research question. As Clark Moustakas (1990) wrote:

The heuristic researcher is not only intimately and autobiographically related to the question but learns to love the question. It becomes a kind of song into which the researcher breathes life not only because the question leads to an answer, but also because the question itself is infused in the researcher's being. It creates a thirst to discover, to clarify, and to understand crucial dimensions of knowledge and experience. (p. 43)

This is a heuristic indwelling during which the researcher may explore within any thoughts, dreams, opinions, or experiences related to the research question. Presupposition and bias of the

researcher are both discovered and identified and then utilized to develop other questions to help in the investigation of the phenomenon.

Thus, the first component of this research consisted of the recording of my own experience throughout the next several months. As such, my own thoughts, feelings, and day dreams as they related to my own realization that I was and have been the primary wage earner in my family for the past seven years were written down in journal form. In addition, I had the opportunity to be interviewed by a journalist who became interested and familiar with the research.

Embedded in my curiosity about my experience was also a problem to solve. I needed to understand my own feelings which were for the most part angry sensations, anguish, and confusion. As a psychologist and a researcher, I was encouraged by Moustakas (1990) when he described Polanyi's (1962) concept of research as problem solving.

Solving a problem means finding one's way. Like swimming, skiing, or playing the piano, it requires practice. To be able to swim one must enter the water, and to become a problem solver one learns to solve problems. (p. 43)

As such, the purpose of this heuristic inquiry would be to address a problem relevant to this researcher and engage others as co-researchers investigating their experience and perception. So as the researcher was a lens through which the research question was first seen, she turned inward upon herself to experience, describe, and quantify that very lens. Then the researcher turned about and looked outward at the experiences of co-researchers. And finally, re-focused inward, the researcher validated, enriched or modified the explanation of the research findings. As such, the researcher was the instrument by which the research was conducted.

In such an "alternative research paradigm" (Hoshmand, 1989), there is a shift away from reliance on the more traditional, empirical scientific method. So it followed that the separation into operational definition, theory testing, and verification designed to separate data from their context is inverted into an investigation initiated with a passionate yet disciplined commitment of the self as investigator. (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985). It is through this spiral movement, through experiencing lived space with others, that the researcher would learn, illuminate, and generate data.

Qualitative Data as Results

In addition to the heuristic work of the researcher, in this research an effort was made to maintain the integrity of each co-researcher by presenting the interview data in "contextual" segments. And although in the study other methods of data analysis were also used such as thematic analysis, only the contextual data will be discussed at this time.

The contextual presentation of data was an expression of the necessity to preserve a co-researcher's experience intact and coherent as a singular unit. This researcher felt that the interview data without any further editing and analyzing most accurately expresses the experience of a co-researcher and thereby contributes to "interpretive validity" (Maxwell, 1992):

Interpretive accounts are grounded in the language of the people studied and rely as much as possible on their own words and concepts. The issue, again, is not the appropriateness of these concepts for the account, but their accuracy as applied to the perspective of the individuals included in the account. (p. 289)

Since lengthy and multiple interviews can be cumbersome, the interviews were condensed using exclusively the words and expressions of the co-researcher. Note the interpretative validity in the following condensed interview (Shelef, 1994) from a forty-year-old, mother of two:

I feel like I've been ripped off and I'm pissed about it. When I met my husband he was making double what I was. I saw him as capable of supporting me and this was the first man I've ever been attracted to who could do that. Yea, I wanted to be taken care of. When I met him, my income wasn't even covering my basic necessities like adequate food. I grabbed him to save me financially. What I didn't look at then was that his sister was managing his funds because he couldn't do it. Shortly after that he lost his job and he hasn't been able to consistently earn a good salary since.

I thought he was competent about that and he wasn't. I thought he would support me and he hasn't. I've tried to let him manage our income and he's gotten us into embarrassing predicaments. Even though our income was \$80,000 last year we've been using our savings and our credit card debt has increased. I had one brief period -- a few months -- where I didn't have to worry about spending money. Now I can't enjoy the money I'm making at all because it's just a feeling a relief that the money comes in in time to fund the household account. I think that he married me thinking I was going to take the role of his sister and his mother and anyone else who took care of him and I'm not doing that and he's angry and he acts out in all kinds of ways.

I don't trust the man any more. I don't trust his decisions. I don't trust what he tells me. Two or three jobs back when he changed jobs again I told him flat out that I couldn't be supportive of him any more. I couldn't believe in him any more. And I see him setting himself up now because if he fails again in a business endeavor he'll say it's because I didn't have faith in him. Like I'm thinking negative. I feel ripped off with all these promises. 'This' is the job that is always going to be 'it.'

And I feel ripped off that I have to worry about how much money my business makes. I get pissed about that because I don't like to look at my practice in terms of money. Then I can't put the energy I need to into school because I have to put the energy into making sure my practice makes enough money. It never occurred to me that I would be supporting my family. It occurred to me that I would be working and have a family and that I would coordinate my working hours around my family. The shock of supporting everybody detracts from my adrenaline and my profession.

On the other hand, I think men got a raw deal in that they were brought up to believe that they have to be head of the household. You have a penis, you support your family. My 7-year-old son is already planning his mansion and how he's going to take care of everybody. I feel like I can't enjoy my own success because I have this burden. But then why shouldn't I be the primary wage earner? Where is it written that the man must do that?

My mom went to work later so 'I could go to college.' My father was always the primary wage earner. Actually I think my mom overspent and had to go to work, but she put the blame on me. Their expectation for me was that I would be a kindergarten teacher. The covert message was that I was going to get married and have a man to take care of me. Well, I've been married three times now and not one of them has 'taken care of me.' I'm really embarrassed that my father knows about my present situation; that I've screwed up again; that I can't get a man who will fulfill his proper role.

Every time my husband changes jobs, he gets sick. Guaranteed. It disgusts me. I think it's one of his ways of acting out. I'm just not going to nurture his feelings any more. And I've been ripped off of the wonderful sexual relationship we used to have. I don't see him as strong and capable, and I'm less attracted to him.

And, what do I do? I protect him. He presents himself as very successful and I let other people believe it because I'm embarrassed. I am no good if he is no good. I would love to expose him if I could do so without discrediting me. But if people find out what an idiot I'm married to, then what are they going to think about me? I feel badly when I say that because he has so many good qualities. And when he is feeling strong and capable and functioning well, he's great. But his ego is sooo fragile. As I gain confidence in my profession, he feels like he has no value for me. When he's not supporting me, he feels like a failure. He doesn't know what his role in the relationship is. Recently he said he has a fear that when I get my Ph.D. I'm going to ditch him.

But I'm not going to ditch him....

Our secret doesn't get out. I never reveal any of this. When my feelings about this do surface they go back underground quickly. I go back to my illusion that everything is okay. Even the kids don't know. Yesterday one of the kids wanted to do something. I had to say no. I said Mommy's worried there might not be enough money right now. I didn't say it's because Daddy's just lost his job again. (pp. 76-80)

As such, the condensed interview attempted to convey the experience. The reader enters into the context of the co-researcher not to discuss or analyze, but rather to experience meaning. The data seems to answer questions by itself.

Clearly additional qualitative methods of data analysis can only augment the contextual presentation of data. The purpose of this paper was to emphasize the integrity of both the researcher heuristic experience and the co-researcher cohesive, contextual experience. It is the interaction of the researcher wanting to know and the co-researcher wanting to tell that can in itself create a simple paradigm for scientific knowing.

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