Many Ways of Knowing
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In the past decade, many of us have followed a vigorous debate in the social work literature on the nature of research and on the utility and appropriateness for the profession of different research methodologies. At times reasoned, often passionate, sometimes even abusive, this ongoing discussion raises much more than methodological issues. It brings to the surface the major epistemological, ontological, and value questions that are a continuous challenge in any human enterprise, in any practice, and certainly in any search for knowledge. The questions are explicitly or implicitly asked: What is truth? How may we know it? Or, even, is there such a thing as truth and may we ever know it?

The newest phase of this ancient dialogue began with the increasing demand for empirical testing and validation of our knowledge and practice, perhaps enunciated most precisely by Walter Hudson's (1978) famous and often quoted axioms of treatment: "If you cannot measure the client's problem, it does not exist" and, further, "If you cannot measure the client's problem, you cannot treat it" (p. 65). Around the same time, other writers were questioning the usefulness of models from the natural sciences in knowledge building for the social work profession. Joseph Vigilante (1974) asked, "Is Proof Truth?" in a profession where truths are so deeply value-based, and Dennis Saleebey (1979) discussed the tension between research and practice. The debate was joined by Martha Heine man's (1981) challenge to what she termed "the obsolete scientific imperative in social work research" (p. 371).


We are not alone in this struggle. Intellectual leaders in the sciences and the social sciences, as well as in the other helping professions, are asking the same questions and challenging each other over similar issues. The discussions have spawned a new set of "isms": constructivism, deconstructionism, modernism, postmodernism, and even feminist postmodernism, which join the more familiar "isms" often rediscussed and evaluated: pragmatism, utilitarianism, relativism, positivism, and empiricism.

Why should a journal editor and editorial board members concern themselves with these demanding, abstract, and highly theoretical discussions?

Many years ago, sociologist Florian Znaniecki (1965), in his classic study *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge*, explored the social processes involved in the definitions of knowledge and in the boundary-maintenance and gatekeeping functions of those "men"—and now, hopefully, women too—who select materials for publication and presentation. More recently, in our own profession, H. J. Karger (1983), in a provocative analysis, reminded us that at the heart of the debate about research and the nature of knowledge is a struggle for "the political control of the direction, leadership, and the future of the profession" (p. 202). He wrote,

"Those who define the questions to be asked define the parameters of the answers, and it is the parameters of the questions and the ensuing answers that function as the lens by which people view reality." (p. 203)

In Znaniecki's tradition, Karger (1983) pointed out that
dialogue and debate are allowed within certain parameters, with the ultimate referee being the means of communication—the social work journals. It is precisely the boundaries determined by the journals—which if not totally controlled, are at least seriously influenced by the academicians—which also limit the boundaries of the debate. (p. 204)

It is thus that every time an article is accepted or rejected, the editors make an epistemological decision that not only is part of the process of defining the profession and its truth but also has political implications in the distribution of intellectual leadership, power, and status and, in these days of "publish or perish," implications for the careers and even the incomes (Kirk & Corcoran, 1989) of academicians. Further, the norms of the journals can even shape the direction of inquiry because their past acceptances suggest to aspiring explorers the kinds of explorations that will most likely appear in print.

The Editorial Board and the Editor of this journal assume this responsibility with seriousness and humility. We are aware that each of us has an epistemological position, either implicit or explicit, that guides our selection process, shapes the journal, and thus contributes to the definition of the profession and its truths and to the distribution of status and power. It is important for these epistemological convictions to be made as explicit as possible.

This editor takes the position that there are many truths and there are many ways of knowing. Each discovery contributes to our knowledge, and each way of knowing deepens our understanding and adds another dimension to our view of the world.

We need large-scale studies in which variables can be reduced to measurable units and the results translated into the language of statistical significance. We need in-depth "thick descriptions," grounded in context, of a single case, a single instance, or even a brief exchange. For example, large-scale studies of trends in marriage today furnish helpful information about a rapidly changing...
social institution. But getting inside one marriage, as in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?" richly displays the complexities of one marriage, leading us to new insights about the pain, the joys, the expectations, the disappointments, the intimacy, and the ultimate aloneness in relationships. Both the scientific and the artistic methods provide us with ways of knowing. And, in fact, as Clifford Geertz (1983) has pointed out, innovative thinkers in many fields are blurring the genres, finding art in science and science in art and social theory in all human creation and activity.

There are indeed many ways of knowing and many kinds of knowers: researchers, practitioners, clients. Some seekers of truth may take a path that demands distance and objectivity, whereas others rely on deeply personal and empathic knowing. Some will find the validation of their findings through statistical analysis and probability tests. Others will find it through the intensity and authenticity of "being there" (Geertz, 1988) or through public and shared consensus in what has been called "practice wisdom" (Siporin, 1989). Some truth seekers strive to predict, whereas others turn to the past for an enhanced understanding of the present.

We must not turn our backs on any opportunities to enhance our knowledge, whether they be examinations of correlations or explications of myths, which, according to Rein and White (1981), align "rational action with normative ideals and historical commitments" (p. 16). We must attend to the theoretical advances of our scholars and academicians but also gather and listen to the "stories that rise up out of practice," which "confront, challenge, confirm, or deny the stories that 'come down' from the distant citadels of the profession" (p. 19). All of these sources are essential to our profession and should enrich the pages of this journal.

We welcome survey research, large-scale studies that discover trends and identify needs. We welcome program evaluations so that we can know more about what seems to "work." We need outcome studies, which may call upon a range of ways of knowing through a single case study, experimental designs, or longitudinal reviews that reflect upon the consequences of events or conditions or interventions. We welcome phenomenological studies that lead the explorer on uncharted paths, naturalistic and ethnographic studies that are familiar but more disciplined extensions of the practitioner's case study (Rodwell, 1987). We are interested in heuristic approaches, where the goal is utility rather than certainty, as well as hermeneutical and interpretive investigations, which lead us to decipher the meaning of events to clients, to significant others, and to ourselves (Scott, 1989).

We can enhance our understanding by listening to and reporting the narratives, the stories that make order and sense of human experience and "organize it into temporarily meaningful episodes" (Polkingerhne, 1988, p. 7). We can attend to the myths that link value and action, and we must respect the tacit knowledge and practice wisdom that is "inductively derived from experience, and shapes the practitioner's cognitive schema" (Scott, 1989, p. 40).

But as we open ourselves to exploring and receiving many ways of knowing, we must be ever aware that each is grounded in, and an expression of, certain ontological, epistemological, and value assumptions. These assumptions must be made explicit, because knowledge and truths can be understood and evaluated only in the context of the framing assumptions. Theories can both illuminate and obscure our vision (Scott, 1989, p. 48). They also "constitute moral intervention in the social life whose conditions of existence they seek to clarify" (Giddens, 1976, p. 8).

The boundaries of our profession are wide and deep. We are concerned about the nature of our society, about social policy, social justice, and social programs. We are concerned about human associations, about communities, neighborhoods, organizations, and families. We are concerned about the life stories and the inner experiences of the people we serve and about the meaning to them of their experiences. No one way of knowing can explore this vast and varied territory.

References