Editorial
Qualitative Methods: Why?*

North American gerontologists have adopted a new credo: in order to do 'good research,' it is necessary to use (sometimes exclusively) qualitative methods. They appear to be rediscovering the significance of methods used by their predecessors as well as by researchers in other parts of the world. This current volume undoubtedly illustrates this belief.

What are qualitative methods? Of what value are they? When, how and why should we use them? Research experience yields diverse answers, which are at times contradictory, but which remain implicit for the most part. Few researchers have reflected deeply on the why and the how of the "qualitative" in the field of aging. Nevertheless, *New Methods for Old Age Research* (Fry & Keith, 1986) as well as *Qualitative Gerontology* (Reinharz & Rowles, 1988) constitute two important stages in this process and continue to guide the work of researchers. The discussion of general methodological problems and of problems of theory construction in the study of aging (Schaie, 1988; Birren & Bengtson, 1988; Marshall, 1986) addresses related questions. At the same time, in general, discussion concerning the "qualitative" suffers from at least two handicaps: ambiguity of terminology and a need for justification as an alternative to the "quantitative," which is judged to be dominant, and is, therefore, a threat.

It is in this context that the *Journal* decided to devote a special issue to qualitative methods. This involved giving researchers the opportunity to present their work and encourage them to reflect on the conditions under which these methods are to be used. A symposium on the application of qualitative methods in the study of aging was organized at the Canadian Association of Gerontology Congress held in Toronto in October 1991, and several of the articles in this issue were written by participants in that symposium. Calls for manuscripts in newsletters of various academic and professional associations as well as by word of mouth resulted in the submission of additional articles. The health sector for the most part turned a deaf ear to this call and few francophone authors submitted manuscripts, although interesting work is in progress in these circles. Developments in research methods and publication practice are likely to increase participation in this type of forum in the future. The articles in this issue, without necessarily being representative of all of the research, or exemplary in themselves, reflect what is now taking place in the field of aging among those researchers who were willing to run the risk of exposing their work to public view. Sincere thanks are due to those who made submissions; putting oneself under the critical eye of one's peers is considerably more perilous when the credibility criteria of qualitative research are still minimally codified and constitute only a fragile consensus.

Each of these articles addresses in its own way an important question

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concerning the use of qualitative methods in the study of aging. These methods range from using data from the personal experience of the researcher, through cultural markers present in data gathering methods, to the triangulation of data and the in vivo study of processes. This variety reflects the range of issues arising from the application of qualitative methods in general. Neither systematic presentations of qualitative data gathering techniques, nor of tools for their analysis will be found in this issue. These questions are the subject of many general works about qualitative methodology to which researchers in gerontology also refer (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1990; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Spradley, 1979; Bertaux, 1981; Ferrarotti, 1983).

This collection does not represent a concerted plea for the use of qualitative methods, although the enthusiasm of certain authors might well be contagious. What will be found are examples of the use of qualitative methods which should stimulate our thinking, enabling us to see the possibilities and the limitations of these methods as well as their pertinence to areas of study in the field of aging. Too often we have witnessed a "dialogue of the deaf" between defenders and attackers of the "qualitative" who insist on comparing apples and oranges, although the urgent need is to define the specific contribution of different methods to the production of knowledge about aging.

By way of introduction, we will briefly describe a few characteristics of qualitative methods as well as the circumstances in which they are most often used. We will then describe how the emergence of the humanities and, more generally, the change of paradigm have favoured the use of qualitative methods in the field of aging. Finally, we will describe the relationship that can be established between paradigm, research topic and method. We will conclude with a brief presentation of the articles which make up this special issue.

Characteristics and uses of Qualitative Methods

What are qualitative methods? It is tempting to say that the simplest and most general characteristic is that they work with words rather than numbers. More precisely, any method that does not primarily use statistics or attempt to measure relationships between variables is qualitative. This definition is minimalist; all the elements of a specific paradigm could be listed in order to define the "qualitative". In this case we would speak less of "method" than of "perspective" or simply of "qualitative research". For example, Reinharz and Rowles (1988, pp. 3–33) presented in a few masterful pages the characteristics of "qualitative gerontology," the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research, various forms of qualitative research as well as the specific questions raised by this method with regard to its use with seniors.

We recommend that the reader refer to the publication by Reinharz and Rowles. We will mention only briefly the objectives of this method and the kind of results it achieves. The principal objective is the *analysis of the mean-*

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ing of the experience of individuals, captured in its "lived" form, with a minimum of preplanned, imposed structure. It requires using the meaning of experience relative to aging to acquire broader knowledge, resulting in an analysis based on theoretically and empirically grounded descriptions (Reinharz & Rowles, 1988, p. 6).

In order to ensure the collection of data which will provide the necessary base for analysis of the meaning, the researcher adopts certain rules during the gathering of information. He or she proceeds by direct personal contact with the individuals and the environments that are being studied. Behaviour, attitudes and beliefs are considered, not as separate entities, but as interacting and inscribed in a specific context. Finally, the researcher recognizes him/herself as being an integral part of the particular condition being studied and includes his/her own experience as part of the research data. This procedure results in a particular kind of data, considered as being the "text" of the encounter that transcends the experience of the participants (the researcher and the informant) (see Reinharz & Rowles, 1988, p. 7).

Under which circumstances is this approach used by researchers? Most authors justify the use of qualitative methods by one or the other of the following rationalizations:

– Practical limitations can make it difficult or even impossible to gather information with tools using pre-established categories (access to information);

– The plan of a research project and the appraisal of the importance of its findings necessitate the use of information about space and time in which the condition studied evolves, and this information is often qualitative (the context);

– The degree of understanding about a specific subject of research can require that qualitative methods be used in order to single out pertinent categories during the exploratory stages of research (the validation of categories);

– Different interpretations of the results of quantitative research can sometimes be arbitrated with the help of qualitative procedures (the verification of results – the validation of inferences);

– Recognition, over and above observable behaviour, of the interpretations given by the participants, implies qualitative methods (the meaning);

– Finally, the information about a symbolic reality constructed in vivo between participants is obtained by qualitative methods (the interactive construction).

These practices reveal the conception that researchers have of qualitative methods, and their linkage to quantitative methods. The more the methods are considered as autonomous of ontological and epistemological assumptions, the more their combination in one study becomes plausible, and vice versa. The idea that the "qualitative" and the "quantitative" can be substituted for each other in order to get the same results has been abandoned (Pirès, 1987). Today these methods are considered instead to be "complementary," in that they produce knowledge that is different and irre-

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ducible that can at the same time clarify different dimensions of one observable fact. It is in this way that one can make use of the triangulation of methods (Reinharz & Rowles, 1988, p. 15), while at the same time recognizing the theoretical limitations inherent to each (Pirès, 1987). Meanwhile, the more the research topic is developed based on the theoretical plan, the more it determines the choice of method of study. The link between theory and method is a question to which we will return.

The Humanities and the Change of Paradigm

What makes qualitative methods so popular? In our opinion, this popularity is linked to two important developments which have marked the study of aging: the very active interest in aging which is shown within certain disciplines in the humanities; and the new strength acquired by the "critical" and "constructivist" paradigms.

In fact, it is for the most part the work of anthropologists, as well as historians and some geographers, which has made qualitative methods popular again. These disciplines have always used these methods in the study of aging. As Reinharz and Rowles (1988: 13) have noted, these are traditional methods that have produced "the most powerful images we have to draw on to understand aging" but it seems as if each generation of researchers has to rediscover them. More recently, with the "Humanities" arriving on the scene, (see Cole, Van Tassel & Kastenbaum, 1992; Cole, Achenbaum, Jakobi & Kastenbaum, 1993; Kenyon, Birren & Schroots, 1991; Cole, 1992) North American researchers have been confronted with questions and procedures which had remained marginal in the field of aging. In Europe traditions are different, and this type of work has been part of the gerontological picture for a long time without being dominant (Philibert, 1968; Rosenmayr, 1983).

The Humanities have been involved heavily in the field of aging. This has introduced a new emphasis on the "qualitative" and has again raised *research questions* to which the dominant practitioners of the gerontological field had paid little attention. In simple terms, the understanding of the *aging experience*, (the particular expression of social conditioning and the unique reconstruction of meaning in the thread of personal history) is known to be indispensable to the understanding of the phenomenon of aging in its entirety. In our opinion this is one of the repercussions, in the study of aging, of the "paradigmatic shift"[1] which affects all scientific research. Here are a few examples.

We are no longer looking for universal laws explaining aging. Biological or social determinism has been replaced by a perspective that takes into account cultural, historical, even spatial *contingencies*. It is the "veto of the ethnograph" (Keith, 1990), of the historian (Laslett, 1985) and of the geographer (Rowles, 1978) which obliges researchers to integrate into their work the data of the "context". One more step and we will have to take into account individual contingencies (human freedom), seeking configurations and type-structures in the facts learned from personal experience.

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From this perspective we observe the phenomenon of aging without any illusion of absolute objectivity. The *subjectivity* of the researcher "contaminates" this observation and, instead of denying it, we ask ourselves how to use it and at the same time preserve the specificity of the scientific work in relation to the journalistic discussion or artistic creation. This "contamination" can be perceived in the following manner. All the facts are influenced by the theory through which we observe them. And as all theory is a mental exercise, it reflects the language and the value system of those who have formulated it. The language and the values affect the whole research process; from the choice of the object of research to the interpretation of the results and to the recommendations made, as well as the choice of paradigm, the instruments and the method of analysis. It is, therefore, necessary to ask oneself which language and whose values will predominate. If the results of a research project can vary according to the value system adopted, then the choice of one value system in particular tends to liberate and empower certain people, while it can oppress and disempower others. Research then becomes a *political act* (Guba, 1990, p. 24).

This is recognized by the tenets of "critical gerontology"[2] in which we can recognize two groups. The first adopts a preferential option for groups and persons who are dominated in our society, by "focussing" on the symbolic and institutional construction of old age and of aging as forms of social classification and sources of inequality. We are referring here to studies in "the political economy of aging". A new book has just been published in this area (Minkler & Estes, 1991). We are also referring to research on women and aging (Baines & Neysmith, 1991; Abel, 1991) which goes further than the preoccupation of "context" alone, to delve into the question of social relations. The second group, influenced by the viewpoints of philosophy, literature and history, regards the dominant values concerning aging and death as fundamental facts of the symbolic universe and of the identity of a society. One might consider that the work of the Humanities subscribes to this way of thinking (Moody, 1988; Kenyon, 1988: Manheimer, 1992; Cole et al., 1993), in criticizing, for example, the idea that human development is unilinear and aimed towards a goal which the approach of the "life course" tends to imply.

If research is so dependent on values, we can understand why practitioners and seniors ask researchers to work *with* and not *on* the individuals being studied (participatory research) and to treat more openly questions of ethics linked to research. The researcher is thus required to invite the individuals to express themselves in their own words. The researcher should then work in the same language in order to obtain more precise information from the individual, at the same time satisfying ethical requirements by taking into account value systems other than his or her own.

All of this leads us to consider scientific investigation as a labour of *interpretation*, a series of successive "translations" of the information and the concepts of one language into another, while ensuring the preservation of the greatest possible precision of meaning.[3] It is a delicate job strewn with

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difficulties, especially since it concerns a subject which raises fundamental questions about human life – aging, death – in a situation where those factors are ignored, or even denied, because they seem incompatible with the dominant aspirations of growth and development. In this context, the fact that the personal experience of the researcher is considered to be research data seems to have significant implications.

Paradigm, Research Topic and Methods

It seems that the methodological traditions of the Humanities, along with the debate about paradigms, should have created favourable conditions for the use of qualitative methods in the field of aging. When the paradigms are invoked, it is necessary to avoid hasty conclusions about the existence of an obligatory link between the ontological or epistemological assumptions and the research methods. These assumptions mark instead the choice of the *research question*. For example, from the perspective of a constructivist paradigm, one would be less interested in knowing the physical space and the perception that the senior has of it as separate entities. One will try instead to establish how seniors construct their personal space and this construction, being at the same time contingent and changing, will not necessarily assume the configuration of the physical space. The concern is no longer with space but with spatiality. Murphy and Longino (1992) expertly demonstrate this reformulation of traditional research topics, such as the relationship of the senior to space, time, to his/her body and to his/her mental faculties. They also note the resulting transformation of these categories: space vs. spatiality, time vs. temporality, body vs. embodiment, brain vs. mind. Meanwhile, it is the *theoretical construction* of these reformulated questions that demands the use of certain methods – as inversely, the use of certain methods determines the theoretical construction (Schaie, 1988).

The use of qualitative methods is, therefore, directly linked to the research topic and to its theoretical construction. In the field of aging, a difficulty similar to those encountered in other fields always arises: the progress of conceptual work and of theoretical construction is much slower than the accumulation of empirical data. To amass data is to respond like the man who is searching for his keys under a street lamp: "Is this where you lost your keys?" – "No, but it is much easier to look for them here."

In this way, qualitative procedures can certainly help to specify and diversify the empirical data collected in order to answer questions that are defined in accordance with quantitative methods. One may ask what is the point of producing "more of the same" (Murphy & Longino, 1992), when the principal contribution of the qualitative methods rests in the fact that they can clarify different questions and allow their theoretical construction in establishing *the frame and the sense of the studied phenomenon* (a phenomenon that is possibly measurable, or can become so). We think that the qualitative procedures can make way for an in-depth description (which Geertz, 1973, would call "thick description") shaped by theory, a description

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which is itself at the foundation of all knowledge. In addition, they can contribute to theoretical construction through the elaboration, by analytical induction, of qualitative models in accordance with Granger's (1982) conception, grounded in empirical reality. In this sense, "good" qualitative research describes a phenomenon precisely (precision here not being any exact measure of quantity, but the accurate expression of the meaning), and aims, immediately or in the future, to develop a conceptual model.

The crucial question remains. Why, and for whom do we work? In the words of Guba (1990): "Whose side are we on?" Many researchers turn to the qualitative with the idea that qualitative methods contribute to "changing something in the world," through improving the lot of seniors. "Missionaries" are numerous in a field divided by those aiming toward the "empowerment" of the aged on one hand, and by planners aiming for a better social management of "the problems of aging," on the other. The research question, the theory for its study, and the milieu in which it is studied will be chosen, consciously or not, in accordance with this mission. Altogether too often, we will be content to re-use the categories established by some prestigious research, because it represents the Science which defines the problem and specifies the treatise and the practice. However, for those who wish to bring about change, it is essential to work at *revising the categories* themselves, which implies a more comprehensive conceptualization and a questioning of accepted ideas. For example, as researchers have questioned the categories that deal with man/woman relationships or North/South relationships, it is possible to question the categories that define aging and the relationships between age groups. Conceptual and theoretical work not only responds to scientific needs but to political necessity.

We will end the introduction here, in the hope that the complexity of the question has been demonstrated. We hope, also, that we have uncovered some underlying threads in the quest for "new" methodological tools, "alternatives" to the tools most often used in gerontology. The foregoing attests to a recurring and irritating fact: that the study of qualitative methods rarely stays within the parameters of research procedures, but tends to spread out into questions of theory, epistemology, paradigm and ethics. The contributions to this issue reflect this state of affairs. It seems to us that it is important not to limit discussion, but to develop it with the usual discipline that scientific work requires.

The Articles

Why should we use qualitative methods to study aging? Each of the articles in this issue tackles important aspects of the "qualitative" in its own way. We shall describe them briefly, underlining points which, in our opinion, are important to this discussion.

Andrew Achenbaum shows us that the "qualitative" is not something new in gerontology. On the contrary, for a long time, research on aging has participated in two different worlds (science and philosophy, the measure and

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the meaning) which come together only with difficulty. He asks himself how these two worlds link up in the personal life of the researcher. Examination of the autobiographies of several eminent scientists suggests that their perception of aging evolves with time and is the object of constant re-interpretation. The autobiography would thus be a useful exercise which would permit the researcher to ask better questions and to better appreciate the characteristics of "qualitative". It seems that many researchers continue to be hesitant about recognizing their personal experience as "data" – is this because the translation of personal experience to gerontological knowledge is not that simple (Houle, 1986)? Or, because the analysis procedures are not explicit?

Sarah Matthews notes that certain research topics are difficult to study using current quantitative procedures. She considers, for example, that family support of seniors would be better understood as the result of an interactive system in a family rather than as the sum of the individual efforts of its members. Thus, according to Matthews, it is this last formula which dominates, researchers having the tendency to define their research topic in accordance with available data (e.g., national surveys). Consequently, certain questions are never asked and certain populations never studied. The conditions under which aging is studied in certain groups appear, in fact, to be difficult (see Matsuoka, in this issue). Furthermore, Matthews worries about the fact that, too often, the degree of statistical significance stands for the interpretation of results. She feels that the weak codification of analytical qualitative procedures becomes an advantage because the researcher is forced to think and carry out conceptual analysis on a constant basis.

Marie Beaulieu is interested in the perceptions of the managerial staff of seniors' residences regarding the abuse of seniors, and in the meaning they give to their own behaviour in this regard. The qualitative approach is reputed to be particularly productive in the study of these perceptions and the drawing out of meaning for stated procedures. The author discusses the possibilities and the limitations of the qualitative procedures she has used. She insists on the fact that her choices stem as much from the epistemological and theoretical positions that she has adopted as from the topic studied itself. This approaches the paradigmatic argument that Levy discusses (Ron Levy, this issue).

Joan Norris shows how the triangulation of methods brings new zest to a much studied subject such as retirement. This is done by introducing questions about the meaning of behaviours and by using qualitative procedures (topical life stories) for gathering information. A group of professionals of retirement age (some still working and others having retired) reveal themselves to be fairly homogeneous in regard to different measures (quantitative) of psycho-social adaptation. Meanings attributed to work experiences vary among people and thus influence their reaction to retirement, as well as their decisions related thereto. So the triangulation of methods, while not providing data on the same theoretical object, casts light on various dimen-

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sions of the same empirical phenomenon in a convincing manner.

Joseph Tindale uses participant observation in order to study the process of the formation of a group identity among seniors during the organization of a "search conference". While describing the progress of work in the field, he shows the ambiguity of the status of the observer, as well as the possibilities and the limitations of information gathered in this manner. He estimates that participant observation allows not only a description of group dynamics, but also an evaluation of the result in accordance with objectives specified in advance.

Atsuko Matsuoka discusses the problems of access to information in populations of ethnic and cultural minorities. These populations often have oral traditions, which are resistant not only to written questionnaires, but also to the types of direct questioning on which many of our data gathering methods rely. In these groups discourse is closely linked to the context and cannot be understood except in context (high-context groups), so that the essential often remains unsaid. In such cases one must proceed by interview and by observation, which entails problems not only of cultural interpretation but also of literal translation between the language of the researcher and that of the informant. The author presents various interview scenarios to overcome these problems. All are labour intensive and, therefore, somewhat expensive, with the result that this kind of research is rather rare, and available information about these groups remains rudimentary.

Finally, there are two essays written in a more polemic tone by authors who, based on their experience as "quantitative researchers," have a specific interest in the qualitative. They both question the relationship between scientific work and the researcher's values. Levy wonders why belief systems or the ontological and epistemological assumptions are very often ignored when, in fact, they constitute the basis from which the researcher works. The discussions about methods resemble a partition hiding opposing beliefs – reflected in the "paradigm dialogue" which will continue to occupy us for a long time.

Warren Thorngate believes that the researcher who cannot shake off his beliefs, even for a moment, should still take them into account when handling the results of his research; especially in the way in which he disseminates his results. The use that society makes of a piece of research depends not only on the contents of the work but also – and more than we would generally like to admit – on the form in which it is presented. The "qualitative" form lends itself better to communication and could, because of this, be more efficient in bringing about changes. These considerations raise the question of the scientific value of research, especially of qualitative research about which there is so little consensus as to criteria. How can the value of a research project be measured? To the extent that it respects the rules of a research method (where there are rules) and makes as explicit as possible the presuppositions and the choices which characterize it, in order to be appreciated in its relative truth? Or because it stimulates change in the perception and social management of the topic studied? Each of the research

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methods requires rigorous thought and creative imagination in our work, whether it be qualitative or quantitative. It is hoped that this issue will provide an opportunity for each of us to reflect on our own work.

Verena Haldemann

Notes

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1 We point out that following Guba (1990), we use the term "paradigm" to denote a set of beliefs and positions that guide action. In this instance, we are speaking of beliefs that guide the scientific investigation of a community of researchers. This paradigm emerges from the answers (by definition impossible to prove) that the researcher gives to three basic questions, which are ontological, epistemological and methodological. (1) ontological: What can we know? What is the nature of "reality"? (2) epistemological: What is the relationship between the researcher and what he wants to know? (3) methodological: How must the researcher proceed in order to arrive at the knowledge? The answers to these questions constitute assumptions which determine what scientific investigation is and how it must be practised.

2 In the introduction to the publication *Voices and Visions on Aging: Towards a Critical Gerontology* (Cole et al., 1993), Moody presents his vision of critical gerontology, linking it to the tradition of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. In this perspective, which implies criticism of the instrumental reason itself, the aim of critical gerontology would be to expose the link between knowledge and domination, as well as to construct, with the goal of emancipation, a vision of aging and old age which takes into account the question of finalities, of values and of meaning in human life. (See the statement of fundamentals and of the critical gerontology agenda by Moody, in Cole et al., 1993, pp. xv–xli.)

3 This interpretation constantly goes back and forth and involves at least three languages: that of the informer (who expresses his experience in simple, commonsense terms), that of theory (which furnishes starting concepts which tend to influence the formulation of results), and that of the researcher (who records the information in his/her language and constructs categories at different levels of abstraction).

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