Application of Qualitative Research Methodology for Developing Social Work Practice Models

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This article highlights the need to develop practice models in the field of social work, so as to contribute to the overall development of social work knowledge. It is based on the assumption that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies rest on separate epistemological positions, which result in different goals of social research, as well as in divergence with regard to the manner in which the two methodologies pursue social knowledge. The article also recognises the significant role of qualitative research methodology in developing social work practice models based on empirical research, and discusses the nature of research design decisions required of this methodology. The essential features of qualitative research methodology, resulting from its epistemology, are first presented, so as to subsequently reflect on the essentially emergent nature of qualitative research design decisions, and their application to the development of social work practice models. Prior to discussing the nature of qualitative research design decisions, this paper examines the essential features of qualitative research methodology, and outlines the nature of its contribution to knowledge development.

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INTRODUCTION

This article highlights the need to develop practice models in the field of social work, so as to contribute to the overall development of social work knowledge. It recognises the significant role of qualitative research methodology in developing social work practice models based on empirical research, and discusses the nature of research design decisions required of this methodology. The essential features of qualitative research methodology, resulting from its epistemology, are first presented, so as to subsequently reflect on the essentially emergent nature of qualitative research design decisions, and their application

to the development of social work practice models. The specific nature of research design decisions, along with examples, are examined in relation to each stage of the qualitative research process.

- developing the initial conceptualisation of the research concern pertaining the practice area focused upon,
- selecting the research setting and the researched,
- choosing data collection methods, and
- selecting and developing approaches and procedures for analysis to arrive at the concluding conceptualisation of the resulting empirically developed practice model.

This paper concludes with a discussion on the scope of social work practice models developed empirically within the framework of qualitative research methodology.

NEED TO DEVELOP SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE MODELS

Those in the field of social work are continuously confronted with complexities within their specific areas of practice. These complexities result from several factors. Collectively, social work practitioners in India work in a variety of field situations, characterised by divergence in terms of the

- constituencies in whose interests they work, which are typically segmented in a variety of ways: for example, a constituency may be perceived as an individual, or a community, or even as a particular vulnerable and marginalised group to which the individual/community belongs; alternatively, a constituency may be perceived as a particular issue of concern (environment, education, availability of basic amenities, etc.);
- wide range of ideological approaches adopted for problem-solving and social change, and the micro/macro levels at which the change-efforts are directed;
- multiple types of interventions used; and
- several other groups and constituencies, as well as the socio-political environment intervened with in order to benefit the particular constituency of concern.

All the above-stated factors interact together to create specific contexts of social work practice, each with its own unique features. At present, many of these contexts of social work practice are still in the stage of exploration in India, as the problems/issues addressed are, in themselves, large and complex. Complexities in social work practice are further compounded as the process of conceptualising the problems/

issues addressed is largely interwoven with the process of problem-solving, that is, as social work practice intervenes in its areas of concern, it further specifies and even expands its conceptualisations of these areas of concern. Further, the multi-disciplinary nature of social work knowledge contributes to the complexity in its practice. Often, problem-solving efforts result from attempts to integrate and contextualise diverse social science theories with knowledge derived from practice experiences. All these complexities, inherent in social work practice in India are reflected equally within social work education, with the result that the social work profession in India is still struggling to define itself.

Over the years, through cumulative experiences, social work practitioners have developed conceptualisations, which guide their work within their particular contexts of field practice. These conceptualisations pertain to both the problems/issues they address, as well as the interventions they use to bring about change. These practice-based conceptualisations may be termed as practice 'wisdom', as they are in the nature of loosely-held guiding principles, which result directly from practice experiences. Unfortunately, such practice wisdom has largely not found its way into the formal body of social work knowledge. It is only when practice wisdom is located within, and integrated with the formal body of social work knowledge that it is transmitted through education and extension training to social work practitioners working in other contexts, and to future generations of social workers. The development and dissemination of practice-based knowledge, and its integration into the formal body of social work knowledge is required for the vibrant and cumulative growth of the field of social work.

For practice wisdom to be assimilated into the formal body of social work knowledge, experiences pertaining to a specific, localised field situation need to be conceptually integrated with other such situations to develop a practice model applicable to a class of similarly defined field situations, which symbolise a context of social work practice. For example, in the context of social work practice pertaining to disaster management, practice wisdom can be found in the work of a particular agency working on a specific disaster management programme. However, a practice model on disaster management has the potential to be applicable to multiple agencies working on the management of various types of disasters. Thus, the development of practice models requires that empirical experiences

pertaining to a context of social work practice are conceptualised, viewed as a dynamic process, and integrated analytically with the existing knowledge.

There is a need to formulate empirically-based practice models for social work (Grasso and Epstein, 1992), as they contribute towards the development of formal theories rooted in social work practice. Practice models have the potential to enrich academic theories drawn from the various social science disciplines, which are utilised in the field of social work, as practice models are anchored in field experiences. A theory can be perceived as an integrated network of generalisations, anticipated hypotheses, and assumptions (Hebsur, 1985). Practice models, themselves, can be perceived to be theoretical statements, which integrate assumptions, generalisations, and anticipated hypotheses in relation to the conceptualised social phenomenon, the interventions used, and their outcomes within a specified context of practice. Research plays an essential and integral role in the development of such practice models (Grasso and Epstein, 1992). However, it is recognised that, in fact, there continues to be a gap between practice and research in the field of social work (Riessman, 1994). Research findings are seldom used to either conceptualise problem areas, or to select interventions, or to evaluate them.

Historically, social work, like the various social science disciplines, has relied on structured, pre-determined research designs, which are today classified as belonging to the 'quantitative methodology of research'. Over the last 35 years or so, the various social science disciplines and allied fields, such as social work, and the management sciences, have recognised the growth of an alternative, and evolving paradigm of research, namely 'qualitative research methodology' (Bryman, 1989; Das, 1983; Morey and Luthans, 1984; Van Maanen, 1982). The historical development of qualitative research methodology has witnessed polarised arguments about the relative value of each type of methodology, that is, qualitative and quantitative (Crompton and Jones, 1988; Das, 1983; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Miles, 1979; Reissman, 1994; Turner, 1988; Van Maanen, 1982). It is not the purpose of this article to focus on these polarised arguments. This article rests on the assumption that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies rest on separate epistemological positions, which result in different goals of social research, as well as in divergence with regard to the manner in which the two methodologies pursue social knowledge (Bryman, 1988b; Leininger, 1994). In brief,

qualitative research methodology is primarily directed towards the goal of exploration and theory generation, while quantitative research methodology is primarily directed towards the confirmation of pre-formulated theory. Further, the epistemology of each methodology indicates the philosophic assumptions made with regard to the relationship between the researcher and the known, as well as assumptions pertaining to the nature of knowledge about the social world (Bryman, 1988b; Gould, 1999). The epistemological position held shapes methodology by explicating the manner in which the social world can be known, or studied.

It is necessary to recognise epistemological differences in qualitative and quantitative methodologies in order to prevent errors in their usage. For example, every research endeavour should reflect a correspondence between the epistemological position held, and the specific research methods used. Each type of methodology offers a variety of specific research methods, which are based on its unique epistemology. Therefore, it must be recognised that the decision to mix research methods across the two methodologies *within the same research endeavour* essentially disregards the intent and philosophic assumptions of each methodology (Leininger, 1994). Further, recognition of the divergent epistemological roots of the two methodologies is needed to prevent errors expressed during research-related discussions which occur outside the realm of pure academics. One such common error is that the terms 'qualitative research' and 'qualitative data' have, at times, been used interchangeably. This is a serious error as 'qualitative research' represents a distinct methodology, while 'qualitative data' may be collected within the framework of either qualitative research, or quantitative research. The same misconception exists with regard to the terms 'quantitative research', and 'quantitative data'.

Thus, it is crucial to recognise that qualitative and quantitative methodologies present two distinct approaches to social inquiry. Further, in addition to pursuing different goals of social research, each of these two types of methodologies offers its own characteristic approach towards arriving at research design decisions for a particular research endeavour. Qualitative research methodology emphasises the need to view research design decisions as dynamic and emergent, to suit the needs of the evolving conceptualisation of the research concern. Viewing qualitative research designs as being essentially emergent in nature is a significant departure from the conventional view of

research designs within quantitative methodology, which views them as blueprints, wherein research design decisions are finalised prior to the implementation of a particular study. Prior to discussing the nature of qualitative research design decisions, this paper examines the essential features of qualitative research methodology, and outlines the nature of its contribution to knowledge development. This is necessary so as to locate the essentially emergent nature of qualitative research methodology to empirically formulate social work practice models, and thereby contribute to the development of social work knowledge. While discussing the essential features of qualitative methodology, key differences between the qualitative and quantitative methodologies have been briefly referred to wherever necessary.

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology encompasses a family of research methods based on an interpretive, non-positivist approach to the study of social phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The interpretive approach does not take for granted an external, fixed world of social phenomena, and instead, it examines the processes by which the social world is constructed by its social actors. The interpretive approach is in the contrast to the positivist, natural science approach underlying quantitative methodology (Bryman, 1988b; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Quantitative methodology tends to view social reality as external to social actors, and thus, it views social reality as an object of study. On the other hand, the interpretive position inherent in qualitative methodology focuses on discovering the processes by which social actors perceive, give meaning to, and enact social phenomena.

A variety of rich intellectual streams have contributed to the development of qualitative methodology as a distinctive approach to inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Though some differences exist between these streams of philosophic thought, which contribute to qualitative methodology, it is important to recognise that all the streams adopt an interpretive position with regard to social inquiry. A level of integration across the various streams has occurred in the field of qualitative methodology, whereby this approach to social inquiry can be described in terms of its essential, characteristic features, which also distinguish it from quantitative methodology. Six key features characterise qualitative methodology. Each of these six

characteristics is related to the others, and they are built on paradigmatic assumptions, which set them apart from quantitative methodology. Thus, it is necessary to view these six characteristics in totality, rather than individually so as to assess the scope of qualitative methodology. Each of these six characteristics is outlined below.

The first characteristic of qualitative methodology refers to its focus on uncovering the meaning of the phenomenon being studied (Crompton and Jones, 1988; Dabbs, 1982; Das, 1983; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Morse, 1998c; Van Maanen, 1979a). Qualitative methodology seeks to do this by describing the phenomenon of interest in a holistic manner and by locating it within its context (Bryman, 1988b; Cassell and Symon, 1994; Denzin and Lingoln, 1998; Leininger, 1994; Morse, 1992; Noblit and Engel, 1992; Padgett, 1998). This holistic search for meaning seeks 'thick descriptions' (Gilgun, 1992) which not only provides detailed descriptions, but serves to convey a complex network of processes by which meaning is created and enacted by multiple actors (Downey and Ireland, 1979). The search for contextualised holistic meaning results in understanding a phenomenon in its entirety from the viewpoint of multiple perceptions. This emphasises the need to place individual actions, events, behaviours and perceptions within the frame of a larger social and historical context. In this way, qualitative methodology seeks an interpretive, understanding of human experience, and the socially constructed nature of reality, as well as an understanding of the situational factors that shape inquiry. It is necessary to emphasise that the term 'context' is not used in a limited sense in qualitative methodology. Contexts are viewed as layered influences, which shape the phenomenon of interest. This characteristic of qualitative methodology leads to an ideographic approach to analysis, wherein meaning is understood within the boundaries created by defining both the space and time within which the phenomenon is located. In contrast, quantitative methodology emphasises the measurement of a phenomenon, and its frequency of occurrence. Analysis in quantitative methodology is focused on identifying causal relationships between selected variables, which are usually viewed as de-linked from other variables in their contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Such analysis is monothetic in nature, which seeks to establish findings applicable outside the frame of particular contexts. The ideographic context-specific approach, inherent in qualitative methodology, facilitates the dynamic study of processes.

The second characteristic of qualitative methodology aims to reduce distance between field data and theory by not starting a study with a rigid, tightly structured, *a priori* framework. Instead, it aims at evolving a theoretical framework as a result of the study (Bryman, 1988b; Cassell and Symon, 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Gilgun, 1992; Jauch, Osborn, and Martin, 1980; Lincoln, 1985; Miles, 1979; Morse, 1992; 1997b; Padgett, 1998; Turner, 1983; Van Maanen, 1979a). Qualitative methodology is inductive in nature, which permits empirical data to shape emerging concepts and theories. In order to develop theories rooted, or grounded in data, there is minimal use of pre-formulated analytical labels and hypotheses. Some qualitative researchers do advocate the use of semi-structured conceptual frameworks to initiate the search process, but they emphasise that these are held tentatively and are continuously revised during data collection and analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). However, the dominant view within qualitative methodology is that structured *a priori* frameworks are likely to constrain the generation of insights, and result in findings, which exhibit an incomplete fit with the phenomenon being studied. Hence, qualitative methodology advocates that the research process should emphasise the inductive development of theories based on field observations. In contrast, in quantitative methodology, pre-formulated concepts and theories are usually the starting point for inquiry (Bryman, 1988b).

The third characteristic of qualitative methodology is related to the first two as it is directed towards developing an emic (insider) perspective, that is, an understanding of meaning, from the perspective of the researched (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Morse, 1992; Padgett, 1998). Thus, this third characteristic aims to reduce the distance between the researcher and the researched (Cassell and Symon, 1994; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Miles, 1987; Mintzberg, 1979; Van Maanen, 1979a; 1982; Walizer and Wienir, 1978). Qualitative methodology is used in naturalistic settings so as to link observations to the context of the phenomenon being studied (Cassell and Symon, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Padgett, 1998). The researcher is required to engage with the research setting intensely, for a prolonged period of time, and to enter into an active dialogue with the researched, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest from the view of multiple perspectives, and develop contextually relevant findings. The expected role of the researched is that they should be proactive in terms of defining their key issues in relation to the study.

Thus, the qualitative research process emphasises the need to be transparent, and there is recognition that the research, itself, is a social process, influenced by the choices and decisions made (Casell and Symon, 1994). Underscoring the third characteristic is the acceptance of the inherent subjectivity of all social processes, including the research process. The argument here is that the search for objectivity is largely misguided given multiple stakeholder perspectives, and it is these varying perspectives and interpretations which are of value in understanding behaviour. Thus, the researcher needs to actively consider the reflexive character of the research process (Cassell and Symon, 1994). In contrast, quantitative methodology adopts an etic (outsider) perspective, where the researcher looks in on the social world being studied (Bryman, 1988b). On the other hand, qualitative researchers attempt to become insiders to the experiences of the researched.

The fourth characteristic refers to the fact that qualitative methodology typically results in data that are open-ended and descriptive (Das, 1983; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Mintzberg, 1979; Van Maanen, 1982), as is implied by the absence of rigid, structured, *^priori* frameworks. The purpose of description is to disclose the concepts and complex patterns of relationships between the concepts observed, and to explain why things happen as they do. Qualitative methodology views social reality in processual terms, and thus, focuses on the interlinkages between events, behaviours, perceptions, and actions (Bryman, 1988b). From this perspective, qualitative methodology also explores the interpretations of those researched with regard to the factors that result in such interconnections. In contrast, quantitative methodology tends to view social reality in static terms (Bryman, 1988b).

The fifth characteristic of qualitative methodology refers to its tendency to access multiple sources of data, which may require the use of multiple methods of data collection (Cassell and Symon, 1994; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Padgett, 1998; Sanday, 1979; Van Maanen, 1982; Walizer and Wienir, 1978). For example, qualitative studies may use multiple methods to gather data from varied sources, such as individual or group interviews, content analysis of documents, and through observation. Accessing multiple sources of data by using multiple qualitative methods within the larger frame of qualitative methodology serves the purpose of triangulation. The concept of triangulation within a single qualitative study refers to the

convergence of multiple perspectives that can strengthen research findings by presenting a comprehensive picture of complex social processes involving multiple stakeholders (Cassell and Symon, 1994; Padgett, 1998).

The sixth characteristic of qualitative methodology highlights that it is not a neat and sequential research process, as it needs to be responsive to the continuously identified situations and circumstances in the field setting (Bresnen, 1988; Mintzberg, 1979; Popay, Rogers, and Williams, 1998; Vas Maanen, 1983). The research process inherent in qualitative methodology is characterised by the interweaving of data collection, analysis, and the emergent conceptualisation (Bresnen, 1988; Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles, 1979; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Turner, 1998; Van Maanen, 1979a). Thus, this characteristic emphasises the open, unstructured, flexible, and iterative research process of qualitative methodology, where emergent conceptualisations are modified and refined during overlapping data collection and analysis (Bryman, 1988b; Cassell and Symon, 1994; Noblit and Engel, 1992; Padgett, 1998). Many analytical decisions (such as what specific lines of inquiry should be pursued) are made by the researcher in the research setting during data collection. Additionally, as analysis proceeds, the tentative findings are checked, modified and confirmed in the field setting. The qualitative research process enhances the possibility of encountering the unexpected and unanticipated domains of inquiry related to the phenomenon being studied, and also facilitates appropriate responses to changes required in the research strategy as it unfolds. In contrast, the quantitative research process in structured, sequential and pre-planned.

The six essential features, which characterise qualitative research methodology, provide the framework within which research design decisions are made in qualitative studies. The nature of qualitative research design decisions are also indicative of the iterative, and responsive process of research in qualitative studies, which have the potential to develop social work practice models. These are discussed below.

THE NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN DECISIONS

Within the framework of qualitative research methodology, research design decisions are made on the basis of heuristics, or guidelines, which provide direction to the research process. The qualitative

research process is iterative and flexible in nature because qualitative research design decisions evolve during the research process, and they are not rigidly-held *a priori* blueprints of decisions. The interactive, flexible qualitative research process facilitates the development of empirically relevant concepts and their interrelationships, so as to generate theories anchored in data. The nature of qualitative research design decisions are examined below in relation to the four key stages of the research process, namely:

- conceptualising the research concern,
- selecting the researched,
- selecting the mix of data collecting methods, as well as shaping the process of data collection, and
- selecting and developing procedures for analysis to facilitate the development of field-based practice models.

Since qualitative research design decisions are not pre-determined blueprints, and instead, take shape during the research process, it is necessary for qualitative studies to make the research process transparent by explicating not only the content of decisions, but also the process resulting in these decisions.

Conceptualising the Research Concern

Qualitative researchers unanimously agree that the strength of qualitative studies is derived from the fact that they do not begin with structured, rigidly-held *a priori* conceptualisations of their research concerns, or subjects of study (Bryman, 1988b; Creswell, 1998). However, contemporary debate within qualitative research methodology does address the issue pertaining to whether or not qualitative studies should make explicit their *a priori* conceptualisations, even if these are unstructured and tentative in nature (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

It is necessary to recognise that all research endeavours begin with some *a priori* conceptualisations, which are either implicitly held, or explicitly stated. Even if a research starts without an explicitly stated conceptualisation, the implicitly held conceptualisation influences the nature of research inquiry (Hebsur, 1985). Thus, both implicit and explicit conceptualisations guide the search for data, the manner in which concepts are identified, and the nature of interrelationships between concepts. The epistemology of qualitative research methodology recognises that construction of meaning of the social world, as well as the labels used to describe it, result from selective perception

of experiences (Gould, 1999; Reissman, 1994). It is crucial to recognise that this applies not only to how the researched ascribe meaning to social phenomenon, but also to how researchers conceptualise their research concerns. The conceptualisation of a research concern cannot be separated from the researcher's experiences and perceptions (Mahtani, 1999). Given the above reasoning, it is suggested that *a priori* conceptualisations should be made explicit, even if they are tentative in nature. Explicitly stated *a priori* conceptualisations will make the search for data, as well as the development of concepts and their interrelationships, a transparent process.

In qualitative studies, explicitly stated *a priori* conceptualisations are unstructured, flexible, and held loosely, so as to facilitate systematic exploration of the research concern. Such *a priori* conceptualisations typically integrate available knowledge regarding the research concern, including both academic literature and field experiences. These conceptualisations comprise of concepts and the interrelationships between these concepts. At this initial stage, *a priori* concepts serve as sensitising concepts, which guide the initial search for data (Clarke, 1997). For example, Mahtani (1999) demonstrates how criteria were developed in the *a priori* conceptualisation of two studies to identify and discern strategies of NGOs. These criteria were, in fact, sensitising concepts, and they were used as heuristics to identify strategic decisions taken by the NGOs studied. Relationships between the sensitising concepts serve as lines of inquiry, which facilitate comparison of data. Qualitative research methodology recognises that the unstructured, tentatively stated *a priori* conceptualisation undergoes change as a result of data collection and analysis. In the inductive research process, analysis of data is directed towards developing the *a priori* conceptualisation into a structured, well-defined theoretical statement of field-based experiences. Thus, the concluding conceptualisation incorporates multiple stakeholder views, and integrates them holistically to represent the context of the field studied through qualitative research methodology.

Research design decisions pertaining to the *a priori* conceptualisation focus upon the extent to which it is extensive in terms of the sensitising concepts identified, and the lines of inquiry specified. As data are collected, the *a priori* conceptualisation undergoes changes to represent the data, till it emerges as a tight, structured conceptualisation of field experiences, with clearly defined concepts and their interrelationships. For example, Mahtani's (1992) study demonstrates

the manner in which the initial abstract concept of strategy was structured into 35 dimensions. It is in this sense that interaction between conceptualisation, data collection and analysis was referred to while discussing the essential features of qualitative research methodology.

Selecting the Researched: Theoretical Sampling and Saturation

The sampling process in qualitative research methodology differs significantly from the sampling process in quantitative research methodology, which uses statistical sampling. Qualitative research methodology presents an alternate perspective on sampling through the process of theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling is a systematic process in which heuristics are used to select the researched for a particular study. One mistaken view of qualitative research is that it is adequate to select 'a few' researched, without specifying the criteria used to select them. This is a serious error. Qualitative researchers recognise that the generation of theories grounded in data can only be achieved through the process of theoretical sampling and saturation (Bresnen, 1988; Bryman, 1988a; Dunkerley, 1988; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Turner, 1988). Specialised academic journals for qualitative research specify that theoretical sampling and saturation should be essential aspects of the qualitative research process (Morse, 1997b).

In contrast to statistical sampling, theoretical sampling does not permit generalisation of findings to a larger population. The issue of generalisation of findings is perceived differently in qualitative research, where it is understood in theoretical rather than statistical terms (Bresnen, 1988; Bryman, 1988a; Dunkerley, 1988; Glaser and Struss, 1967; Turner, 1988). In attempting theoretical generalisation, the researcher's efforts are directed towards ensuring that a particular set of findings completely represent the emergent field-based theory with regard to its concepts and their interrelationships. In other words, theoretical sampling attempts to ensure that the concepts discovered, as well as their interrelationships, completely represent the context of the phenomenon studied, that is, the research concern. Thus, heuristics pertaining to theoretical sampling decisions focus on obtaining divergent data to completely saturate the emergent, field-based theory. Since the concepts and their interrelationships comprising the emergent theory are shaped by empirical data, it follows that iteration occurs between the processes of theoretical sampling, data collection, and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Popay,

Rogers and Williams, 1998). Thus, the exact number of researched included within a particular qualitative study cannot be specified at the start of the study. When the emergent field-based theory is bounded, and additional data does not develop it further, then it is accepted that saturation is complete (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Until saturation occurs, the emergent theory is incomplete, and concepts and their interrelationships are not clearly formed (Morse, 1997b).

Mahtani (1999) reports on the specific steps undertaken, and the heuristics used to study the strategies of NGOs. Here, the process of theoretical sampling and saturation were followed at two levels, namely to select the NGOs, and to select the participants within each NGO. Both groups comprised the researched. Theoretical sampling aimed to maximise the differences among the NGOs included in the study so as to obtain as many dimensions of the content of strategy, as well as variations in the strategy formation process. Heuristics were developed to maximise differences in strategy among the selected NGOs, and these included divergence in terms of the:

- social/societal problems addressed;
- services offered, campaigns and programmes undertaken; and
- the constituency in whose interests they worked.

Saturation occurred when the addition of NGOs did not alter either the dimensions identified to describe the NGOs' strategies, or the emergent theory pertaining to the strategy formation process within the NGOs. A similar process was followed for theoretically sampling participants within each NGO.

Selecting Data Collection Methods

As discussed earlier in the section on the essential features of qualitative research methodology, a mix of methods is used in qualitative studies to incorporate diversity and multiple stakeholder views. Qualitative research methodology offers a variety of methods, such as narratives or oral histories, content analysis of documented data, unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Hoffman, 1996; Morgan, 1988; Morse, 1997a; Riessman, 1994; Walizer and Wienir, 1978). The scope of data collection and analysis of each method is clearly specified, as is the manner in which they are to be used. Qualitative studies need to choose a mix of methods suited to the needs of the conceptualisation of the study. Some research design decisions pertaining to choosing specific methods for a particular qualitative study are:

i) What type of data can be collected by using a specific method?
ii) What are the scope and limitations of the chosen methods in relation to the particular study, and how do they complement one another?
iii) Are the methods to be used sequentially, or simultaneously?
iv) What methods will be used with the individual researched, and what methods will be used with the researched as a group?

The answers to research design questions like those stated above, and the reasons for the same indicate the heuristics used to arrive at these dimensions.

Cross-checking of data obtained across methods is an essential component of the qualitative data collection process. Recording the data obtained is also an integral part of the qualitative data collection process. Field notes of the various methods used form the basic raw data (Bresnen, 1988; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Turner, 1988). Field notes indicate gaps in data collection, and provide direction for further lines of inquiry.

Qualitative studies (for example, Bresnen, 1988; Sanday, 1979; Van Maanen, 1982), are characterised by a responsive approach to data gathering from multiple sources. The use of such multiple sources of data enhances the validity of the findings (Snow and Hambrick, 1980) and enables the researcher to cross-check the information obtained so as to explore varying stakeholder perspectives (Sanday, 1979). The iterative research process between data collection and analysis, characterised by continuously comparing the emerging concepts and relationships with new data, facilitates the identification of discrepancies between varying interpretations (Kirk and Miller, 1986). Qualitative methodology, with its unstructured mode of data collection facilitates achieving construct and contextual validity as theoretical constructs and hypotheses, emerge from empirical observations (Das, 1983; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Miles, 1979; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Conversely, the responsive nature of data collection in qualitative studies makes it difficult to assess the reliability of the data obtained. For example, the choice of specific participants is linked to their involvement in particular events, and during interviews, the specific questions asked are linked to the nature of responses received for earlier questions. The result is that unique questions are asked of different participants.

Reliability, as understood in quantitative studies, is achieved when it is assured that the specific questions asked and the operations involved in the study can be repeated to arrive at the same findings (Kirk and Miller, 1986; Krippendorff, 1980; Scott, 1984). It has been suggested by Kirk and Miller (1986) that in qualitative studies reliability can be enhanced by describing the detailed procedures adopted so as to facilitate a repetition of these procedures. Hoffman (1996) offers another viewpoint on the issue of reliability in qualitative studies, which is defined as the consistency of responses received about the same events on a number of different occasions by the same individual. Thus, within the context of these studies, the question of reliability pertains to confirming whether the data obtained are indeed factual, and the question of validity pertains to examining the proximity between the conceptual labels used to describe the data, and the data itself.

Data collection experiences reported by Mahtani (1999) indicate that there is immense possibility by which methods can be mixed in qualitative studies to achieve triangulation within the framework of qualitative research methodology. The need to mix methods results from the recognition that research is a social process, involving various actors. A mix of methods facilitates capturing varying perspectives pertaining to the same research concern.

Selecting Procedures for Analysis

Data collection within the frame of qualitative methodology is labour-intensive, and yields a large volume of descriptive data. Analysis of such non-standardised, open-ended data calls for procedures which are in accordance with the assumptions and characteristics of qualitative methodology, and which permit exploration of meaning (that is, meaning created by varying perceptions) in their context. The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to disclose concepts and the complex patterns of their interrelationships, so as to explain why things happen as they do. Analysis in qualitative methodology is essentially interpretive in nature, and follows a set of heuristics rather than specific algorithms. Such algorithms are characteristic of the wide range of computing techniques used in quantitative data analysis.

Some qualitative researchers report descriptive data, without resorting to any type of content analysis, or interpretation of data. However, specialised academic journals on qualitative research promote

qualitative research that synthesises and interprets data to develop conceptual models or theories (Morse, 1999). This paper discusses those procedures, which are in accordance with the interpretive process of analysis in qualitative methodology, and which facilitate the development of conceptual models or theories.

Qualitative researchers recognise that analytical decisions are shaped by the initial, flexible conceptualisation of the research concern, and by the emerging conceptualisation as it is moulded by data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles, 1979; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Mintzberg, 1979; Morse, 1994). Though analysis is initiated and focused by the *a priori* conceptualisation, it is simultaneously closely interwoven with the data collection process. The close intertwining of data collection and analysis is advocated by qualitative researchers, as this serves to anchor the emerging concepts and their interrelationships in empirical data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Morse, 1994).

Iteration between data collection and analysis involves the following procedures. All information collected should be recorded in the form of field notes, which represent the raw data. If voluminous data are collected for each unit of analysis (that is, individual, family, group, community, organisation, or any system), then these varied data from multiple sources needs to be integrated into a holistic, descriptive case report for each unit of analysis, so as to facilitate analysis. The case report on each unit of analysis should be verified by the researched to whom it applies. However, Morse (1998b) disputes the necessity of this step in qualitative analysis, as she asserts that verification of data occurs continuously during the data collection process. Each piece of data gathered is cross-checked during the subsequent process of data collection. While verification of data does occur continuously during the data collection process, it is still suggested that the researched should be involved in the verification of the case reports, as these integrate raw data, which is an analytic process. In fact, the feedback received on the case reports serves to further expand the data collected (Mahtani, 1999). Hence, it is recommended that verification of data, in the form of such case reports, by the participants should be perceived as a logical and natural termination of the data collection process.

Once the case reports are completed, the, within-case analysis initiated during data collection with the raw data, is continued with the case reports. It is now possible to develop the coding categories to a

higher level of abstraction. Procedures for removing and specifying reflective remarks have been described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to enable the development of field-based concepts and their labels.

Qualitative researchers recommend that the conceptual labels used for emergent concepts should correspond closely to the terminology of the raw, narrative, descriptive data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles, 1979; Morse, 1994). As discussed earlier, concepts included in the *a priori* conceptualisation function as 'sensitising concepts' (Clarke, 1997), and during data collection, they serve to guide the search for data. During analysis, these sensitising concepts alert the researcher to promising avenues of investigation pertaining to concepts and their interrelationships. As data are collected, they are used to refine, modify, or even replace the sensitising concepts, so that the conceptual labels which emerge through inductive analysis closely match the field context studied (Mahtani, 1999). As the density of data in relation to the different concepts and their categories increases, saturation becomes visible. Linkages between various concepts are then established to identify the themes, or patterns of relationships between concepts. Emergent themes are refined and bounded at this stage.

Cross-case analysis is carried out after completion of the within-case analysis for all the units of analysis included in each study. During cross-case analysis, the concepts and themes identified during the with-case analysis for all the units of analysis are examined to ascertain the extent to which they are similar across the cases studied (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). For this purpose, coding categories need to be standardised across all the NGOs, wherever applicable, and a systematic comparison is made of the emerging themes (complex hypotheses) with evidence from each case in order to assess the extent to which it fits the data. Cases which confirm the emergent themes enhance confidence in the findings, while those which do not support the emergent themes provided insights into how the emerging theory can be modified and extended. This guiding principle in analysis in qualitative methodology has been discussed by Eisenhardt (1989) and Miles and Huberman (1994). The themes resulting from cross-case analysis are at a Sager level of abstraction as those formulated from the within-case analysis of each case. Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that the evidence and procedures used in qualitative analysis must be reported clearly so that readers may be able to judge the strength and consistency of the relationship found.

The findings resulting from the cross-case analysis should be compared with existing literature in order to identify similarities and differences. This is an essential feature in order to generalise the findings theoretically to a similar class of phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 19789; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Hubrman, 1994; Popay, Rogers and Williams, 1998; Turner, 1983).

CONCLUSION

This paper began by recognising the need to develop social work practice models, so as to contribute to the development of social work knowledge. The significant role of qualitative research methodology in developing social work practice models was also recognised. This paper now concludes by discussing the potential applicability of qualitative research methodology to empirically formulate social work practice models.

Concept development is the first, fundamental aspect of developing practice models. This involves the identification of configuration of concepts identified from field data. These configurations of concepts pertain to the analytical perspective held regarding the problem of concern and its context, as well as to the nature of interventions utilised and the range of changes effected. Further, conceptualisations of practice models need to be process-oriented, as they demonstrate the manner in which interventions are utilised to effect social change. Thus, in addition to identifying configurations of concepts, practice models also depict the inter-linkages between concepts, indicating the manner in which concepts affect each other. A third core aspect of developing practice models is the need to incorporate multiple stakeholder perceptions in relation to the problem, its context, and the change process. These three core aspects of social works practice models require that an exploratory stance is adopted to search for new knowledge applicable to a particular context of field practice.

Qualitative methodology is intrinsically suited to exploratory studies aimed at concept development, because of its unstructured, inductive, and flexible nature, and also because, it promotes greater researcher-researched interaction (Dabbs, 1982; Das, 1983; Dunkerely, 1988; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Morse, 1997b; Nobilt and Engel, 1992; Padgett, 1998; Van Maanen, 1982). The nature of qualitative research design decisions facilities a process of inquiry, which begins with a flexible, *a priori* conceptualisation of field practice. This *a priori* conceptualisation provides the sensitising concepts and the exploratory lines of inquiry, which initiate the process of data

collection. The iterative characteristic of qualitative methodology through the processes of data collection and analysis results in a revised and refined conceptualisation in the form of a practice model grounded in empirical field experiences. A crucial feature of the resulting practice model is that it is located in its field context, as the grounded conceptualisation intrinsically links the process of change to the context in which the change occurs.

The process-orientation of practice models indicates the need to ask 'how' and 'why' questions historically over time as well as over a range of complex concepts, many of which are likely to be identified during the course of data collection. Qualitative methodology is preferred while studying process and also when it is desired that the phenomenon being studied should not be de-linked from its context (Cassell and Symon, 1994; Das, 1983; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Jauch, Osborn and Martin, 1980; Noblit and Engel, 1992; Padgett, 1998; Van Maanen, 1979a). This methodology is particularly suited to incorporating emic perspectives and explanations, as well as multiple stakeholder views, as it provides a framework for using multiple methods to collect data from varied sources. Preservation of chronological flow enables identification of the actual events and situations that lead to specific outcomes. This permits the inductive analysis of change as a process.

Thus, qualitative methodology facilitates the exploration of complex phenomena in a manner that is holistic, and context-specific. Qualitative methodology is conducive to the development of complex constructs so that they closely correspond to the field situation. Further, it permits the analysis of process, and it preserves the chronological sequence in which such process unfolds. It is these features of qualitative methodology, with the flexible nature of its research design decisions, that gives it the potential to be utilised to develop social work practice models. The development of such field-based practice models will result in reducing the distance between practice and research, and thereby strengthen social work knowledge.

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