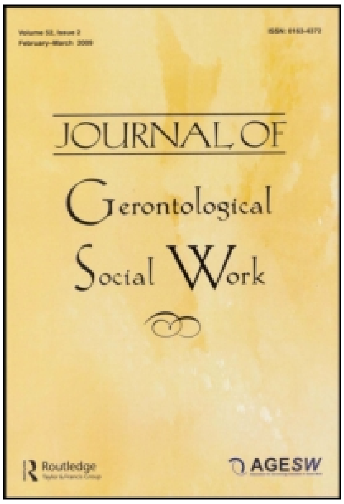

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From the Editor: Is There Room for the Self in Research?

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From the Editor: Is There Room for the Self in Research?

Social work practitioners are well-versed in the effective use of self. Critical self-reflection is a key skill. Yet in research *the self* seems to get in the way. This sets up a peculiar dissonance – one that reinforces the pernicious gap between research and practice.

In a traditional, positivist paradigm the self is not seen as an asset or a tool, but as a source of error or bias. In pursuit of objectivity, we seek to minimize intrusion from the self through ritualized data collection procedures and rigorous criteria for hypothesis testing. We teach staff on our research projects to differentiate between clinical assessment and research interviews, reminding them that they are there to observe, but not to change the respondent's situation.

This presents a difficult dilemma, especially when our interviewers are social work students. I experienced this during a pilot study of older adults coping with depression. Social work students that I hired as interviewers encountered people living in unbearable circumstances, some of them asking quite directly for help. Carefully drawn-out research plans collided head-on with our professional mandate to alleviate suffering. I could not advise my students to remember their research training, collect their data, and walk away "like a thief in the night." (Kieger, 1991) Instead, we devised an approach that allowed first for completion of the standardized instruments, then for a direct conversation about what hurt and what resources might be available to help. I imagine other researchers have worked through similar processes.

The post-positivist or qualitative paradigm offers a different role for the self. Shedding claims of objectivity, qualitative researchers use the self as a tool for data collection and take personal predilections into account in the interpretation of results. In this context questions of status, particularly as "insider" vs "outsider" deserve consideration (see Zinn, 1979).

Age is particularly relevant to gerontological research. As Betty Friedan (1994) observed, most people who collect data for studies of old age are outsiders with respect to this key attribute. This sets up an interesting dynamic that Amanda Grenier, of McGill University, explored in her 2007 article "Crossing age and generational boundaries." Her discussion addressed the intergenerational encounters that characterize most research interviews; noting that older adults meeting 20-something interviewers may see them more as grandchildren than as professional researchers. She suggested that while this may lead respondents to censor their answers, "Working within and across such boundaries may peak the curiosity and intrigue of researcher and participant, and hopefully the desire to understand and communicate." (p. 722).

Whether we use qualitative methods, quantitative methods, or some combination of both, social work researchers in aging are uniquely qualified – by virtue of our profession – to make effective use of our selves. This applies to the process of research, as well as the dissemination of findings. At a minimum, we have a special obligation to disclose personal factors relevant to the interpretation of our results, making our selves available to readers and – perhaps – helping to bridge the practice-research divide.

Amanda S. Barusch
Editor-in-Chief

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