THE VALUE OF SECRECY

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The author tries her hand at oral history and discovers important differences in approach between quantitative and qualitative methods. A crucial difference is that, in an oral history, some of the most interesting findings cannot be divulged. The desirability of this approach is explained, as the author finds herself happily a party to the subterfuge.

I am a social work researcher and also an assistant professor. I came to research honestly as an extension of my curiosity about the intriguing and confounding world of human beings. We live together, appear to crave each other's company, yet fight viciously among ourselves. Some of us wear long cloth pendulums from our necks because our real appendages of dominance are hidden in our trousers. Others of us bare our bosoms and get angry if anyone looks. Ah, the mysterious, pathetic, silly human animal. Certainly worth some study.

My first research forays were quantitative. This was in the mistaken belief, through some fault of my teachers or my parents, that I am good in, and love, math. In any case, lining up numbers and performing fancy statistical tests on them was my early approach to studying humans. I did this, with some success and enjoyment, for a few years. That is, until I was gradually aware of the ascendancy of "qualitative" research. Qualitative methods are a natural result of the increased use of "practice wisdom" in social work intervention (Siporin, 1989). Goldstein (1990; 1999) has been a consistent supporter of using a humanistic, in contrast to a strictly scientific, approach to practice:

Entering into the context of a client's life is not far removed from witnessing (and respectfully becoming a part of) a drama replete with plot, protagonists, antagonists, crises, and critical choices. In assuming his or her role, the social worker surely is an expert about many things that need to be known or provided; the client, however, remains the expert about his or her reality... (Goldstein, 1990, p. 38).

It was only a matter of time until researchers followed suit, and began to spend time listening rather than measuring, being respectfully silent rather than determining how closely their subjects matched the researcher's view of reality.

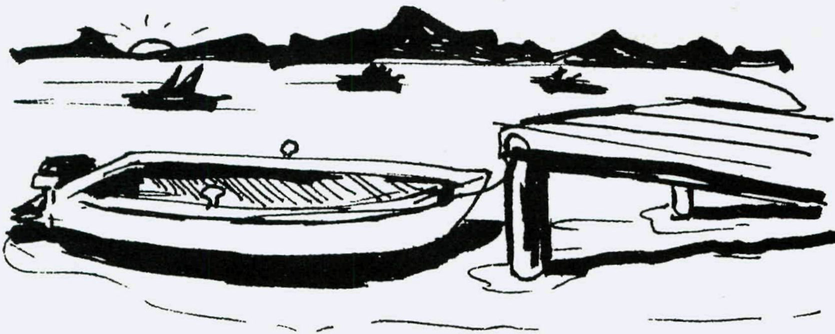
Sherman and Reid's (1994) book, *Qualitative Research in Social Work* heralded an era of the increased use of grounded theory, ethnography, and other qualitative approaches as legitimate techniques available to study human subjects. As stated by Sherman and Reid,

> There was a recognition that the controlled and reductive procedures of quantitative research tended to selectively ignore much of the context of any study and thereby miss much of the situation...(p. 3).

Qualitative research sounded like something I needed to learn how to do. I applied for a small grant from an historical and cultural foundation in my state to do an oral history project in the fishing

village where I recently moved from New York. The proposal was based on a small study I had done for a local project called "Communities for Children," whose purpose was to find out what the children and adolescents of the community needed. The Communities for Children initiative, supported by the Governor's office, was part of a national response, I suppose, to the bad press, (some of it earned) that children and youth have been receiving. My report compared our town of 2500 to the adjacent towns, the county, and the state in terms of "risk" and "protective" factors in the geographic areas affecting children from birth to adulthood.

Our town fared very well, with low incidence of risk factors and high incidence of protective factors, and I was intrigued. I went to the town manager and asked him what he thought a good second, qualitative, study would be. He suggested I talk to the old folks to find out what makes the town a good place to live.



St. George is still a fishing area, the primary type of "fish" being lobsters. Over the centuries the original Penobscot inhabitants were replaced by (in order) the English, Scottish and Irish, Finns, and Swedes. People came, and, except for the Penobscots, they stayed. Those who did not fish worked in the stone quarries, the fish plants, or cutting ice. Many of the children in the St. George elementary school are related to these ancestors, and to each other.

Given my lack of experience in the qualitative area, combined with my status as "outsider," it was with some trepidation that I applied for the grant. I decided if I got the money that I would do the oral history project, and if I didn't, I wouldn't. It would be up to fate.

It was with mixed feelings, therefore, that I found the grant had been approved, and that I had less than a year to interview or have someone interview, videotape, and audio tape ten to twenty elderly people of various cultural backgrounds in my town. Luckily I had asked my friend Howard, who is an experienced social work oral historian, to be a consultant to the grant. After I calmed down I met with him, and then I met with the town manager, and then the head of the local historical society, and then the town manager's wife, whom I then (cleverly, I thought) hired to do much of the video taping. I decided to audio tape people myself, and had also hired a person to transcribe the audio tapes for me. The budget for equipment had been turned down, so I borrowed equipment from the university where I teach. I was ready.

Although the town manager's wife knew everyone in town, I did not. I did know that my Girl Scout Brownie co-leader's father was a descendent of one of the original settlers, though, and asked her if I could talk to him. She said yes if I arrived at exactly 7:15 on Thursday because that was the time between dinner and bed when her parents were free. They are both lobstermen. He is almost eighty and she won't divulge her age. I had been lobster fishing (called just "fishing") with the Mrs. and her daughter the scout leader a couple of

times, but had only seen the father from a distance. His boat "Morning Mist" was impressive, a real fishing boat, whereas "the girls" had a smaller one with no cabin, and they put out fewer traps. "The boys" are still in charge in my town. A protective factor? A clue?

But anyway, I found myself, equipment draped stern and aft, in their kitchen one Thursday night. Father was clearly not comfortable about the audio tape recording, so we all, Mom, Pop, daughter, grandchildren, dogs, and police monitor radio, sat around the table and chatted while the microphone from the university, hanging out in the middle somewhere, tried its best to keep up. The mike, its black shiny face peering up at us, was clearly the outsider this time. At one point father asked me to turn it off. Then he told me a funny story about a childhood incident involving a rooster, we all laughed a lot and then I turned the mike back on.

When I had finally packed it back up, turned everything off and neatly twined the extension cord around my arm, he said he had a another story "just between us" to tell me. The rest of the family had heard it already, but sat down anyway in respectful silence. He pulled out old newspaper clippings to show me the official version, and pointed out with a mixture of pride and apology that the local people had been able to keep their secret from the reporters. I can't tell you what it was about. It was our secret.

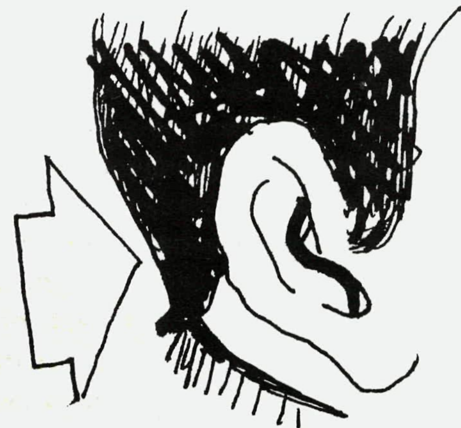
The audio tape from that first interview was almost indecipherable, what with the dogs barking, the scanner beeping and whooshing, and the ladies and kids giggling and interjecting their own comments about life on the peninsula. It took the transcriber a long time to sort it all out.

As required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) everyone I officially talked to signed a consent form promising confidentiality as well as the right of final review of the book and videotape that would be produced. I didn't need an IRB to tell me that you don't record what someone tells you is "just between you and me." But, perhaps due to my quantitative training and experience, I found it hard to leave some of the most interesting data out of the study. How could I tell the whole story? Wouldn't the oral history be white washed?

"That's why it's called **oral** history," the town historian told me.

My next interview was with a woman from my church. She told me to "just stop in anytime, dear," and I did. She offered me muffins and tea and we chatted for awhile before I broached the idea of wearing the little mike I had brought on her lapel. She graciously agreed, although I noticed she leaned her head back while she was talking as though she might have a spider on her blouse somewhere and it was about to jump. But she is a gracious person, as so many of the people of that time and age in my village are. She told me wonderful stories of her peaceful life on the peninsula. They were poor but happy. They took their little skiffs out on the water in the summer. They skated on the little ponds in the hollows of the woods. I took her picture in a field of lupine. She put on a blue skirt and jacket, I thought probably to bring out the blue in the lupine and the blue in her lovely old sparkling eyes.

Then we turned off the mike. I put it all (cords, audio tape machine, lapel mike, extension cords) away while



she eyed me quietly. Then she said, "Well, I should tell you the story about. . . ."

I can't tell you what she said, because I promised her it was just between her and me. "Everybody knows about it," she confided, " but we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so we don't talk about it." I smiled numbly and wondered whatever had possessed me to want to do qualitative research.

And so it went. I taped the stories of the idyllic childhoods and the dead pig hanging in the barn all winter, the first radios and the time they had to row to town to get the doctor. I learned that in the dead of winter one old man would hitch his plow horse to a sleigh and brave the snow every week to get groceries for the whole community, and he stood up and wore a full-length buffalo robe while he was doing it. And I didn't tape the stories of the rum running along the wild rocks of "Herring Gut," the full grown man who liked to play with little girls, the accidental murder that everybody watched from half-drawn curtains. Those are my secrets now, too.

But my quantitative self wanted to tell it all. I was weighed down with my secret, disreputable, thoroughly "oral" history. Meanwhile, the story I videotaped and transcribed continued to grow. It was starting to look fat, pretty, and (I thought) a little bit dishonest.

In a fit of pique I called my friend and consultant Howard and asked if we could have lunch. Over a peaceful meal in a nice restaurant he patiently explained to me that my two stories made perfect sense, and that there should be two stories, and suggested that I look into the value of secrecy.

The first place I looked was in an article by Palmer (1990) about the value of secrecy among Maine lobstermen. The economic loss associated with telling other lobstermen the size of your catch, he theorized, would lead to secrecy among lobstermen about where the best fishing is. For example, if asked how the fishing was in a particular area on a day when there were two or three "keepers[1] " in every pot[2] (the norm is one every few pots), a selfish fisherman might say that it was "not so good." And so information regarding the pounds of lobsters pulled from a certain area on a certain day would be kept from the other, competing, lobstermen.

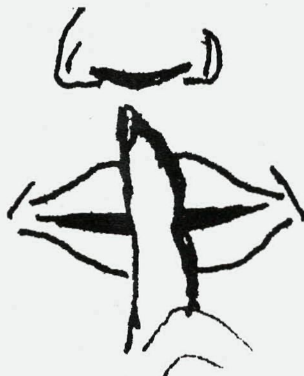
Interestingly, he did not find this to be true in an area where the lobstermen had strong social ties on shore. As I found in my oral history project, many Maine lobstermen still come from well established local families and have extensive familial and social ties with other members of the community. By openly reporting where the lobsters are, a fisherman is communicating a willingness to cooperate even when it may entail a personal economic loss. Apparently, social cohesiveness is more important than individual economic gain.

Of course, it was a different story when the lobsterman on the receiving end of lobster-location information was an "outsider." Acceptance by Maine lobstermen, or lack thereof, is legendary. Where I live, I have heard of newcomers' boats being broad-sided, traps stolen, and most frequently, buoys being cut from the traps and set adrift, with no way for the neophyte to find his pots, probably brimming with keepers, in the depths below. The number of colorful buoys hanging from fence posts and carried off by tourists attests to the outrageous extent of buoy cutting going on in my town.

New lobstermen, writes Palmer, only gain acceptance after years of passively following the rules set by the old-timers. They are not privy to important information, and do not have their equipment returned if

it goes astray, as the other fishermen do for each other.

My oral history project had uncovered privileged information of another, possibly group-cohesive kind. The old-timers kept the stories of murder and mayhem alive among themselves. They were proud of their stories, the disreputable as well as the quaint. In many cases the stories they told in secret showed their courage or their ability to survive hardships. The probable reasons for keeping information from outsiders differed from the economic incentives in the Palmer article, but were just as potent. Perhaps the rest of the world wouldn't understand. Perhaps they would misuse the information. Trust needed to develop first.



Away from the rocky coast of Maine, there is evidence that sharing secrets within the group and keeping them from outsiders has a distinct, group-cohesive function as well. Parker (1986) states that secrets are important to the group life as a way to produce a sense of togetherness and protection from outsiders, and that membership in a society or community is determined partially by shared secrets.

Parker challenges the assumption that honesty and directness are always the best approach in dealing with others. The experiments in communal living during the 1960s, according to Parker, demonstrate the possible dysfunctional results of total honesty. These open, truth-telling groups frequently ended up in chaos, leading to the end of the commune. Some group therapeutic experiences have also led to disastrous confrontations among members, he states, possibly inflicting further damage on their already vulnerable members.

Perhaps in Parker's examples the problem is not the directness as much as it is the make-up of the commune or the lack of preparation of the group. In a village like St. George, the people have known each other for a very long time. They have been schooled in what can and cannot be told directly. From kindergarten to high school the children have role-played how to confront, when to be direct, and how to deal with each individual in the group. Secrecy is learned as well, to keep from hurting others' feelings, to prevent open ridicule, or perhaps to create a common bond. They are together, in the same classrooms and on the same sports teams, for most of their childhood.

Instead of openness at all costs in all situations, Parker postulates that "a degree of secrecy and discretion is necessary to promote interpersonal relationships and societal functioning" (p. 235).

My oral history participants were aware of the need to keep some things secret. Functioning within their society, with who-knows-what people around, requires that certain information be contained. Even within the group, if Parker is right, a certain amount of shared secrecy serves the purpose of generating good feelings and cohesiveness. By being let in on some of the community secrets, it has occurred to me, maybe I was being initiated into the community. That's a

pretty big leap for an admitted "outsider," and I am honored by the thought.

As for my research, I have to accept that most oral histories are probably equally

Secrets

devoid of certain bits of information. In retrospect, what is left out of stories is perhaps as important as the story itself. We must keep our secrets safe here in the village, safe from the prying eyes of all those outsiders in the rest of Maine and the world, and safe from you, dear reader.

My project is almost finished. The video will be shown at the local grange, or maybe the Odd Fellows Hall, at a future date. Everyone will love it. And we will see that St. George is, indeed, a wonderful place to live, though we are still not sure why that is so. Perhaps another study .... ❑

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[1] Only lobsters of a certain size can be kept; the rest have to be thrown back.

[2] Lobster traps are called "pots."

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