

ACT, Angell et al. identified an urban program and a rural program, observed 14 providers in interactions with clients, and subsequently conducted open-ended interviews with each of the participants. Through their study, they learned how ACT providers construct problems of nonadherence, how they promote adherence in their clients, and under what conditions the strategies vary.

- *Qualitative methods can clarify clients' perceptions of interventions.* Singer (2005) asked this question: How do clients make sense of the experience of therapy (p. 269)? Singer asked clients to write weekly case notes following a question guide, conducted taped interviews, and reviewed her own notes during the data-collection period to understand the role of the client-therapist relationship in achieving outcomes.

- *These methods can help social workers understand why people in need of services do not seek help.* Lindsey et al. (2006) wanted to learn about help-seeking behaviors and depression among African American adolescent boys. They conducted interviews with 18 urban youth recruited from community mental health centers and after-school programs. Those in treatment had family members and school personnel who noted their depressive symptoms and facilitated their access to mental health services, whereas those youth not in treatment had family members who argued against seeking professional help.

The need to establish credible evidence should not be an argument for or against qualitative methods. Evidence-based practice includes anything that provides systematically collected information to inform social work practice (Pollio, 2006). Yet, some fear that the experimental methods we have described up to this point will become the only acceptable research paradigm for securing evidence about best practices. At the extreme, Denzin (2005) suggests that “the evidence-based experimental science movement, with accompanying federal legislation, threatens to deny advances in critical qualitative inquiry, including rigorous criticisms of positivist research” (pp. 109–110). Broader recognition of the value of qualitative methods will help social work practitioners avoid such a one-sided perspective on research.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research can raise some complex ethical issues. No matter how hard the field researcher strives to study the social world naturally, leaving no traces, the act of research imposes something “unnatural” on the situation. It is up to the researcher to identify and take responsibility for the consequences of her or his involvement. Four main ethical issues arise:

- *Voluntary participation.* Ensuring that subjects are participating in a study voluntarily is not often a problem with intensive interviewing and focus group research, but it is often a point of contention in participant observation studies. Erikson (1967) argues that covert participation is, by its very nature, unethical and should not be allowed except in public

settings. Covert researchers cannot anticipate the unintended consequences of their actions for research subjects. Few researchers or institutional review boards are willing to condone covert participation because it offers no way to ensure that participation by the subjects is voluntary. Even when the researcher's role is more open, interpreting the standard of voluntary participation still can be difficult. However, much field research would be impossible if the participant observer was required to request permission of everyone having some contact, no matter how minimal, with a group or setting being observed. And should the requirement of voluntary participation apply equally to every member of an organization being observed? What if the manager consents, the workers are ambivalent, and the union says no? Requiring everyone's consent would limit participant observation research to only settings without serious conflicts of interest.

- *Subject well-being.* Before beginning a new project, every field researcher should consider carefully how to avoid harm to subjects. It is not possible to avoid every theoretical possibility of harm nor to be sure that any project will cause no adverse consequences whatsoever to any individual. Direct harm to the reputations or feelings of particular individuals is what researchers must carefully avoid. It will be difficult for others to counter the interpretations offered by participant observers since findings are not verifiable and the contextual nature of the research makes it more difficult to replicate the study (Herrera, 2003). Maintaining the confidentiality of research subjects will be critical to avoiding harm to subjects. Participant observers must also avoid adversely affecting the course of events while engaged in a setting. These problems are rare in intensive interviewing and focus groups, but even there, researchers should try to identify negative feelings and help distressed subjects cope with their feelings through debriefing or referrals for professional help.

- *Identity disclosure.* Current ethical standards require informed consent of research subjects, and most would argue that this standard cannot be met in any meaningful way if researchers do not disclose fully their identity. Some complete observers may become so wrapped up in the role they are playing that they adopt not just the mannerisms but also the perspectives and goals of the regular participants and, by doing so, abandon research goals and cease to evaluate critically what they are observing. But how much disclosure about the study is necessary and how hard should researchers try to make sure that their research purposes are understood? In field research on Codependents Anonymous, Irvine (1998) found that the emphasis on anonymity and the expectations for group discussion made it difficult to disclose her identity. Less-educated subjects may not readily comprehend what a researcher is or be able to weigh the possible consequences of the research for themselves. Should researchers inform subjects if the study's interests and foci change while it is in progress? Can a balance be struck between the disclosure of critical facts and a coherent research strategy?

- *Confidentiality.* Field researchers normally use fictitious names for the characters in their reports, but doing so does not always guarantee confidentiality to their research subjects. Individuals in the setting studied may be able to identify those whose actions are described and may thus become privy to some knowledge about their colleagues or