

Prologue: Genesis of the Research

I have translated my longstanding interest in the interpersonal dynamics of helping relationships into a continually developing program of research. My journey into the realm of counseling began with my involvement as a counselor in Lakshya Trust, a first community based organization in Gujarat to implement targeted intervention (TI) with men who have sex with men (MSM) in three cities, namely, Vadodara, Surat and Rajkot. My job was to coordinate the counseling component of the TI, developed MSM specific counseling service that included HIV specific counseling services as well non-HIV specific counseling services addressing psycho-social issues, mental health and sexuality related issues of the MSM population.

The motivation for this study was based on my professional experiences as a HIV counselor, trainer and HIV consultant. Over a number of years, I observed counselors' struggles to make sense of what they were doing, and their exclusive focus on the clients' behavior change resulted into success as well as failure. Counselors were struggling to provide best HIV counseling services, but there was lack of an appropriate counseling model that could be applied to deal with everyday counseling issues. At the same time, however, counselors' showed competency in using indigenous strategies and techniques to deal with clients' contextual (socio-cultural issues) problems.

Early in the design stage of the research it appeared that one possible way to approach the study of counseling practices was to use a mixed-methods approach. Hence

I proposed a mixed method research, which was not the sole focus of my graduate training in research design and methods. Around this time, I got an opportunity to visit the Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Columbia University, New York as a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar. To get clarity on the selection of an appropriate research methodology, I audited courses on qualitative research methodology and grounded theory that included working closely with the data, and thematically analyzing research interview transcripts using NVIVO 9 and protecting human subjects' rights. The wealth of rich information gleaned through qualitative data analysis based on grounded theory made a profound impact on me. Further, interactions with expert faculty members, scholars from Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, James Madison University, Virginia and other Universities in the USA enhanced my understanding of research methodology. Considering the nature of the present research, a grounded theory based qualitative inquiry was found to be more appealing and meaningful. After careful review of Grounded Theory, I finally, adopted the constructivist grounded theory as a research design for the present study.

The process of my qualitative inquiry of counselors' experiences was fascinating and instructive. The constructivist grounded theory research design required me to become familiar with, and successfully navigate the challenges and complexities of conducting unstructured research interviews. I came to understand the frustrations and time commitment associated with transcribing the data. I struggled with how to begin to approach the voluminous data set that the research has created. And, in the end, I managed to construct a lengthy narrative of interviews with counselors and counselor-

client interactions relying on participant observation notes and field notes. Although I have stayed close to the data throughout my analysis, the narrative that I eventually constructed was to a large extent a reflection of who I am. My thoughts, feelings, professional experiences, and academic exposure to the content area were manifest in both the structure and content of the final research product. Kagan and Kagan (1991) have proposed that the inquirer must assume that interviewees have great wealth of knowledge that is not obvious to an observer. The inquirer's role, therefore, is to facilitate the process of extracting information, experiences and perspectives which they already know, but rarely aware of them. The process of data gathering also brings data to the surface that the inquirer already knows, but may not have acknowledged knowing it. Even after explicitly adopting a research stance of "not-knowing," I recognized that I brought to this research an understanding and a set of assumptions about counseling practices, counselors' experiences of providing HIV counseling services that undoubtedly might have influenced the 'findings.'

I began the research by holding impressions of what HIV counseling means in the context of TIs, from both theoretical as well as practical perspectives. As Chenail and Maione (1997) commented that researchers who are also practitioners "have to come to grips with how they are going to manage their previously acquired knowledge in their soon-to-be area of research" (p. 1). I endeavored to be vigilant about those pre-existing impressions so that I was also aware of ways in which they tended to influence my questioning of participants (and, therefore, the participants' responses) during the data collection.

My philosophical and theoretical stand for the present research is “integrative” and “interpretive.” I continuously strived to avoid the hazards of methodology by allowing my research interests and my self-understanding to guide my choice of method, rather than have a particular (received) method guide my choice of research interests and impose undue influence on my development as researcher and the research findings that are unearthed.