All research is conducted by people. Behind every research report is at least one person, and that person has made many, many decisions and choices in the carrying out of a particular research study. Whether a report describes the reliability and validity of a new assessment tool, the efficacy of an occupational therapy treatment program, the relationships between occupational performance and environmental factors, or the nature of the experience of living with schizophrenia—at least one living, breathing human being is responsible for having pulled it all together.

Sometimes, I think, we lose sight of this fact. Research does not exist “out there.” The researcher’s “voice” is present in all research. People create research—they come up with the research ideas and questions, choose the basic designs, work out methods for collecting and analyzing the data, interpret the results, help the reader understand the meanings, and project possibilities for future research. All along the way, researchers are making decisions about what is of interest, what seems to be important, what is highly valued, what needs to be done, and how to go about it. A well-written research article reflects the researcher’s enthusiasm for the research topic, as well as her or his careful planning and execution of the study. In all of these ways, the researcher’s voice is present. Geertz (1988) refers to this voice as the “authorial presence” (p. 9).

Although the researcher’s voice is present in all research, the researcher is perhaps most visible and audible in qualitative research. This issue of The American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT) includes a unique cluster of articles that give voice to the researcher in qualitative research. The articles are not research reports per se (with one exception—Neville-Jan’s autoethnography). Rather, these papers are intended to offer critical analyses of different approaches to qualitative research, and to share the conversations that are active among qualitative researchers about the various processes that characterize this research.

Each paper in this cluster of articles represents cutting-edge thinking, and each offers a topical discussion of some depth and breadth as well as new insights and new interpretations on the author’s chosen subject. Examples from each author’s own research illustrate and provide grounding for the various concepts and scholarly arguments that are brought forward. In drawing from their research, the authors offer an interesting array of research topics: The meaning of occupation to children with autism; parenting children with sensory integration dysfunction; the homemaking occupations of lesbian couples; everyday experiences in a mental health day program; routines of work and play in families; the meaning of work for home crafters who sell their products at craft fairs; the world of chronic pain; and the experience of organizing a new seniors’ community organization. The authorial presence is heard in the narratives of these research experiences and in the positioning of the authors related to their research.

What do researchers seek when they carry out qualitative research? They seek understandings and insights. And subjectivity is what qualitative researchers seek to understand—the meanings of human phenomena, the nature of human experiences, and the dynamics of the processual elements of living. Qualitative research is interpretive. To do qualitative research is to “question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Qualitative research offers us the “possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (p. 9). In the articles in this cluster, you, the
reader, are brought into “more direct contact” with the world of doing occupational therapy and the world of doing qualitative research.

Qualitative research is not about following rules. Because of this absence of rules, qualitative researchers find themselves having to operate within guidelines that lean heavily toward, “It depends.” The absence of rules, however, does not mean that qualitative research is based on wholesale relativity, or that “anything goes.” What it does mean is that qualitative researchers find themselves working within a paradigm in which ambiguity must be tolerated and even valued, in which final definitive answers are neither available nor can they ever be expected, and about which debate, discussion, and disagreement will probably always be present.

Noted cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) stated that progress in interpretive forms of scholarship “is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate” (p. 29). He further wrote, in his essays on the interpretation of culture, that no single research voice will ever provide the answers to issues that are debated within qualitative research; “there are no conclusions to be reported; there is merely a discussion to be sustained” (p. 29).

In the spirit of the 1973 statement by Geertz, the articles in this issue of AJOT serve to sustain the discussions and help to refine the debates that are alive and well within the community of qualitative researchers in occupational therapy. What is the nature of researcher reflexivity and how does it contribute to the process of analysis used in qualitative data analysis? Do findings that report categories and themes reflect a full and adequate analysis of qualitative data, or must an analysis go deeper in order to be authentic? How does theory inform qualitative research? Are some types of qualitative research pre-theoretical? A-theoretical? What is the role of those who are the focus of the research—the researched—in the qualitative research process? What are the ethical concerns related to power in the researcher–researched relationship? What are the institutional forces that both shape and are revealed in qualitative research?

The knowledge that emanates from qualitative research often challenges our assumptions about our world and opens our eyes to new ways of seeing that which is already familiar to us. For occupational therapists, these challenges lead to new ways of seeing ourselves as therapists including our relationships with clients, our tools of therapy, the institutional forces of the health care system, our clinical gaze, and our own reflexive processes—all of which contribute to our lived experiences as therapists in the world of occupational therapy and as researchers in the world of qualitative research.

References

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Every year, many people beyond those on the Editorial Review Board are asked to review manuscripts for AJOT. The names of these Guest Reviewers are listed below. For the 2002 volume of AJOT, I am pleased to acknowledge and thank the colleagues listed here who have generously contributed their expertise and time in support of the peer review process. Your assistance during this past year has been very much appreciated.

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