

The Value of a Moment

Qualitative Research on Addiction and Change

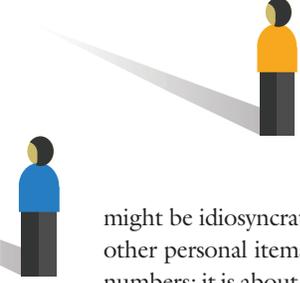
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When we think about research, we usually think about statistics, surveys, large numbers of people participating, randomization to treatment conditions, and experimental control to minimize systematic biases that might affect outcomes. At the same time, when we think about our patients changing, we often think about them taking time and going through a series of steps or phases to work through treatment and recovery. But in reality, there are varied approaches to research and treatment that can be quite different.

This article will discuss qualitative research and how it can be used to study significant moments in the process of change and recovery, and provide some examples from recent psychology and psychopharmacology research. There is a growing revival of interest in examining addiction through the lens of qualitative research, and with our growing enthusiasm for mindfulness-based approaches, the focus on the meaning of the present is coming more into focus. Additionally, many technologies are developing to shape the process of change for our clients, including monitoring moments where risks may be higher, as well as creating immersive

experiences to facilitate change. And while in the long-term we can all appreciate what it takes to achieve sustained recovery, the issues of igniting or reigniting the process of therapeutic change for new and different populations is ongoing; some of the research to take us forward will need to be qualitative. There is also emerging research in pharmacology that further ties into individual experiences and the importance of specific moments that can be catalytic for change.

Contemporary addiction research generally uses either a quantitative or qualitative method, or some combination of both (e.g., mixed method). Quantitative research usually tries to answer questions that can be answered with numbers, large numbers of people, and very specific variables. Quantitative findings are then used to inform theories and views of other people like those studied. In contrast, qualitative research is more about discovering information from smaller numbers of individuals, looking at their experience in depth, its meaning, its context, and how processes or problems might evolve, and using the data gathered to help build theories. Qualitative research often uses open-ended interviews, case studies, observations, and examination of other kinds of data that



might be idiosyncratic in nature, such as a person’s journals, photos, or other personal items. The analysis for qualitative research is not about numbers; it is about looking for patterns and themes and trying to piece together how things happen through an inductive logical process. This type of research is valuable when new areas of study are emerging, and concepts and theories are being crafted.

Vandivier (2019) provides a good example of qualitative research with her phenomenological study. She interviewed nine individuals active in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) who self-identified as having a spiritual experience. Interviewees spoke about having the experience of an awakening through their fellowship in AA. Lightbulb moments connected to feeling overwhelming gratitude were described as most meaningful, changing their relationship to the self. The experience of seeing people as help coming toward them inspired feelings of compassion, being loved, and being transformed. This further inspired a desire to help others, which was experienced as a new kind of high.

Mullin (2020) provides a constructivist grounded theory approach to research highlighting the importance of moments. She interviewed frontline workers assisting severely marginalized individuals in harm reduction settings who were experiencing substance use disorders and homelessness. Intensive interviews uncovered poignant stories of the perceived relational process built upon brief moments of interaction between the service provider and the person being served. Providers reported the process to be slow, built upon the smallest of interactions. For instance, repeatedly saying hello to someone, in the face of discouragement, to show caring and acknowledgment, and to foster connection and trust over time. A brief hello upon sighting may finally culminate in a hello back or requests for services. No matter how brief the interactions prior, they are foundational to building a relationship. Providers also noted that having humility in the situation and respecting the autonomy and privacy of the person were crucial to managing these moments properly.

The idea that moments can have profound impact is not new, but our understanding is evolving. Work by Miller and de Baca (2001) provides a good foundation for understanding how change can happen quickly. They provide many narrative examples on epiphanies of change, and now even pharmacology research is evolving in this area. New theories are discussing pivotal mental states (Brouwer & Carhart-Harris, 2020), describing these states as opportunities for change and tying them back to the neurotransmitter systems affecting dopamine. Similarly, psychedelics research focused on treatment is exploring connections between descriptions of mystical experiences and brain structures impacted by psychedelics (Johnson, Hendricks, Barrett, & Griffiths, 2019). Qualitative research on awe also highlights the potential of rare experiential moments to foster well-being and increased feelings of life satisfaction (Quesnel & Riecke, 2018). The good news is that if a high from a substance can put a person on a path to addiction, it is reasonable to explore the possibilities that moments of trustworthy connectedness, awe, transcendence through fellowship, and novel pharmacological approaches to treatment that inspire insights may hold potential for innovations in treatment. Future qualitative research is likely to help us build a path forward to better understanding the essential ingredients of these moments, which quantitative researchers might call inflection points for change. I hope that this article inspires your curiosity about moments of change and qualitative research in addictions!

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