

Cultivating the family studies terrain: A synthesis of qualitative conceptual articles

Elizabeth Sharp, Anisa Zvonkovic, Áine M. Humble, and
M. Elise Radina

Version Post-print/Accepted manuscript

Citation (published version) Sharp, E. A., Zvonkovic, A., Humble, A. M., & Radina, E. (2014). Cultivating the family studies terrain: A synthesis of qualitative conceptual articles. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6(2), 139-168. doi:10.1111/jftr.12037

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Sharp, E. A., Zvonkovic, A., **Humble, A. M.**, & Radina, E. (2014). Cultivating the family studies terrain: A synthesis of qualitative conceptual articles. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6(2), 139-168. doi:10.1111/jftr.12037

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ABSTRACT

With the intent of cultivating the Family Studies field, we review and synthesize conceptual discussions of qualitative work published since 1985 in the field of family studies. We critically examine the extent to which conditions in the field offer richness and sustainability for qualitative scholarship. We classify discussions by three overarching patterns: (a) appreciating, (b) expanding, and (c) improving qualitative research. Using these patterns as a framework, we encourage scholars to spend less attention appreciating qualitative research and calling for expansion. We recommend instead more critical engagement, greater synthesis, and contemplation of fertile issues accompanying the vast (existing and potential) territory of qualitative research in Family Studies.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Bob Milardo, Andrea Swenson, and the anonymous reviewers for their assistance with previous versions of this manuscript. The first author would like to acknowledge Texas Tech University and University of Durham, UK Institute of Advanced Study for time and resources to write the manuscript.

Cultivating the Family Studies Terrain: A Synthesis of Qualitative Conceptual Articles

Drawing on a farming metaphor, in this paper we employ the idea of crop cultivation as a way to think about discussions written about qualitative research in Family Studies (FS) outlets since 1985. Cultivation encompasses the notion of having optimal conditions (e.g., rich soil, sunlight) in order to grow crops. The cultivation process requires selecting proper areas in which to grow crops, making decisions about how much to plant and how to use resources concerning new crop expansion, enhancing the soil, and clearing out elements that interfere with optimal growth (e.g., moving rocks and tilling). It also requires an understanding that healthy soil needs to have more than one type of crop—farmers routinely alternate crops so as not to deplete the soil of nutrients. We liken empirical qualitative research to the crops (outputs) and conceptual (methodological and epistemological) qualitative articles as the soil that allows such crops to flourish. Although we focus on the qualitative terrain, many of our remarks apply to cultivating the wider field of FS, as well.

Offering an aerial view of the FS qualitative field(s), we reviewed qualitative conceptual discussions from FS journals published in the last two and a half decades, and two influential theory books – *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Methods: A Contextual Approach* (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993) and *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research* (Bengtson, Acock, Klein, & Dilworth-Anderson, 2005). Conceptual (i.e., methodological, epistemological, and/or theoretical) discussions are critical in any field because they encourage careful thought about not only what scholars are doing, but also about *how* scholars are creating knowledge and what is considered knowledge. By putting the thinking about the mechanisms of data gathering/collecting, analyzing, and interpreting under close scrutiny, methodological discussions expose epistemic values, assumptions, practices, and

regulations (Walker, 2005). As such, conceptual pieces are primed to offer important insight about the FS terrain, reflecting current practices and thinking (or at least that which has been published) and setting the stage for future work. A rationale for studying conceptual pieces can be found in the cultivating image as well; rather than only examining the fruits of qualitative scholarly labor (i.e., qualitative empirical pieces), we think the field is also well served by putting the attention to the soil of the terrain (i.e., the conceptual pieces) in which qualitative research projects are planted.

Unique Contribution of the Present Manuscript

To our knowledge, there has not been an effort to systematically consider conceptual qualitative family studies articles as a whole to inform recommendations for future work. Attention given to conceptual and methodological issues (in the June 2012 issue of *Journal of Family Theory and Review (JFTR)* special issue on Qualitative Research in Family Studies and the August 2012 issue of *Journal of Marriage and Family (JMF)* Exchange on Qualitative Research) has signaled that the time may be ripe for such an examination. We considered qualitative conceptual pieces published in 40 different FS journals and two chapters in the *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Methods: A Contextual Approach (Boss et al., 1993)*, all chapters in the *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research (Bengtson, Acock, et al., 2005)* and the 2010 *JMF Decade in Review*. Our review uses LaRossa and Wolf's (1985) article that took stock of qualitative FS research as our jumping-off point, and it ends with reviewing the recent qualitative exchange in the *JMF* (August, 2012) issue¹. In this exchange, LaRossa (2012a, 2012b) and the other authors, Roy (2012), Matthews (2012), and Lareau (2012), focused on

¹ We did not systematically include books in the family studies or broader social science field for this review. We acknowledge that qualitative work is often published in books and that methodological books exist. Discerning between texts oriented to "how to" do qualitative research and conceptual contributions was beyond the scope of our manuscript.

mapping the *JMF* qualitative culture within the last five years. In contrast, our scope and purpose is much more expansive. Our analysis, as we will explain, led us to identifying an historical movement away from a preponderance of descriptive, introductory articles focusing on appreciating and expanding the qualitative terrain toward pieces characterized by nuance, analysis, and synthesis.

Selected Publications and Analytic Approach

We reviewed non-empirical articles addressing qualitative methods (see Table 1) or epistemological considerations (see Table 2) published in 40 FS journals identified by the 2011 Journal Citation Reports® (Thomson Reuters, 2013)² from 1985 to the present (2013). This effort resulted in an analysis of 48 articles (41 methodological and 7 epistemological) dispersed in 12 journals (see Table 3), and two chapters in the 1993 *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*. Borrowing from Benson, Sporakowski, and Stremmel's (1992) modified adoption of Bloom's taxonomy (i.e., classification of thinking moving from concrete operations to formal operations, including knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), we analyzed the purpose and topics of the piece, looking for contributions to ongoing debates and critiques, and we documented each piece's intended audience.

[Insert Tables 1, 2, and 3 about here]

We also examined carefully 19 chapters in the 2005 *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research* and 25 articles in the 2010 *JMF* Decade in Review to ascertain the extent to which qualitative research has been integrated in the FS field, both in terms of empirical qualitative work and conceptual discussions. Finally, we considered the National Council on Family Relations' (NCFR) Qualitative Research Network presentations and Anselm Strauss Award

² There are limitations to the SSCI list of family journals and we are aware that not all family-focused journals are included in this list. We also would like to point out that methodological discussions, at times, occur within empirical articles.

winners, an annual award given by the NCFR Theory and Research Section for excellent work in qualitative family research.

Classifying the Qualitative Conceptual Material:

Appreciating, Expanding, and Improving the Terrain

The materials we reviewed focused on more than a dozen topics. Articles and chapters were classified into three broad categories in terms of their purpose: (a) appreciating the qualitative terrain, (b) expanding the qualitative terrain, and (c) improving the qualitative terrain (see Tables 1 and 2). Those articles classified as “appreciating the terrain” primarily focused on arguing for the value of qualitative work in FS. “Expanding the terrain” articles focused on calls for producing *more* qualitative empirical work and/or describing new methodologies, techniques, or phenomena in FS. Finally, the focus of “improving the terrain” articles was on critique of existing practices and/or offering correctives. With general trends of movement from appreciating and expanding, then to improving, we can see traces of a developmental progression in the field.

Appreciating the Qualitative Terrain

Just as a farmer may need to convince others that a particular piece of land is worth investing in, qualitative family scholars have felt the need to carve out space in FS for qualitative work and, thus, have written about the value qualitative research can (and does) have for the field. Articles classified as appreciating the qualitative terrain made claims for the worth of qualitative work in general (e.g., Burck, 2005; Gilgun, 2005, 2012; Imber-Black, 2008; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993; Singh, 2011), through descriptions of particular qualitative methodologies (e.g., Burck, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 1993), and by identifying distinct qualitative data collection strategies (e.g., van Teijlingen & Forrest, 2004). Some authors argued

for the value and sustained contribution of FS qualitative work historically (e.g., Gilgun, 2012; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993), through pointing to particular empirical qualitative pieces (e.g., Gilgun, 2012; Gubrium & Holstein, 1993; Imber-Black, 2006, 2008; Rosenblatt & Fisher, 1993; Singh, 2011), or through countering misunderstandings of qualitative rigor based on positivistic assumptions (e.g., Gilgun, 2005). In all of these discussions, the worth of qualitative research was the explicitly expressed main focus.

Claims advocating for qualitative research in general terms garnered the most attention in this category and they were characterized by knowledge-level discussions (Benson et al., 1992). The audience for many of these pieces was scholars not familiar with qualitative research, resulting in introductory remarks and descriptive discussions characterized by the authors not assuming knowledge and comprehension levels with qualitative work (Benson et al., 1992), with one exception. Gilgun's (2012) piece was a synthesis of four "enduring patterns" of FS empirical qualitative studies over time (i.e., context, immersion, interpretations grounded in accounts, and contributions to well-being), providing information and food for thought for qualitative and quantitative scholars alike.

Rosenblatt and Fischer (1993), Gilgun (2005), and Singh (2011)'s discussions, while also generally writing for a qualitatively naïve audience, explicitly identified broad epistemological and/or theoretical commitments in their discussions. Gilgun's (2005) article, for example, tied epistemological assumptions to widely accepted notions of generalizability and reliability—both standards, if based in positivism, are inapplicable to qualitative research from other paradigms (e.g., critical, interpretative, post-modern paradigms). Despite attention to philosophical issues, the aforementioned discussions were largely descriptive in nature (Benson et al., 1992), not necessarily pushing substantive epistemological and theoretical debates in the way that more

recent articles classified in the “improving the qualitative terrain” category do.

Beyond general claims made for appreciating qualitative research, other articles offered more specific arguments about the worth of qualitative work and focused on clearly established methodologies. They identified commonly used methodologies rather than introducing a novel strategy or methodology practice into the FS terrain. Drawing attention to specific methodologies helped showcase the massive and varied qualitative territory. In this way, these discussions may help to disrupt an assumption that all qualitative research is similar, illustrating how different the soil can be for each methodology. Burck’s (2005) and the 1993 *Sourcebook’s* discussions, for example, clearly demarcated distinctions among some of the major qualitative methodologies used in the field (i.e., grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, and discourse) (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993).

Recommendation: Spend less space appreciating. Moving forward, we think that repeated attempts to identify and explain the worth of qualitative FS research are no longer needed. They can take time, energy, and space away from deeper and more substantive issues and from doing the actual harvesting. That being said, we do recognize that appreciating the terrain may have been necessary at one point in time and that such discussions served as an important step in helping accelerate more sophisticated analysis and synthesis of the complicated issues qualitative researchers currently must consider.

Until recently, the field has been dominated by quantitative research (Walker, 2005), and thus there was previously a need to publicize the benefits of qualitative research. However, we think that there is evidence that space has been carved out for qualitative work in the contemporary context. Our claim is evidenced partially through the growing number of qualitative empirical work being published in a number of FS journals (Humble, 2012) and the

shift in conceptual articles recently being written to other qualitative scholars and not quantitative scholars (as we will discuss in the “improving the terrain” section).

Moreover, we think another related issue tied to “appreciating the terrain” is that, like other fields, it appears that qualitative scholars have been “more preoccupied with building fortifications against attack than with creating evocative, true-to-life and meaningful portraits and landscapes that constitute the best of the test of rigor in qualitative work” (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 1). We agree that no amount of arguing or convincing will change the mind of a non-qualitatively-oriented scholar who disregards qualitative work in general terms—it is much more instructive to showcase what would be missed without the use of qualitative methods (Mason, 2013a). Arguably, the best way to showcase the value of qualitative work is to have high-quality, compelling qualitative research in FS journals – showing the bounty that is produced, to rely on our metaphor. As we will discuss later, it is possible that the appreciation of the qualitative crops is stifled by lack of synthesis of the growing number of empirical qualitative work, inaccessible terrain, and/or an inability to properly cite qualitative work.

Expanding the Qualitative Terrain

Arguing for the value of qualitative land is closely linked with a push for more land and more types of land. The slight majority of the articles we reviewed (26 out of 48 articles) and many of the NCFR Qualitative Research Network presentations pushed for *expansion of the qualitative territory*. By expanding, we mean explicit calls for having more qualitative research available for consumption in publication and expanding the types of paradigmatic framing, research designs, and qualitative analyses. The audience for these works was predominately quantitative and novice qualitative researchers. Topics considered when arguing for an expansion of qualitative terrain included editors’ notes that directly called for more qualitative work (e.g.,

Imber-Black, 2006; Sprey, 1985) and articles and presentations that focused on reviewing and writing qualitative manuscripts (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995; Arditti, 2011; LaRossa, 2012a, 2012b; Pitchforth, Porter, van Teijlingen, & Forrest-Keehan, 2005; Matthews, 2005, 2012; Walker, Allen, & Connidis, 2005). As well, some work was published that championed opening up the field to theorizing through qualitative research (Bengtson, Acock, et al., 2005).

Articles and chapters that expanded the scope of the questions that could be addressed in FS via qualitative research were also classified in the “expansion” category. Such pieces included articles and chapters that presented methodological innovations (Acock, van Dulman, Allen, & Piercy, 2005; Marshall, Zaidman-Zait, Domene, & Young, 2012; Piercy & Benson, 2005; Small, 1995; Van Eeden-Moorfield, Proulx, & Pasley, 2008) or ways to analyze qualitative data (e.g., Forrest-Keenan, van Teijlingen, & Pitchforth, 2005; Khaw, 2012), in addition to pieces that showcased the qualitative use of secondary data sets (Radina & Downs, 2005), qualitative data in large projects (Manning & Smock, 2005), innovative data sources (Connidis, 2012; Gibson, 2012) and those that presented practical suggestions for enlarging design and data collection options (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005; Fowles, 2007; McDowell & Fang, 2007; Small & Uttal, 2005).

Furthermore, articles and pieces contributed to expanding the field when they offered practical examples of the value of qualitative work under examination, such as the value of Participant Action Research (Small, 1995); showcasing specific “products” from qualitative research, such as the ways in which qualitative research can illuminate “habits of hiding”—deception and self-preservation tactics marginalized populations may engage in (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005); and arguing that qualitative researchers are more able to study hard-to-reach populations (e.g., Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). Expansion also took the form of “how

to” resources, offering other scholars directions and guidance about conducting qualitative studies in the field. For example, the *JFTR* 2012 special issue offered an array of “nuts and bolts” for qualitative scholars to hone their craft. We highlight Connidis (2012) article in this issue. She compared analysis from two distinct data sources and explicitly foregrounded her paper with epistemological and ontological considerations.³

We demonstrate a thread of what we classified as “expansion” articles by describing a major theme in this category, a focus on writing (Matthews, 2005, 2012; Pitchforth et al., 2005) and reviewing qualitative manuscripts (Ambert et al., 1995; LaRossa, 2012a). Matthews (2005) and Ambert et al. (1995) offered tips to publish qualitative family scholars’ work in mainstream FS journals. As well, FS professional NCFR conferences targeted to professional Family scholars and practitioners have devoted program time to expanding the presence of qualitative work in the field. Sessions have included: “Funding and Publishing Your Qualitative Research” at the QRFN presentation in 2004; a session offered by *JMF* and *Family Relations* journal editors on “strategies for success” as a qualitative researcher in FS in 2005 and tips on “How to be a Productive Qualitative Scholar” (Arditti, 2011).

The broad focus on writing, publishing (productivity), and reviewing qualitative work suggests that some family scholars have believed problems with the amount of published qualitative research exist. In other words, the assumption here is that more arable land is needed for qualitative research (e.g., LaRossa, 2012a, 2012b; LaRossa & Wolf, 1985) and the premise locates the cause of the problem both on the shoulders of authors (Matthews, 2005, 2012; Pitchforth et al., 2005) and in the laps of reviewers (Ambert et al., 1995; LaRossa, 2012a). A related problem is the expectation (noted as unrealistic by LaRossa, 2012b) that reviewers have

³ As we were completing the final draft of this manuscript, Connidis’ 2012 article in this journal was honored with Wiley’s 2013 Alexis Walker Award for excellence in research.

expertise in all qualitative methodologies. There may be a common misconception that all qualitative research is similar—perhaps an unintended message given to readers when conceptual articles focus on generic qualitative research. Contributions inside this theme tended to be broad in scope in that they did not extensively consider specific methodologies or epistemological commitments.

If there is an “arable land-shortage” problem, we are not convinced that placing the onus on authors through offering solutions based on broad guidelines is helpful or consistent with understanding the wide array of methodological designs qualitative scholars can use and the numerous epistemological commitments they can hold. To return to our farming metaphor, there seems to be an assumption that because a farmer has one plow, he or she can work any field.

Finally, we have concerns that the focus on the reviewing and writing process may take attention away from scholars delving into substantive epistemological, ethical, and other complex issues of conducting qualitative studies with families. This focus on reviewer and author guidance might be likened to students who hyper focus on their grades (“How can I get an A?”); in this case, the focus for qualitative scholars in FS is on getting their work published.

Recommendation: Target expansion. We caution against generic calls for expansion. Having more qualitative research in circulation—more, not necessarily better—strikes us as a questionable goal. Instead, we advocate for targeted expansion efforts. For example, contributions that highlight innovative methodological ideas, including using qualitative methods with technology (e.g., Van Eeden-Moorfield et al., 2008) and aesthetic methods (e.g., Piercy & Benson, 2005) demonstrate the potential to expand the FS field and to provoke further imaginative qualitative work. If we think of journal space devoted to qualitative work as limited (likening to a field with limited acreage), it seems that there are many important topics vital to

expanding qualitative FS work that have heretofore received minimal (i.e., one article) to no coverage. These topics include: sampling (focusing on particular issues with sampling families), dyadic and multi-member analysis, data redundancy, affective/sensory methods and atmospheres (Mason, 2013b), biographical methods, teaching qualitative methods, technology-based methodological innovations, transdisciplinary methodologies, and caring methodologies (Zvonkovic, Sharp, & Radina, 2012).

Improving the Qualitative Terrain

In addition to advocating for the value and expansion of land, conceptual discussions also focused on improvement – weeding, pruning, and (re)fertilizing the land. Improvement was argued for in terms of methodological issues, as well as more fundamental epistemological issues. Articles classified as “improving qualitative methodologies” recommended “correctives” of analytical practices (e.g., LaRossa, 2005; Pyke, 2010), acknowledged and offered emotional support to qualitative researchers collecting data with child abusers (e.g., Coles & Mudalz, 2010; Roberts, 2011), considered criteria for good qualitative studies (e.g., Forrest-Keenan, & Van Teijlingen, 2004), identified methodological questions/issues (Humble, 2012; Lareau, 2012; Roy, 2012), and offered tips for collecting data with a particular racial -ethnic groups (e.g., Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Umaña-Taylor & Bamaca, 2004).

Additionally, in the improving category, a critical engagement of epistemology was foregrounded in several pieces (e.g., Allen, 2000; Bengtson, Allen, Klein, Dilworth-Anderson, & Acock, 2005; Edwards, 2002; Harris, 2008; Larson, 2002; Knapp, 2002; Rosenblatt, 2012; Sanchez, 2002). Although these articles did not have methodological issues as their primary focus, their epistemological considerations helped point to the varied land in FS, showcasing paradigms closely linked with several qualitative methodologies. Only one article (Rosenblatt,

2012) positioned the methodological and epistemological interplay as the main focus of the discussion.

We saw a clear shift in the audience for the methodologically-focused papers in this category. Whereas appreciating and expanding the terrain discussions were mostly aimed at quantitative researchers and to some extent, novice qualitative researchers, explicit methodological discussions in the “improving” the terrain category were directed at other qualitative scholars. This shift in audience encouraged more critical engagement with conceptual issues. These articles tended to be more recently published and offered more critique within the qualitative terrain than the previous ones. We think the movement to critiquing within the qualitative terrain is an indication that qualitative research has a firm footing in the field—a reflection that qualitative research no longer “needs” to be justified and qualitative scholars can expose challenges and dilemmas inherent in their work. Another signal of footing might be that the epistemological pieces in this category were aimed at *all* family scholars, suggesting that all scholars (not just qualitative scholars) need to grapple with epistemological issues.

Similar to discussions in our other classifications of publications, there was fluidity between specificity and broad engagement. In this case, though, the broad engagement tended to be reflective of higher order analysis, especially among the epistemologically-focused discussions (Benson et al., 1992). Critical engagement was evidenced by responding to problems in the qualitative field(s) through offering solutions (e.g., LaRossa, 2005) and pointing to problematic practices in the field such as, using qualitative software without critical analysis (Humble, 2012) or assumptions about sample size (e.g., Lareau, 2012; Roy, 2012). We highlight two of these articles here.

LaRossa’s (2005) article on grounded theory (GT) analysis was valuable because it was

one of the first times we saw a direct *insider* critique of FS qualitative work and for its singular focus on a qualitative analytical technique (later, in 2012, Khaw also focused on GT analysis), indirectly critiquing scholars for not attending to complexity in FS analytical practices. LaRossa wrote the paper based on the knowledge that GT methods were the most common method used among family scholars and that confusion about application of GT analysis existed. He briefly offered a broad critique of FS and other fields by pointing out the problem of the vague use of GT and researchers “skipping steps” in the analysis (p. 840) and positioned his article as corrective. His explicit goal was to make one strand of GT analysis more accessible to FS scholars (he aptly pointed out various approaches to GT to counter notions of “one” GT methodology based in one paradigm). Focusing on this aspect of the article, it helps showcase complexity and epistemological variability of GT, which, in turn, might serve to highlight the complexity and epistemological choices linked to other qualitative methodologies.

In a similar vein but pointing to wider issues, Lareau (2012) also offered critical remarks aimed at other qualitative scholars. She raised questions about unacknowledged residual effects of positivistic thinking, through questioning another family scholar’s language/framing as well raising issues around sample size. She raised questions about using terms such as “hypothesis” and “variable” and brought attention to a pattern of large sample sizes of qualitative *JMF* publications. She asserted that “large-scale interview studies often focus on the frequency of responses rather than the meaning of responses” (p. 671), a focus that “inevitably limits the PI’s ability to probe in data collection, develop an emergent research question, and contextualize the quotes in a special social context” (p. 675). She concluded that “*JMF* should not ‘beat up’ on qualitative researchers for having relatively small number of cases; it should be possible to publish a study of only 12 families” (p. 675).

Lareau's assertions about a tendency for *JMF* to discount small samples led us to consider the sample sizes of published qualitative work. Keeping the discussion within the scope of Lareau's remarks (i.e., qualitative articles published within *JMF*), we examined the sample sizes of all the published qualitative articles in *JMF* between 2000 and 2010. Out of 58 qualitative articles published in this timeframe, close to half (25 articles) had 45 or more participants (with 9 of these having at least 115 participants). The pattern of these sample sizes raises questions, considering that most qualitative methodologies do not "require" more than 20 to 30 sampling units and some as few as 6 participants (Creswell, 2013; Sandelowski, 1995). Lareau exposed what may be a preference for at least one FS journal to privilege qualitative research that leans toward positivistic paradigms with large sample sizes, discourse about hypotheses, tests of inter-coder reliability, and other dimensions. If this is indeed the case, FS scholars need to address this issue so as not to stifle qualitative research based in other epistemological groundings.

Philosophical debates are important to engage in, especially because, as we previously noted, qualitative scholars have access to a wide range of epistemic commitments and our review suggests that the complexity of paradigm choices frequently is glossed over in conceptual discussions. There were several important exceptions (Allen, 2000; Harris, 2008; Knapp, 2002; Larson, 2002; Rosenblatt, 2012; Sanchez, 2002; Temple, 1994), although as we already pointed out, most of these articles did not focus directly on methodology.

Articles foregrounding epistemology were most critically engaging and the most likely to have synthesized important ideas from the terrain as a whole. One of the most salient pieces is Allen's (2000) discussion. She asked the FS field to move beyond positivism in their work and illuminated problems endemic to *all* FS research by making explicit the tension between

positivism and postmodern epistemologies (commonly used in qualitative work). Similar to statements made by Ambert et al. (1995), Small (1995), and Fowles (2007), Allen emphasized that positivistic values were still dominant in FS and encouraged scholars to employ other paradigms. Additionally, regardless of what paradigm a scholar used, she demanded that scholars be transparent about the ideologies influencing their research. We echo this call for researchers to foreground their philosophical commitments. Moreover, the 2002 *JMF* exchange on the pervasive “objectivism” in family scholars’ writing (Edwards, 2002; Knapp, 2002; Larson, 2002; Sanchez, 2002) and two articles published in the *Journal of Family Issues* (i.e., Harris, 2008; Temple, 1994) helped push the field forward through their exposure of epistemological and ontological assumptions while raising issues of authority, knowledge, and definitions of families. Although these pieces put primary focus on epistemology, we recommend that future pieces focus on the interplay between epistemology *and* methodology (and theory).

Rosenblatt’s (2012) recent discussion about interviewing is an exemplar due to his wrestling with paradigms and data collection/data making decisions. He offered a specific methodological application of Allen’s (2000) charge to scholars. He carefully considered his data gathering decisions and explicitly wrote about tensions based on the pull between positivism and postmodern sensibilities.

Recommendation: More critical correctives and more theorizing. We recommend more work that critically examines qualitative practices and assumptions. We see some evidence of this work (e.g., Rosenblatt, 2012) and call for more such work because this work critically engages scholars active in the field. We would like scholars to use the prime “real estate” of journal articles to engage in critical questioning, push more “correctives,” put theory to work with qualitative research, and to carefully reflect on epistemological and ontological issues.

We also echo other scholars' push for illuminating the ways qualitative research expands upon existing ideas and leads to new theorizing. Qualitative theorizing is another area that is often superficially linked with qualitative work without explicit discussion of *how* specifically qualitative work contributes to theory development (LaRossa, 2012a, 2012b). Sprey (2013) makes the case that "to advance theoretical understanding in the field of family studies, some questions should be at a higher level of abstraction....Moving beyond the individual to focus on social relationships leads to different, more abstract questions whose answers cannot be found by simply analyzing the responses and views of individuals." (pp. 59-60). We are heartened by the special issue of the *Journal of Family Theory and Review* on "Qualitative Family Scholarship: Innovative Theories in the Interpretive Tradition" (planned for 2015) which is poised to provide synthesis between theory and in-depth consideration of specific qualitative work. In addition to more critical engagement clearing and (re)fertilizing the fields, we also advocate for a greater focus on integration and synthesis (we discuss this later).

Integration of Qualitative Work Evidenced in Important Reviews and Awards in FS

Using the heuristic device of appreciating, expanding, and improving categories, we now turn to two FS sources whose primary goal is synthesis and we explore the extent to which the soil (conceptual debates) and qualitative crops (empirical work) have been integrated in the terrain. We turn first to an analysis of two sources of reviews in the field: the 2005 *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research* (Bengtson, Acock, et al., 2005) and *JMF*'s 2010 Decade in Review. How much attention is paid to qualitative work in these reviews, we argue, (partially) reflects the field's perspective on the importance of FS qualitative research and how much qualitative work has been included into the corpus of the FS field. Our goal was to examine whether the reviews reflected a general appreciation or a call for readers to appreciate qualitative

work (i.e., appreciating), whether and to what extent they directed readers to areas of qualitative work that expand the field (i.e., expanding), or whether and to what extent the pieces used qualitative work in its totality (epistemology, methodology, and findings) and integrated it into the literature as a whole, which could include raising questions relevant to the FS field as a whole (i.e., improving).

Unlike its 1993 predecessor that was mostly composed of chapters presenting a different theory, the 2005 *Sourcebook* is largely devoted to chapters reviewing specific content areas of FS, with the theories prevalent in the content area discussed and applied. The 2010 *JMF* Decade in Review, as with earlier such issues of *JMF*, is organized around research developments in important content areas during the prior decade. Given the similarity between these two highly visible sources with their focus on specific content areas, we examined how the reviews discussed qualitative approaches and the extent to which qualitative work was included. We also devote some attention to the Anselm Strauss award administered by NCFR's Qualitative Family Research Network in order to provide an additional perspective on how the field construes good qualitative research on families.

Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research (2005)

The stated purpose of the 2005 *Sourcebook* (Bengtson, Acock, et al., 2005) was to develop a useful resource that would encourage theorizing among both students and scholars. The editors emphasized the value of multi-method approaches in family research and “asked the contributors to...attempt to break down some of the artificial barriers between qualitative and quantitative methods” (Bengtson, Acock, et al., 2005, p. xx). Despite this specific goal of the volume, of the 19 content chapters, seven chapters made no mention of qualitative approaches or studies. Often, but not always, this lack of mention was a function of the type of content of the

chapter (e.g., a chapter on multilevel modeling techniques, Sayer & Klute, 2005). An additional four chapters incorporated qualitative research only inasmuch as calling for future qualitative studies because of their potential to enhance understanding. We consider these to be a generic posture of appreciation of qualitative work, without specificity as to which particular avenues, respondents, or approaches might be most germane.

Eight chapters covered qualitative approaches much more extensively. Chapters with explicitly feminist content developed epistemological arguments about how research questions are designed and studies are conducted, and in this way, they incorporated qualitative approaches and as well as drew from qualitative studies (DeReus, Few, & Blume, 2005; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; MacDermid, Roy, & Zvonkovic, 2005). Chatters and Taylor (2005), in their chapter on religion and families, extensively discussed conceptual issues having to do with questions of interpretation about the concept of religious belief. As they did so, they created room to value perspectives that provided a lens on the meaning of religion, as well as the use of rituals and narrative methods to approach the phenomenon. Similarly, the chapter on cognition, culture and parenthood (LaRossa, Simonds, & Reitzes, 2005), and the chapter on time in families (Daly & Beaton, 2005), both co-authored by symbolic interactionists, emphasized ways of framing the issues at hand, challenges with gathering adequate information about the topics that led the authors to suggest that life histories, studying people's words, culture and how the unfolding processes of everyday life lend themselves to creative data gathering techniques. Other authors made detailed points of the ways qualitative strategies could clear up debates on the topics, could provide other ways of conceptualizing key concepts, and would enrich theoretical claims made in the area (Crosbie-Burnett, Lewis, Sullivan, Podolsky, DeSouza, & Miltrane, 2005; Walker et al., 2005). These eight chapters, then, made a case for how qualitative work in

each specific content area could contribute to improving the wider FS field, in terms of how questions are framed, what scholars do with the knowledge generated, and who is studied.

In sum, we found that the incorporation of qualitative research occurred in two ways: (a) drawing from qualitative approaches, and (b) providing multiple specific examples of how qualitative studies could improve understanding of the content area. Of note is that only when *both* of these occurred did the chapters include explicit discussion of epistemology. Thus, it appeared that explicitly bringing together multiple ways of approaching a research area (e.g., qualitative and quantitative) made space for a discussion of the ways that research is influenced by how phenomena are conceptualized and measured.

Journal of Marriage and Family Decade in Review (2010)

At the close of each decade, the *JMF* has a tradition of publishing one issue focusing on major developments (primarily focusing on content but also attending to methods and theory) in the previous decade. Its Decade in Review is designed to highlight the most important developments in FS in the last ten years, to “thoroughly and critically review the significant advances (theoretical, empirical, and methodological)” (Demo, 2010, p. 402). Of note is the significant amount of leeway authors had in the review task; some areas of review were vast and others were less so. Relatedly, some authors were transparent about their review criteria, but more than half of the articles did not explicitly state their review criteria. It was common for authors of the review pieces to call for more qualitative research on their topic; eight out of the 25 review articles did so. Silverstein and Giarrusso (2010), in their review on aging and families, mentioned lack of space for qualitative work, stating: “It is also our impression that quantitative analyses of large data sets may have crowded out fine-grained analyses and in-depth qualitative investigations from the leading family journals” (p. 1050). Although such calls demonstrate

appreciation of qualitative work, and in one case, calls for expanding the space devoted in journals to qualitative work, they may not necessarily connect the epistemologies of qualitative work, or draw attention to how the field as a whole can be improved by such a connection.

Minimal attention was given to qualitative research in 75% of the review articles, as ascertained by our reading of the Decade in Review articles that included the authors' mention of the method of research cited. Others (25%) cited five or more qualitative pieces of research (e.g., Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cherlin, 2010; Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Edin & Kissane, 2010; Sessler, 2010; Smock & Greenland, 2010). When qualitative work was cited, the references frequently were books and ethnographic studies. Quite a few articles referred to the same body of qualitative work, notably the ethnographic studies produced by Kathryn Edin and Annette Lareau (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Lareau, 2003). The citing of ethnographic studies, and books in particular, is worth noting, serving as a reminder that the optimal outlet for ethnographic work is a book. However, of the articles that detailed their inclusion criteria for their review, several only reviewed articles in peer-reviewed journals, effectively eliminating such qualitative work from consideration and inclusion of their potentially unique contributions.

The style of each article differed, with varying attention to the qualitative nature of the work they cited, tending to emphasize how qualitative studies on specific samples expanded the knowledge in the FS field about their topic area. In their review of families and health, Carr and Springer (2010) positioned in-depth qualitative research as one of the five most important future directions and argued that "small-scale qualitative studies provide insights into the ways that the distinctive cultural views and practices of ethnic families affect health and health behaviors" (p. 756). Biblarz and Savci's (2010) overview of scholarship on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families highlighted how qualitative work has contributed to our understanding of

variations by race and class. MacDermid Wadsworth's (2010) review on war and terrorism referred to focus groups of refugees. Anderson (2010) mentioned a qualitative study about violent relationships during pregnancy in her review of conflict, power, and violence. Silverstein and Giarrusso's (2010) review of the literature on aging families described how qualitative work could assist with assessing intergenerational expectations and behaviors regarding help and support. Lastly, Carr and Springer (2010), in their review of scholarship on families and health, showcased a qualitative study on parental criticism and child eating disorders. In each case, the authors discussed the merits of a qualitative approach in finding hard-to-reach groups who have experiences that could be different from the dominant experience.

Patterns of appreciating and expanding qualitative research were predominant, with very few mentions of ways to improve qualitative research. The few exceptions were Glick (2010) and Sweeney (2010). In her piece on immigrant families, Glick (2010) commented on the difficulties inherent in synthesizing (i.e., meta-analysis) findings from qualitative work, whereas Sweeney's article about stepfamilies critiqued qualitative researchers for lacking a "systematic presentation of procedures used for data collection and analysis including a clear articulation of motives for selection of particular cases" (p. 678).

We found only one mention of a "meta-analysis" of qualitative work in the decade review (Edin & Kefalas, 2010, p. 465). We strongly encourage family scholars to engage in meta-analyses that focus on integrating the growing number of "outputs" from qualitative work. We think that this is an important direction for the focus of appreciating qualitative work. Syntheses of empirical qualitative studies would provide a complement to our analysis here of conceptual qualitative pieces (Chenail, St. George, Wolff, Duffy, Scott, & Tomm, 2012; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Although other fields have made advances in synthesizing empirical qualitative

studies (especially nursing, see Saini & Shlonsky, 2012; Saini, Shlonsky, Sandelowski, & Barroso, 2003), FS has lagged behind, despite the growing availability of software tools such as SUMARI, which is designed to assist in synthesizing qualitative work and research assistance from Cochran and Campbell trained librarians, librarians in the health field who have expertise in qualitative evaluation studies (Higgins & Green, 2011; Saini & Shlonsky, 2012). Scholars need to be able to synthesize the growing bodies of work in particular areas, especially areas with considerable qualitative work, such as the study of sex/gender (Matthews, 2012).

Summarizing our analysis from the 2005 *Sourcebook* and *JMF*'s Decade in Review, we see minimal attention given to qualitative work and very little engagement with epistemologies of qualitative and quantitative work. It should be noted that the Decade in Review articles are thick with citations and cover a good deal of territory. Nevertheless, given that only 12 articles made specific mention of the qualitative nature of any contribution to their topic at all, we are left with several questions. First, does this indicate that qualitative work is so well woven into the review that the authors did not see a need to identify it as such? Second, is it possible that family scholars may struggle to adequately cite qualitative studies using critical, interpretative, and/or post-modern paradigms? And an overriding question must be asked about the purpose of reviews. Not to belabor our guiding metaphor of farming but, is the purpose of the reviews similar to a county fair in which prized produce and other crops are paraded around and may earn special commendation (and may be grouped in particular categories by the exhibitor)? Or, is the purpose of the review broader?

Strauss Award for Excellence in Qualitative Family Research

We can ask similar questions about the broader purpose of the most highly profiled qualitative award given annually in the FS field. NCFR's Qualitative Family Research Network

gives the Anselm Strauss Award each year for excellent family qualitative research, arguably similar to the awarding of a blue ribbon prize. We examined the titles of the Strauss Award winning papers since 2000 (the earliest available on the NCFR's website). Two awards were given to methodological pieces and the rest to empirical pieces. These trends suggest that, for the most part, the Strauss Award is primarily focused on appreciating qualitative "crops" (showcasing the winner) with a secondary goal perhaps of expanding and improving the qualitative terrain.

We also note that close to half of the awards went to journals outside of FS (i.e., *Qualitative Health Research* and *Qualitative Inquiry*). This might be interpreted as evidence that family scholars are conducting qualitative research that passes the methodological muster of these methods-oriented journals, as opposed to contributing to a "qualitative family studies" subfield. The flipside of this interpretation is that it also may signify that some high quality family research is *not* being published in FS journals, which could occur for a number of reasons.

The Crops May be Fruitful but Hard to Reach: Placement of Qualitative Work in FS

The trend of awarding the best "family studies qualitative work" to work published outside FS journals and the large dispersion of conceptual articles throughout FS journals merits attention about the accessibility of the terrain. Our analysis of journal articles demonstrated that this work is published in a variety of outlets, without a predominant core in any one journal (although *JMF* had 18 of the 48 articles). The analysis of reviews in the FS field also reflected variation in the extent to which qualitative work has been integrated. Although several scholars assumed that a qualitative FS terrain exists (e.g., Gilgun, 2012; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993), the demarcation of a distinct territory is a contested notion. LaRossa's (1988) guest-editorial remarks entitled "Renewing our faith in Qualitative Family Research" in *Journal of Contemporary*

Ethnography elucidate the dispersion debate, situate the history of qualitative research inside the FS interdisciplinary frame and offer nuanced understandings of paradoxical messages sent when editors (and others) explicitly appreciate and call for expansion of qualitative research. It could be useful for family scholars to return to these questions in order to engender a focused debate on the variety of soils, the conditions needed for particular soils, boundaries, and parameters of the qualitative FS terrain. Of course, FS is not a widely-agreed upon discipline and some scholars regard it as an interdisciplinary area and indeed reject the notion that there should be a FS canon.

There are benefits of wide dispersion. For example, it is good to know that FS scholars' work rises to stringent publication standards in specific qualitative methods journals and other outlets as evidenced by the Strauss awardees. However, a side effect of this dispersion, especially if it is located in hard-to-reach places, could be reflected in the trend we noticed of repetition and introductory descriptions rather than deep, nuanced discussions. The scholars who write in multiple journals about the worth and value of qualitative research, which we would classify as appreciating qualitative research, appear to be writing to unique audiences who have not read similar work. As well, the dispersion of qualitative work means that, frequently, authors of conceptual qualitative pieces have not cited each other's work, hence not building a literature or a sense of dialogue that would serve to "aerate" the soil in the qualitative family studies field. A similar argument can be made regarding the repeated calls for expanding the terrain—in that the wide dispersion makes it a difficult task to quickly see and fully comprehend the extent to which land has already been carved out for qualitative research. A final side effect is that such work may not be visible to graduate students and scholars writing reviews, further contributing to its inaccessibility. Indeed, our own wide search parameters in preparing this manuscript (40 different journal titles) would have omitted many pieces of the qualitative method literature

(including one of our own conceptual qualitative discussions; Humble & Sharp, 2012). This lends support to the argument that the qualitative family studies as a subfield is not, as of yet, firmly established. Although we do not necessarily advocate for a clearly defined subfield, we are encouraging public discussions about whether a subfield should be an aspiration and, more importantly (regardless of having a distinct subfield) how to best nurture the variety of fields that fall under the massive category of “qualitative.”

The Land Itself: What Underlying Paradigms are in the FS Soil?

The variety of fields used for qualitative work in FS deserves consideration here. Despite the dispersion across publication outlets of conceptual pieces reviewed and the multiplicity of perspectives therein, paradigm discussions were a feature in a small subset of the terrain we reviewed (e.g., Ambert et al., 1995; Gilgun, 2005; LaRossa, 2012a; Rosenblatt, 2012). The bulk of the material was devoid of explicit epistemological issues, focusing mainly on methodological issues. As others have aptly pointed out, “methodology often diverts attention from more fundamental issues of epistemology” (Lather, 2007, p. 38). Of course, unless working from positivist framing (e.g., positivistic qualitative research), qualitative research requires an engagement with philosophical assumptions that are at odds with the dominant research paradigm (Allen, 2000; Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson, & McSpadden, 2011). As another scholar has recently noted, logical positivism is the “epistemological unconscious of the US social sciences” (St. Pierre, 2013). The low coverage of epistemology in our review raises questions about the extent to which positivism may still be operating within our field.

A trend we found in the articles addressing epistemology was that positivism was identified as a barrier to the FS research terrain fully embracing qualitative work (see Allen, 2000; Ambert et al., 1995; Lareau, 2012; LaRossa 2012a; Roy, 2012; Small, 1995). Similarly, a

strong commitment to objectivism in FS was credited with stifling subjectivism in scholar's writing (see the 2002 *JMF* exchange – Edwards, 2002; Knapp, 2002; Larson, 2002; Sanchez, 2002). With the exceptions of Allen (2000), Lareau (2012), and Rosenblatt (2012), epistemological discussions we reviewed did not explicitly draw attention to the ways in which positivist qualitative studies can be found *inside* qualitative research in family studies. There is a perception that, in some FS journals, positivistic qualitative work has been privileged to the exclusion of other paradigms; a concern for the FS field that both Allen (2000) and Lareau (2012) noted. We wonder how qualitative work that primarily maps on to positivistic sensibilities has been linked with an increased legitimacy of *one kind of* qualitative work in the FS field and narrowed the understanding of (as well as the appreciation of) qualitative research in general.

Specific Proposals for Cultivating FS Terrain

There are many promising ways to cultivate variety in the FS qualitative soil and we have already offered several broad recommendations in the previous sections of the paper. Our suggestions that follow are specific with the intention of offering family scholars accessible and timely resources. We promote targeting the use of existing areas, taking advantage of some uncultivated areas, and further fortifying the field with depth and provocation.

Target Use of Existing Areas

Responding to the repeated and high number of “expanding” calls in the conceptual discussions in our review, we suggest that family scholars consider making good use of the amount of “untilled” land that can be used to cultivate frequent and sustained conceptual debates, both quantitative and qualitative. We found accessible “land” in a variety of outlets including journals, awards, and the major family studies annual conference and pre-conference.

Several journals invite brief conceptual discussions/reflections and this space could be

well utilized by family scholars offering nuanced, pieces about the interplay of methodological, epistemological, and theoretical underpinnings and current dilemmas. For example, the journal *Parenting: Science and Practice* includes brief (~3,000 word) “Statements” articles, which “provide a forum for the rapid dissemination of ‘fresh concepts, alternative methods, or emerging trends,’” (<http://www.psypress.com/journals/details/1529-5192/>). In a similar vein, the *Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care* also includes space for ongoing dialogue and has several brief qualitative discussions, most of which are introductory statements included in our review.

Moving away from introductory pieces, we encourage pieces similar to Morse’s (1998) editorial statements, which are brief, nuanced, incisive, and focused on extant controversies in her field. In addition to the brief and potent discussions, we encourage longer, in-depth pieces like the ones found in *Qualitative Health Research Journal*’s “Pearls, Pith, and Provocation” section devoted to innovative and/or provocative issues and methodologies. We envision more pieces like Allen’s (2000), Harris (2008) and Rosenblatt’s (2012) articles. We also strongly encourage more interchanges like the 2002 and 2012 *JMF* Qualitative Exchanges and urge scholars to consider conceptual issues already published when writing non-empirical qualitative pieces in the future. We hope this paper helps with the latter suggestion.

Take Advantage of Uncultivated Land

In addition to taking better advantage of existing space, we also recommend cultivating areas whose potential has not been fully realized. Practices can be changed at professional conferences to encourage more critical dialogue. For example, we promote taking advantage of the space carved out by the Qualitative Family Research Network at NCFR conferences, The Strauss Award, and the Theory Construction and Research Methodology (TCRM) Pre-

Conference⁴. The Qualitative Family Research Network could resurrect the roundtables format used a decade ago with a new conception of having the roundtable format place emphasis on the interplay of methodological, theoretical, and epistemological debates. We recommend assigning a discussant to the roundtable sessions to encourage public and focused debates.

Although we think showcasing the “blue ribbon prize winner” (e.g., Anselm Strauss Award) is useful and we encourage increased visibility, showcasing the winner could be coupled with attention to why the paper was chosen (i.e., Why was it selected? How does it map on to other work in the field? How does it help cultivate the field?) In this vein, we suggest that Anselm Strauss Award winner could be given space on the NCFR program to present their winning paper (similar to the Feminism and Family Studies Section’s Jessie Bernard excellent research proposal winner) and the award committee could request that the author focus the majority of the presentation engaging with epistemological, methodological, and/or theoretical issues from the award-winning paper.

In addition to NCFR presentations, other mechanisms to further heighten the visibility and impact of the Anselm Strauss Award exist. First, the reviewing process could become more public. Interested FS scholars should be invited to engage in discussions about the list of journals including the selection parameters. Historically, these discussions have been confined to the Nominating Committee. We also suggest that the Nominating Committee, on which three of the four authors of this manuscript have served, could post “honorable mentions,” and make public the list of all the qualitative articles in the past year that were considered for the award (in the past, the award committee has compiled every qualitative article published in the selected

⁴ These are illustrative examples from the NCFR’s annual conference; other organizations may have additional opportunities for interaction including listservs and blogs.

journals in the past year). The public list of all the qualitative studies could serve as an important resource for FS scholars as a continued database for empirical qualitative work published each year. We think this is one useful response to the dispersion issue we have already discussed. We envision that this list would help accelerate syntheses (i.e., meta-analysis) of empirical qualitative work as well as showcase the on-going methodological and epistemological assumptions embedded in the articles.

Moreover, we have ideas for journal editors and the TCRM workshop, designed to be a higher-level exchange of ideas and reactions to papers that are submitted as working papers read by all attendees. First, we suggest that a FS journal editor(s) and the TCRM chair encourage scholars to be thinking about ways of synthesizing the growing number of empirical qualitative work being published. Second, we would like to see TCRM explicitly support methodological qualitative debates. It might be possible for the TCRM chair to consider an under-explored topic in FS qualitative discussions (e.g., see our list on page 11) and invite several scholars to remark on their reactions thus creating an exchange similar to those in *JMF* in 2002 and 2012.

Additionally, taking cues from Adamsons' (2008, 2009) series of TCRM papers, in which she considered FS journal editors' thinking and impressions of theory pieces in their journals, there could be an investigation into current editors' perceptions of qualitative pieces (both conceptual and empirical). We recommend that scholars consider having dialogue with FS journal editors, editorial board members, and reviewers about their knowledge, impressions, and encouragement/welcoming of qualitative conceptual pieces and empirical pieces.

Fortify the Field

Targeting existing land and more fully utilizing untapped land are ways to help fortify the field, especially if the land is used to promote depth and provocation. As one additional way to

nurture the qualitative soil, we propose a major thrust in ways of synthesizing empirical studies for FS research, such as our recommendation for the Strauss committee. Lastly, we advocate for the FS field in general to devote attention to issues of epistemology, including the creeping of positivistic standards and viewpoints in published qualitative research; attending to how epistemology, ontology, theory, and methodology is fundamental to *all* research, not only qualitative.

Conclusion

Cultivating a field for healthy and sustained growth requires considerable reflection of previous growth patterns, soil and weather conditions, and a wide range of other factors including removal of weeds and other threats that interfere with optimal growth. In this paper, we have attempted to offer an aerial view of the soil (conceptual discussion) in which the crops (qualitative empirical work) are embedded. We have argued that careful attention to epistemology, theory, substantive dilemmas, synthesis and critical critique will optimize the harvest of qualitative work in FS and of the FS field at large.

Although, on the surface, appreciating and expanding are promising goals, we would caution family scholars to think carefully about how they are cultivating the qualitative landscape. Instead of appreciating qualitative work in broad terms, we encourage scholars to work towards a sophisticated appreciation of what already has been planted (e.g., integration of conceptual discussions, synthesis of empirical work). In a similar manner, we suggest targeted expansion and would like to see a movement away from solely technical, methodological pieces. We also think that our paper offers important directions for careful reflection of empirical studies. We view the creation of *JFTR* as a healthy signal of the FS field. At this juncture in history, conditions are especially ripe to cultivate the qualitative terrain in ways that make our

field more sustainable.

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