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Martin Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue and Implications for Qualitative Family Research

Martin Buber is well-known for his seminal book I and Thou *and his philosophy of dialogue. Although he is often characterized as an existentialist, Buber referred to himself as a philosophical anthropologist, given his study of the wholeness and uniqueness of human being. Buber viewed human existence as grounded in relationships. However, in spite of his view of human being as fundamentally relational, his ideas have received relatively little attention in family theory and research. As part of the special issue on qualitative family scholarship and innovative theories in the interpretive tradition, this article first examines the intersection of Buber's philosophy with the interpretive tradition in social science research. It then presents an overview of Buber's relational constructs I–It and I–Thou and his philosophy of dialogue. Finally, the implications of Buber's ideas for the process of qualitative family research, particularly qualitative interviewing, are discussed, followed by a presentation of several potential qualitative studies that draw on Buber's theoretical framework of dialogue and way of being.*

Let us assume I am discussing a text from our literature. It has been interpreted countless times and in countless ways. I know that no interpretation, including my own, coincides with the original meaning of the text. I know that my interpreting, like everyone else's, is conditioned through my being. But if I attend as faithfully as I can to what it contains of word and texture, of sounds and rhythmic structure, of open and hidden connections, my interpretation will not have been made in vain—I find something, I have found something. And if I show what I have found, I guide him who lets himself be guided to the reality of the text. To him whom I teach I make visible the working forces of the text that I have experienced. (Buber, 1957, pp. 100–101)

Martin Buber (1878–1965) was both an original thinker and an interpreter of different philosophical, religious, and literary traditions. He is well known for his philosophy of dialogue and his seminal book *I and Thou* (1958), a treatise written relatively early in Buber's professional life in which he presented his relational ontology. In addition to his influential philosophical work, Buber was also known for his German translation of the Bible (the first Hebrew-to-German translation since Martin Luther), his enthusiasm for mysticism and Hasidic Judaism, and his unique influence in the Zionist movement of the twentieth century.

Buber was a prolific writer who authored more than 700 books and essays during his lifetime, many of which have been translated into multiple languages. During the past century, hundreds of books, chapters, articles, and essays about him and his ideas have been written by authors throughout the world and across diverse disciplines. The implications of Buber's relational philosophy are profound,

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and the applications of his ideas about interpersonal relationships have influenced numerous individuals, disciplines, and communities.

Family studies has a rich tradition of scholarship related to interpersonal relationships and families. Yet much of the family research that is published makes no reference to theory (Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and relatively few family scholars have drawn on Buber's philosophy as a theoretical framework for research and practice. Although complex and perhaps challenging to apply, Buber's relational philosophy, his sensitivity to social and historical context, and his focus on lived experience resonate with the assumptions associated with many qualitative research approaches in the social sciences. The purpose of this article is fourfold: first, to discuss the intersection of Buber's ideas with the interpretive tradition in family science research; second, to present some of the fundamental constructs of Buber's relational philosophy; third, to discuss implications of Buberian theory on the process of qualitative family research; and fourth, to present some suggestions for qualitative family research that draw on Buber's relational framework.

Buber and the Interpretive Tradition

Although much of the research in the family and social sciences is grounded in positivistic assumptions associated with quantitative research and the scientific method (Allen, 2000; Bengtson et al., 2005), qualitative research and the interpretive tradition have a long and rich history in family and social science research (Acock, van Dulman, Allen, & Piercy, 2005; Gilgun, 2012; Goodsell, 2013; Zvonkovic, Sharp, & Radina, 2012). Interpretive research aims to develop deeper understandings of human experience. It emphasizes subjective experience and focuses on understanding the meaning that people give to their experience. Interpretivism also recognizes the importance of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of people's experience. This includes that of the researcher(s), who actively contributes to the generation of meaning. With interpretive research, the researcher is the primary means of data collection and analysis, processes that necessarily involve interpretation and close engagement with the data.

Similar to the interpretive tradition in social science research, Buber was intensely interested in understanding human experience. Specifically, he was deeply concerned with human *being*. Buber is often characterized as an existentialist (although he did not claim this label as his own), with an emphasis on human *being* as fundamentally relational and a rejection of the positivistic notion that humans are subjects operating within a world of objects who can be adequately understood according to physical or psychological properties. Other parallels with the interpretive tradition include the importance of context and a critical stance toward objectivity, dogmatism, universal laws governing human behavior, and decontextualized generalizations of human experience (Rosenblatt, 2012). With his focus on relationships, he was also concerned with knowing (or being in *dialogue* with) the whole person and his or her lived experience, rather than interacting with others in abstractions, fragments, or as a function of one's own subjectivity or projections. Buber's philosophy of dialogue has important implications for both the way qualitative research is conducted and the subject of families and relationships.

Phenomenology

In many ways, Buber's philosophy intersects with aspects of the phenomenological tradition. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with understanding lived experience and is often identified with 20th century thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others. Although there are different schools of phenomenology, phenomenological theory generally assumes that humans are interpretive beings that actively make sense of the world around them and come to understand their world through direct experience or engagement (Daly, 2007; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). This notion of engagement with the world was described by Merleau-Ponty (1962): "All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world" (p. viii). Our reality, therefore, is what we know through our lived experience with the world.

Along with an emphasis on lived experience, phenomenologists acknowledge the importance of language, as human experience and

understanding are fundamentally informed and constituted by language (Knapp, 2003; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Buber and phenomenological scholars recognize that language is essential to the process of interpretation, or the process of making sense of and giving meaning to experience. It also constrains how one experiences the world (Inger, 1993; Knapp, 2003). Additionally, those in the phenomenological tradition recognize the influence of social, cultural, and political contexts on people's interpretations of their experience (Dahl & Boss, 2005; Dowling, 2007).

Phenomenology is not only a philosophical tradition but also a framework for scientific research (Giorgi, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989). As a method of investigation, phenomenology is characterized by its domain of study, its methods, and its results (Smith, 2013). At a basic level, phenomenological research seeks to understand human consciousness and experience (Dahl & Boss, 2005). In contrast to research that focuses on quantitative and objective data, phenomenological inquiry emphasizes qualitative, experiential information. Its primary focus is on human phenomena, how people experience and make sense of their everyday worlds, and the meaning their experiences have for them (Daly, 2007; Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). Consequently, phenomenology is often utilized as a theoretical framework for qualitative studies, which seek to provide in-depth understanding and rich descriptions of human experience. As such, it is especially suited as a framework for studying families (Daly, 2007; Gilgun, 2012; Zvonkovic et al., 2012).

Existential Phenomenology

One branch of phenomenology is *existential phenomenology*. As described earlier, phenomenology generally focuses on how people understand their experience. Existentialism, a philosophical movement commonly associated with the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and others, is primarily concerned with the concrete existence of individual persons and their experience of *being*, or *being-in-the-world* (Crowell, 2010; Heidegger, 1962; Polkinghorne, 1989). Being-in-the-world, or *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1962), is an ontological construct that refers to a person's prereflective, pretheoretical existence

and engagement with the world (Wheeler, 2013).

Existentialism rejects the notion of humans as subjects interacting with a world of objects (Crowell, 2010). Similar to Buber, existentialists believe that human being cannot be fully understood according to basic categories derived from scientific, psychological, or philosophical thought. Existentialism does not reject the validity of these or other categories; rather, it holds that humans cannot be completely understood in terms of them. A family researcher can adopt a third-person view and describe a person's experience in light of these or other categories. However, a person's *being* as a first-person agent cannot be fully understood in categorical or third-person terms. Rather than viewing people as subjects living in a world of objects, an existential phenomenological perspective stresses the complete unity and interdependence of the individual and his or her world (Valle et al., 1989). The *meaning* of a person's existence emerges through the world he or she lives in, and vice versa. Studies informed by this perspective seek to "*understand* phenomena in their perceived immediacy and [are] not concerned with *explaining, predicting,* or, *controlling* them" (Valle et al., 1989, p. 13).

Although much of Buber's writings are existential in nature, he did not identify himself as an existentialist, contrasting his focus on the whole person and "dialogic" intersubjectivity with the "monologic" self-consciousness emphasized by existentialism (Scott, 2014). In the latter part of his life, he considered himself a "philosophical anthropologist," with his study of the wholeness and uniqueness of human *being* (Friedman, 2002). However, with his emphasis on dialogue and his sensitivity to language, context, and the primacy of experience and prereflective or pretheoretical engagement with the world (Wheeler, 2013), his ideas resonate with the phenomenological-existentialist tradition.

Similar to phenomenological theory, Buber felt that one could understand the subjective experience of another, but not from a detached or analytical perspective. Understanding another's experience means acknowledging the *whole* person, a way of engaging that Buber referred to as genuine *dialogue*. However, for Buber, this is not achieved through the application of method or willful desire, nor can one understand another's experience through subjective reflection or by standing apart to observe it. In

doing so, the Other (e.g., the friend, spouse, child, coworker, research participant) is related to as an object, a relational stance that precludes understanding. Rather, Buber's notion of understanding the Other is a prereflective way of being-in-the-world that involves regarding oneself and others as whole people who cannot be reduced to a collection of attributes or characteristics (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

Biography: Social, Political, Religious, and Philosophical Influences

In his work, Buber emphasized the importance of social and historical context and knowing a person in the concrete rather than the abstract. His life experiences deeply influenced his ideas about the nature of human *being*, relationships, and his philosophy of dialogue. Buber was born in 1878 into a middle-class Jewish home in Vienna. When he was 3 years old, his mother left the family, and he was sent to live with his paternal grandparents in Poland. There, Buber was immersed in Jewish culture and religious teachings, and the 10 years in which he lived with his grandparents had a significant effect on his educational and spiritual development (Friedman, 1991). Buber attended universities in Vienna, Berlin, Zurich, and Leipzig, where he studied the history of art, German literature, philosophy, and psychology. He read widely the works of classical and contemporary philosophers (Friedman, 1976) and was significantly influenced by the ideas of Kant, Dilthey, Simmel, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. Buber was also very adept at learning languages, becoming fluent in German, Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, French, Italian, and English, with a reading knowledge of Greek, Latin, Spanish, and Dutch. His love for languages contributed to Buber's lifelong fascination with and sensitivity to words and meanings (Zank, 2008). He was married for 57 years and, had two children, and spent most of his professional life in Germany and Israel. He was on the faculty at University of Frankfurt from 1923 to 1933, when he resigned his position in protest to Hitler's rise to power. Buber left Nazi Germany in 1938 and moved to Palestine to join the faculty of Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Although he did not practice Judaism in adulthood and was critical of formal religious institutions, Buber was personally very religious (Friedman, 1976). He emphasized a relationship-based spirituality comprising a personal relationship with God, rather than organized religion (Ross, 2009). In spite of Buber's personal views on formal religion, Buber was seen as a bridge builder between the Jewish and Christian faiths, and he became well regarded by Christian theologians and scholars. His ideas also influenced some in the civil rights movement, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who quoted him in his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Buber's work has been widely read, analyzed, criticized, praised, and applied across multiple disciplines. Buber's ideas have influenced scholars in anthropology, art, business, communication theory, economics, education, ethics, family science and family therapy, feminism, literary theory and analysis, philosophy, political science, psychology and psychotherapy, and religious studies.

Buber's Philosophy of *Dialogue*

The Narrow Ridge

Buber is best known for his seminal book *I and Thou* and his philosophy of dialogue. The well-known biographer and scholar Maurice Friedman (1976) characterized Buber's life as a "life of dialogue." Buber was not satisfied with uncritically adopting past or contemporary theories and philosophies of humanity. Rather, his life was an ongoing, open conversation and study of the wholeness and uniqueness of what it means to be human (Friedman, 2002). In the collection of essays *Between Man and Man* (1965a) Buber wrote:

> I have occasionally described my standpoint to my friends as the "narrow ridge." I wanted by this to express that I did not rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed. (p. 184)

Walking on the narrow ridge entails a continual resistance to generalizations, universalities, and categories that obscure the irreducible uniqueness of the Other. Walking on the narrow ridge means carefully managing what are usually understood as opposites such as freedom and constraint, individuality and community (Friedman, 1991; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Walking the narrow ridge can be difficult at times, and family scholars may find themselves

divided regarding constructs that are seemingly in conflict, such as quantitative versus qualitative research, or the influence of genetics versus one's environment. Living life on the narrow ridge, however, Buber chose not to set up camp on either side of difficult subjects. Friedman (1976) described several illustrations of Buber courageously walking the narrow ridge. For example, rather than a Jewish *or* a Palestinian state, he supported dialogue, cooperation, and a binational state. Rather than dividing human existence into inner and outer, subjective and objective, and individualistic and collectivistic, Buber argued for the *interhuman*: "the ontological dimension in the meeting between persons" (Friedman, 2008, p. 300).

I–It and I–Thou

In Buber's most famous work, *I and Thou*, he presents his theory of the two basic modes of existence: *I–It* (*Ich-Es*) and *I–Thou* (*Ich-Du*). Originally published in German as *Ich und Du* in 1923, it was first translated into English in 1937 by Ronald Gregor Smith. In 1970, a new translation was published by Walter Kaufmann, a student, friend, and critic of Buber. For the most part, the two translations offer similar opportunities for understanding Buber's theory of human *being* and relationships. Nevertheless, there is one variation which must be discussed before expanding on Buber's theory: the different way in which Smith and Kaufmann chose to translate the German word *du*, which is part of the book's title (*Ich und Du*) and the word-pair *I–Thou* (*Ich-Du*). In the first English translation by Smith, *du* was translated *thou*, using an archaic English form of "you." Kaufmann, however, used a more literal translation: *you*. Unfortunately, neither of these captures the meaning and nuance of the German *du*, which is the personal or familiar form of the word *you* (Morgan & Guilherme, 2010). In German, *du* (as opposed to the formal or unfamiliar *sie*) connotes a degree of intimacy and trust and is reserved for only the closest relationships, such as family, close friends, children, and the Divine. However, in contemporary English, *thou* is not used in this manner. Friedman (1976) contends that the biblical-sounding language of *thou* in Smith's translation has misled many to conclude that Buber is speaking only of a relation between man and God. However, it is clear that this was not Buber's intent. Understanding the familiar,

intimate meaning of *du* helps provide insight into the type of relationship Buber means by *Ich-Du*—and the English translation *I–Thou or I–You*.

Buber's basic thesis in *I and Thou* is that human being is fundamentally relational. To *be* is to *be in relation with others*. He argued that people continually stand in relation to others in one of two ways. He begins his book with the following description of the two ways of being:

> To Man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude.
>
> The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks.
>
> The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words.
>
> The one primary word is the combination *I–Thou*.
>
> The other primary word is the combination *I–It*; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *He* and *She* can replace *It*.
>
> Hence the *I* of man is also twofold.
>
> For the *I* of the primary word *I–Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I–It*. (Buber, 1958, p. 3)

This introduction embodies Buber's ontology of the interhuman (Friedman, 1976). *I–It* and *I–Thou* are the two fundamental relationships or basic attitudes that constitute human existence. For "the 'I' does not exist ontologically prior to relation; that is, there cannot be 'I' without it being related to an 'It' or to a 'Thou'" (Morgan & Guiherme, 2010, p. 5). In other words, *who we are* is *who we are with others*. For Buber, there are two basic ways of being: *I–It* and *I–Thou*. In any given moment, we are either one or the other.

To be *I–It* is to stand in relation to the Other as an object. Warner (2001) described three ways people can be objectified: others are regarded as means, obstacles, or irrelevant (see also Arbinger Institute, 2000, 2006). With an *I–It* stance, we may relate to another as a means to an end. In this instrumental way of relating, others are seen as things to be utilized. We may also regard others as irritants or obstacles to our ends. With Buber's *I–It* way of being, an individual relates to others in light of his or her own needs, desires, or distortions. This can occur in relatively functional relationships, such as those that might take place in business or educational settings. However, "more insidiously, *I–It* can take the form of abusive

or exploitive relationships, in which the other is dealt with on the basis of desires and projections, regardless of the damage done to the other" (Fishbane, 1998, p. 42). Additionally, others may be objectified as they are reduced to categories of understanding or bundles of traits or characteristics. Rather than engaging with the uniqueness of the whole person, the detached observer "draws out the general qualities of a person and places them in categories" (Friedman, 2008, p. 49). In this way of relating, others are not truly acknowledged, and the relationship is not direct or mutual (Friedman, 1960).

In contrast to the *I–It* mode, there is the *I–Thou* way of being. *I–Thou* is the essence of *relationship* and is characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, and openness (Friedman, 1965, 2002). To be *I–Thou* is to stand in relation to another as a whole person. In an *I–Thou* relationship, the Other is not a means or obstacle to some object or end goal. As Kant suggested, others are regarded not as a means to an end but as an end of themselves. *I–Thou* is characterized by a rich and intimate engagement with the *Thou*—or the whole, irreducible Other. Rather than seeing others in light of generalities, one relates to the uniqueness of others. In contrast to the other-negating, dehumanizing quality of *I–It*, *I–Thou* is other affirming. To regard another in an *I–Thou* way is to view the Other as a person with needs and desires as real to us as our own (Warner, 2001). One is alive to the realities and experiences of the Other (Boyce, 1995).

Buber further distinguished between the two primary word pairs and the two modes of engagement:

> Primary words do not signify things, but they signify intimate relations.
>
> Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence.
>
> Primary words are spoken from the being.
>
> If *Thou* is said, the *I* of the combination *I–Thou* is said along with it.
>
> If *It* is said, the *I* of the combination *I–It is* said along with it.
>
> The primary word *I–Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being.
>
> The primary word *I–It* can never be spoken with the whole being.
>
> There is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I–Thou* and the *I* of the primary word *I–It*. (Buber, 1958, pp. 3–4)

Buber clarified that the *I* does not stand alone or exist independent of others, as human being is fundamentally relational. Furthermore, the *I* is different in each case. An *I–Thou* stance involves one's whole being in relation to the wholeness of the Other. One is made whole through dialogue with the Other. In contrast, an *I–It* stance never involves the whole being, as it involves the objectification of the Other, which necessarily objectifies the self. What is different is not the Other but the nature of the relationship (Friedman, 1960).

I–It relationships are relationships between subject and object. One relates to the Other indirectly and nonmutually (Friedman, 2002). However, "when *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object" (Buber, 1958, p. 4). Buber (1958) continued:

> Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.
>
> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no *thing*. . . . But he takes his stand in relation. . . .
>
> The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*. . . . No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*. (pp. 4, 11)

The realm of *I–Thou* entails an unmediated responsiveness and direct relation to others; the realm of *I–It* comprises an alienated world in which people are regarded as objects (Metcalfe, 2013):

> If I face the human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I–Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things and does not consist of things.
>
> Thus human being is not . . . a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. (Buber, 1958, p. 8)

With *I–Thou*, another is not known as an abstraction or reduction to categories of identity (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, sexual orientation, diagnosis). Rather, the Other is experienced in the here and now as a person in his or her entirety.

Although Buber described *I–Thou* as essential to genuine relationships and dialogue, he did not believe that the *I–It* way of being was bad or wrong. He felt that both ways of engaging others in the world are necessary for human existence (Friedman, 1960). *I–It* relations help provide the

basis for ordered civilization, scientific endeavors, and technical accomplishment. However, *I–It* alone is insufficient for human existence. Without the *I–Thou*, a person would not become a self at all (Friedman, 1960). Although *I–It* allows for necessary dealings in the world, Buber lamented that modern society was becoming skewed toward *I–It*, with this stance eclipsing the *I–Thou* (Cohn-Sherbok, 2013). He thought that *I–Thou* experiences are essential to a fulfilling life and that modern society needs a better balance between the two ways of being.

For Buber, way of being is not an either-or proposition. In general, we shift back and forth between the two ways of being. In Buber's eyes, the fundamental choice is not whether to be *I–It* or *I–Thou*, rather it is finding a healthy alternation between the two (Friedman, 1976). Buber asserted that one cannot stay in an *I–Thou* stance continuously, and an *I–Thou* relationship will inevitably slip into an *I–It* relation. However, the *I–It* always has the potential to become *I–Thou* (Morgan & Guilherme, 2010). This allows for the possibility of change in relationships. A person who regards another as an object can, at another time, relate to them as a person. The relationship between two family members that is largely *I–It* can become more regularly *I–Thou*.

Although theoretically complex, Buber's relational constructs *I–It* and *I–Thou* are a part of ordinary human experience. Although some have suggested that *I–Thou* experiences are relatively rare, others have argued that they are more frequent and commonly occur in human interactions (Arbinger Institute, 2006; Cooper, Chak, Cornish, & Gillespie, 2013; Warner, 2001), with people regularly and necessarily alternating between the two ways of being (Friedman, 1996). In my experience with students and clients, these ideas are experientially familiar to them, and most people readily recognize experiences when they were treated as an object or affirmed as a person. They can also identify moments when they related to others in instrumental or objectifying ways, as well as times when they were other affirming and responsive to the humanity of others.

Dialogue

Buber is known to many as "the philosopher of dialogue" (Friedman, 1976, xiv). Buber's (1958) philosophy of dialogue is grounded in his ontological premise that "all real living

is meeting" (p. 11). Dialogue is a relational or interpersonal construct that emphasizes "a conception of self as continually emerging in and through the relationship with other rather than one anchored in individualism" (Cissna & Anderson, 1998, p. 65). Buber asserted that the essence of human being is interrelatedness. "The fundamental fact of human existence is man with man, the genuine dialogue between man and man" (Friedman, 1960, p. 29). Thus to *be* is to *be relational*.

In Buber's (1999a) theoretical framework, being is located in the interhuman. The interhuman, or meeting, "is to be found neither in one of the two partners nor in both together, but only in their dialogue itself, in this 'between' which they live together" (p. 75). A person does not become fully human in relation to self. It is only through engagement with another human being that a person can become fully human (Ross, 2009; Scott, 2014).

The *I–Thou* way of being is manifest in what Buber calls *genuine dialogue*. When there is genuine dialogue, whether verbalized or not, "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them" (Buber 1965a, p. 19). This entails a commitment to understanding the experience of the Other, fully putting oneself "into the life of the Other" (Buber, 1965b, p. 81). It involves simultaneously regarding one's own experience and the Other's as legitimate (Inger, 1993; Warner, 2001). However, Friedman (2008) distinguished Buber's genuine dialogue from empathy and identification: empathy, "in the strict and narrower sense of the term" (p. 305), means to go over to or get inside the experience of another while leaving or losing oneself, and identification is to attempt to understand another's experience through one's own perspective. With genuine dialogue, there is a concurrent or simultaneous experiencing of the uniqueness of the other person, oneself, and the relationship. Genuine dialogue is a relation of co-constituted mutuality, with each honoring what is real and important to the Other and embracing similarities and differences without losing a sense of his or her own "Otherness."

Dialogue and Monologue

Buber (1965a) further articulated the fundamental difference in the two ways of being through

a discussion of *dialogue* and *monologue*. Dialogue is a turning toward another, acknowledging the whole person and their uniqueness. In genuine dialogue, one accepts the "otherness" of a person, which is characterized by an openness and willingness to listen to and respond to them (Friedman, 1960). Monologue, in contrast, is a turning away from another. With monologue, there is no real listening or relating.

Buber's personal experiences had a significant impact on his understanding of *I–Thou* and dialogical relationships. One of these was an experience Buber had in his late 30s that taught him about the nature of genuine dialogue. Buber was often sought out for wisdom and advice. One day during World War I, a young German soldier unknown to him and without invitation called on Buber's home. At the time of this visit, Buber was engrossed in religious study and prayer. However, he broke from his meditation and said he could meet with the young man for a short time. Buber (1955) recounted, "I certainly did not fail to let the meeting be friendly. . . . I conversed attentively and openly with him" (pp. 13–14). However, Buber did not recognize the young man's despair, nor did he discern the questions that remained unasked by his visitor (Buber, 1973). Buber later learned from a mutual friend that the young man had died in battle "out of a despair that did not oppose his own death" (Friedman, 1996, p. 8). He had not come to Buber casually but had been in need of support and answers about life's meaning and purpose. Buber was stunned and felt that he had failed the young man. He was remiss at his failure to provide a "presence" that affirmed this young man in his time of need (Friedman, 1976). He also regretted his failure to be fully present such that he could understand the life-and-death profundity of the questions that were unasked. Buber (1955) wrote that this experience led him to give up those things that diverted his attention from the present moment and the responsibility to the person who stood before him. He also learned from this that genuine dialogue involves more than words and behavior; it also requires being fully present, attending to the wholeness of others, and listening to the unspoken. *I–Thou* relating requires more than just casual or academic listening. It requires a truly engaged listening to the whole being of another.

Confirmation

Being made present by another is central to what Buber referred to as *confirmation* in one's uniqueness as a person. Buber asserted that people desire to be confirmed by others *and* to confirm others as well (Buber, 1965b). The confirmation of another person includes a deep form of relating Buber called *making present*, or "experiencing of the other side of the relationship so that one can imagine, quite concretely, what another is feeling, willing, and knowing" (Friedman, 2008, p. 299). In other words, the Other's feelings, needs, desires, hopes, or fears are as real to me as my own. However, in experiencing another person in this way, we do not lose ourselves, as we enter into relationships as unique individual selves (Friedman, 2008). Nevertheless, in meeting one another, our lives interpenetrate.

Confirmation occurs when others are made fully present; mutual confirmation (or *genuine dialogue*) occurs when both are made present by each other. "It is through this making present that we grasp another as a self, an event which is only complete when he knows himself made present by me" (Friedman, 1960, p. 30). Thus, self-becoming is a relational experience, for "the inmost growth of the self does not take place, as people like to suppose today through our relationship to ourselves, but through being made present by the other" (Buber, 1988, p. 61). However, confirmation does not necessarily require agreement or concession:

> The true turning of his person to the other includes this confirmation, this acceptance. Of course, such a confirmation does not mean approval; but no matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue I have affirmed him as a person. (Buber, 1999a, p. 86)

Confirmation is a key aspect of relationship maintenance in families (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2012), and most people recognize from personal experience what it is like to be confirmed. Friedman (2008) explained, "If you have ever been the object of someone's undivided attention, then you have experienced inclusion in genuine dialogue" (p. 304). An experience in graduate school helped me understand the notion of genuine dialogue and confirmation. On one occasion I went to a professor's office with a question about an assignment. As he beckoned me into his office, I could

tell he was in the middle of something. Without taking his eyes from his computer screen, he asked me what he could do for me. In the short time I was with him, he never fully turned away from the computer. I asked my question, and he provided an answer, but I felt like I was an inconvenience or irritation to him. On another day, I went to a different professor's office with a question from class. As he invited me into his office, he too was sitting facing his computer. However, he turned from his computer to face me and asked what he could do for me. After listening to my inquiry, he replied that he would be happy to talk with me about the question. However, he said he could not do it then because he was in the middle of working on a paper, and he asked if we could set an appointment to talk on another day. I remember walking away feeling very good about myself and the interaction. Only later did I understand the difference between the two experiences. In the first case, I got an answer to my question, but I left feeling dismissed and dissatisfied. In the second, I was denied an answer to my question at the time; nevertheless, I went away feeling affirmed, or as Buber might say, I was *confirmed*.

Ethics and Responsibility

Buber argued against universal values and codes of conduct. Rather, it is through genuine dialogue that we have a sense of what we ought to do in relation to another. For Buber, values and ethics, as part of a living human reality, "only exist in the 'life of dialogue,' in the direct, reciprocal relationship between man and man, for in it alone are we able to know and respond to the other in his uniqueness" (Friedman, 1960, p. 27). Thus, responsibility, according to Buber, is a response of the whole person to the Other in the "lived concrete," rather than responding on the basis of abstract principles of conduct. "The idea of responsibility is to be brought back from the province of specialized ethics, of an 'ought' that swings free in the air, into that of lived life. Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding" (Buber, 1955, p. 16).

Buber argued for the primacy of relationship. Thus, no abstract code of conduct is valid prior to particular situations (Friedman, 1960). It is in the moment of relationship—the *interhuman*—that one is called to action. Friedman (1960) explained that Buber's position means not that moral codes are useless but

that they should be recognized for what they are: abstractions and generalizations of human experience that point us back to what people have discovered in real meetings with another. Nevertheless, these guidelines should not take the place of discovering in the moment of genuine dialogue what is the *right* thing to do in *this* particular situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITATIVE FAMILY RESEARCH

Buber's philosophy of dialogue has significant implications for family science research, particularly that which is grounded in the interpretive tradition. There are numerous qualitative studies in family science that could draw on Buber's ideas as framework for the research. However, before suggesting some potential research topics, it is important to first discuss the implications of Buber's philosophy on the way qualitative research is conducted. His ideas challenge researchers to expand their usual systems of thought and think in radically different ways (Friedman, 1976). Scholars are invited to go beyond the common dichotomies put forth in the social sciences (e.g., subjective vs. objective, mind vs. body, nature vs. nurture, quantitative vs. qualitative). One problem with such dichotomous perspectives is that they lead individuals to align with one side or the other, often resulting in divisive hostility, suspicion, and intolerance—attitudes that are in opposition to Buber's notion of dialogue. Reducing experience to conflicting alternatives obscures seeing other possibilities (Friedman, 1976). It also interferes with dialogue and the possibility of bridging the gap between one position and the other, or between one person and another.

Although Buber recognized the necessity of *I–It* relationships and the utility of quantitative research, his ideas about dialogical relationships more closely align with the theoretical assumptions of qualitative research, particularly phenomenological research. Nevertheless, Buber's theory raises questions regarding interpretive research in the social sciences, particularly regarding the researcher's way of being in relation to the research participants. Like Buber's emphasis on being in dialogue with the whole person and knowing his or her lived experience, the phenomenological researcher is interested in the lived experience of others. Yet if family scientists approach their work with

analytical distance, see family members merely as objects to be studied, or predetermine the categories that participants' responses and experiences will fit into, the research will necessarily be impaired. Friedman (2008) observed that the uniqueness of a person (e.g., a research participant) "is hidden from the individual who comes merely as objective observer, scientifically curious [researcher], or prying manipulator" (p. 299). If the research participants are regarded in an *I–It* manner, either the qualitative researcher will be unable to hear their experience because of the detached relationship, or the participants will be unwilling to share the uniqueness of their experience.

Metcalfe (2013) argued that in qualitative research there is a "difference between interviewing an identifiable subject and interviewing a whole person" (p. 45). He discussed the implications of qualitative interviewing in which the interview is understood as an exchange between separate subjects. When family researchers identify potential research participants by a particular characteristic (e.g., second-generation adolescents of immigrant parents), or when they are motivated by a desire to look at only one part of a person's experience (e.g., what is it like to be the mother of a child with a physical disability?), this "subjectification" tends to objectify the participants. In doing so, the researcher runs the risk of relating to research participants as parts or fragments rather than as whole beings. Additionally, research participants are thus invited to ignore their uniqueness and may identify with the researcher's objectified definitions and adopt an alienated identity (Metcalfe, 2013). The result may be an interview that is not about the Other's experience, but a confirmation of the researcher's presuppositions about the topic of study.

Instead of approaching research interviews with a detached or analytical attitude, Metcalfe (2013) drew upon Buber's theory to support the argument for a relational ontology in social science research that is more fundamental than an ontology of independent subjects. Buber's notion of *dialogue* invokes the *interhuman*. In this realm, an *inter*-view would entail a relationship between persons who are wholly present. However, qualitative interviews, as they are often conceived and conducted, end up being primarily an alternation of monologues (i.e., questions and answers) between a researcher and an objectified participant.

Given that the purpose of many qualitative studies is to gain a more in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of people, Metcalfe's critique raises questions about the methods of qualitative research. He cautioned researchers against relating to participants merely in light of certain characteristics or definitions (i.e., variables), such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, psychological profile, marital status, or other "objects" of the researcher's desire. Researchers should, instead, commit their whole selves to the Other (i.e., research participant) and focus on the whole of the person in front of them. Nevertheless, Buber (1958) suggested that a researcher can become "bound up in relation" (p. 7) with research participants in an *I–Thou* relationship without giving up the various qualities of them:

> To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up on any of the ways in which I consider [them]. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. (Buber, 1958, p. 7)

Rather than focusing only on narrow or isolated aspects of research participants, the whole person is present to the researcher. Metcalfe (2013) contended that "you can learn of subjectivity while in an interview with a whole person, but that you cannot experience a whole person if you are a subject in an exchange" (p. 45).

Buber's philosophical anthropology seeks to understand human beings in their uniqueness, complexity, and dynamic interrelatedness with others (Friedman, 1996). To engage in *genuine dialogue* with research participants, the interviewer will conduct the interview with respectful care and openness to the whole of the Other (Metcalfe, 2013). The qualitative researcher approaches an interview with an attitude of curiosity and does not assume the person's life or experience is compartmentalized around the researcher-identified topics (Daly, 1992; Friedman, 1996). A qualitative researcher comes to the process with some ideas about the questions she or he wants to ask, as well as some ideas about the phenomena in question. Researchers' questions inherently narrow their focus on specific aspects of human experience. However, this does not necessitate that they relate to participants as objects. Although the interview may have purpose, with "semistructured" questions as a guide, the focus is on the person in front of them and their lived experience. In other words,

the *person* must be primary and the researcher's agenda secondary. Researchers thus hold their purpose, ideas, and questions in a tentative manner, with a willingness to modify or abandon them if called to do so by the Other. When an interview explores lived experience in an *I–Thou* mode and all parties are in genuine dialogue, "it becomes impossible to distinguish a question from an answer, because every answer gives rise to new questions and new answers. This is the 'between' of the *inter*-view and the 'through' of the *dia*-logue" (Metcalfe, 2013, p. 50). When engaged in a dialogic interview, both "interviewer" and "interviewee" are freed from self-conscious identification with their roles and can collaborate in conversation.

The kind of direct, dialogical relating suggested by Buber's theory may be unfamiliar to many scholars, given traditions of objectivity and analytical distance in research (Bengtson et al., 2005). However, even qualitative researchers may be challenged by the notions of the interhuman, dialogue, mutuality, and interviewing the whole person (Rosenblatt, 2012). Friedman (1996) described further the implications of Buber's philosophy on the research process. Buberian theory recognizes that the researcher himself or herself is a human being and as such is, as *subject* and not just as object, a part of what he or she is studying. German phenomenologist Wilhelm Dilthey asserted that "knowers cannot be merely detached scientific observers but must also participate themselves, for it is through their participation that they discover both the typical and the unique in the aspects of human life they are studying" (Friedman, 1996, p. 16). This perspective is harmonious with the assumptions of second-order cybernetics (or cybernetics of cybernetics), which posits that the observer is part of the system that is being observed (Keeney, 1983).

A second-order perspective suggests that the research relationship is best understood not as an *observed-system* but as an *observing-system* in which researchers recognize the influence of their own subjectivity and participation on the research (Hoffman, 1985). The relationship between the observer and the observed is collaborative, rather than detached or hierarchical, with openness to the uniqueness of the Other (Golann, 1988; Hoffman, 1985). This allows for the possibility of genuine meeting and dialogue in the research process, and what is discovered is cocreated (Becvar & Becvar, 1999). Thus, the

question is not whether but *how* the observer participates in what is observed (Keeney, 1983). From a Buberian perspective, the attitude of the researcher (*I–It* or *I–Thou*) influences the research and what is discovered. The interviewer who has an *I–Thou* attitude is within the "between" not outside of it. The family scientist is fundamentally part of the knowing, which is grounded in an in-depth dialogue with each person and the recursive dynamic between the uniqueness of each case and generalizations that are developed (Friedman, 1996). Buber's theory suggests that in order to understand human experience, a researcher must first "be a participant who only afterwards gains the distance from one's subject matter that will enable one to formulate the insights one has attained" (Friedman, 1996, p. 16).

In spite of the ways qualitative family research may be enhanced by genuine dialogue, Buber recognized the necessity of *I–It* relating. Researchers cannot stay in the *I–Thou* mode on an ongoing basis and will likely shift into an *I–It* relation with participants and the data. Friedman (1996) pointed out that Buber was not pro *I–Thou* and against *I–It*. Rather, Buber recognized a dialectic between *I–Thou* and *I–It*. Human beings necessarily alternate between relating to others as objects and as whole persons, between indirect and direct relationships, between monologue and dialogue. Rather than trying to replace the dialectic with dialogue, Buber's narrow ridge encompasses both dialogue and this dialectic (Friedman, 1996). Friedman (1996) talked about this in terms of finding a good balance between them. He pointed out that the predominant methodologies in contemporary social science begin with the dialectic and study dialogue from within that dialectic. This means that "the mutual knowing of the I–Thou relationship is subsumed under the subject-object knowledge of the I–It relation" (p. 18). What Buberian theory suggests is not a rejection of the dialectic but "a shift in emphasis toward understanding dialogue as the source of knowing and dialectic as an elaboration of that source" (p. 18).

Possible Qualitative Family Research Informed by Buber's Philosophy

Buber's philosophy of dialogue and the interhuman not only has implications for the way qualitative research is conducted but also can serve

as a basis for specific research questions and studies (Cooper et al., 2013). There are several qualitative studies in family science that could be informed by Buber's theoretical framework. As discussed earlier, many of his ideas about dialogue and interpersonal relationships are harmonious with the thinking and research methods of family scholars in the interpretive tradition, particularly those influenced by phenomenological and existential theory. Phenomenological research is conducted with a purpose of "understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118; see also Daly, 2007), and family scholars interested in understanding the lived experience of family members are invited to consider Buber's dialogical philosophy and what meanings families give to their experiences in light of Buber's ideas.

There are multiple qualitative approaches that researchers could appropriately draw upon to conduct research informed by Buberian theory (e.g., case study, critical theoretical analysis, ethnography, feminist analysis, grounded theory, hermeneutics, narrative analysis, participatory action research, phenomenological analysis). Similar to Buber's notion of openness to the uniqueness of another, these qualitative approaches assume an attitude of openness to the uniqueness of research participants and the unique information that emerges from the research process (Gilgun, 2012; Rosenblatt, 2012). However, a researcher comes to understand a participant's experience not merely through the application of method but through *dialogue*. My purpose, therefore, is not to prescribe specific methodologies but to suggest some potential topics and research questions as a starting point for family scholars who are interested in applying Buber's ideas in their research. The following is a brief description of possible qualitative studies and research questions that could be informed by the ideas of Martin Buber.

The implications of partners' way of being and the experience of dialogue and monologue in marriage relationships. There is perhaps no other relationship in which way of being is more salient and the possibility of dialogue and monologue more prevalent than in marriage. The nature of the commitment, the physical and emotional proximity, the frequency of interaction, and the level and nature of intimacy (with

the accompanying vulnerability and risk) open up, but do not guarantee, the possibility of genuine dialogue. Buber (1958) spoke specifically about the marital relationship: "Marriage will never be given new life except by that out of which true marriage always rises, the revealing by two people of the *Thou* to one another" (pp. 45–46). Much of marital research uses quantitative measures of marital satisfaction and correlates the data with certain types of behavior/interaction (e.g., Gottman & Sliver, 2000). Carroll, Knapp, and Holman (2005) challenged the dominant theoretical assumptions of marriage field and called for the development of theoretical frameworks and practices that can improve marriage scholarship. Buber's philosophy of dialogue provides a unique framework through which qualitative family researchers to explore the relationship implications of his ideas. Researchers could interview marriage partners about their experiences with genuine dialogue (Cooper et al., 2013), confirmation (Galvin et al., 2012), and being regarded as a whole person (*I–Thou*) by their spouse. They could ask about partners' experiences with monologic interactions and being treated as an object (*I–It*). Additional research questions could focus on how way of being manifests in interactions between married partners. When do they relate to their partner in an *I–Thou* way (and when in and *I–It* manner)? How do partners' way of being relate to their experience of connection in marriage? What invites changes from *I–It* to *I–Thou* relating?

The implications of parents' way of being and the experience of dialogue and monologue in parent–child relationships. Parent–child relationships also provide fertile ground for relating to others as objects or as people. Family research on parent–child interactions and relationships often quantifies childhood outcome variables and examines the relationship these have with various independent variables such as parenting behaviors. Such research tends to objectify and depersonalize the experience of both children and parents. Drawing on Buber's ideas about dialogue and valuing the experience of others, qualitative family researchers could ask parents and children about their experience of their relationships and how they regard each other (as objects or as people). What is their way of being with each other? How does this influence parenting and they way they respond

to their children? How does this influence the way children respond to their parents? How does this influence the ways they get along? What are their experiences with monologic and dialogic communication? How does an adolescent's sense of their parents' way of being relate their responsiveness to their parents?

Communication in families. Studies on marriage and family communication have relied heavily on quantitative methods to understand the role, process, and implication of communication in families (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009). Additionally, several theoretical frameworks have been developed regarding family communication (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014). However, family communication scholars are not limited to existing theories, and qualitative studies informed by Buber's theoretical framework may provide a unique understanding of the process of communication and how communication between family members is influenced by their way of being. Communication experts often emphasize behavior and the acquisition of skills to enhance communication (e.g., Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010; Miller, Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1991). However, Fowers (2001) suggested that communication skills training assumes the presence of certain "virtues" that promote effective communication. Typically, communication research and interventions focus primarily on behavior. However, Buber's theory suggests that communication and relationships rest on something deeper than behavior: one's way of being. Thus, the quality and impact of communication in families is not defined merely by the words spoken. People may be talking without genuine dialogue taking place. A qualitative study could be done that investigates how family members' way of being influences their experiences with communication. What difference does it make in process and outcome of communication when family members regard each other as objects or as people? How do people experience genuine dialogue versus monologue? What facilitates and what inhibits dialogue?

Problem-solving in families. Way of being is likely an underrecognized or underdeveloped aspect of problem solving. Whether or not a person's needs, desires, point of view, and so on, are real to other family members may have implications for their ability to solve problems

or resolve disagreements. Who is more likely to find a mutually satisfying solution, family members who regard each other in an *I–It* or an *I–Thou* manner? With genuine dialogue, one regards the viewpoint of another as legitimate as his or her own and genuinely has in mind the desires, needs, and experiences of the other and seeks to establish a mutual relationship with them (Buber, 1965a). In contrast, seeing others as objects may invite resistance and hinder problem solving, as an objectified view of another obscures an understanding of their experience. Researchers could develop a qualitative study of family members' experiences with problem solving, specifically looking at the way family members regard each other (as objects or as people) and how this influences resolution of problems between family members. Instead of focusing on the effect of problem-solving behaviors on marital quality and longevity (Gottman & Levenson, 1992), the research would focus on family members' way of being in relation to conflict resolution.

Relationships between members of stepfamilies. Although the social stigma related to divorce and stepfamilies has lessened, the labels "stepmother and stepfather," "stepson and stepdaughter," and "stepsister or stepbrother" still may elicit negative reactions (Ganong & Coleman, 2004) and reflect objectification and interpersonal distance. Such categorizations obscure a view of the whole person and interfere with genuine dialogue. Nevertheless, membership in a stepfamily does not preclude regarding others in *I–Thou* ways. Qualitative studies could ask about family members' experience with these labels and the way labels objectify others and inhibit connection and relationships. Family researchers might also ask about how family members overcome these labels and see and respond to each other as people rather than through the implicit or explicit expectations associated with the "step" labels.

Therapist–client relationships and the therapist's way of being toward clients in family therapy. A few family scholars have applied Buber's theory clinically with couples and families (e.g., Borszormenyi-Nagy, & Krasner, 1986; Fishbane, 1998; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Inger, 1993). However, very few, if any, have utilized Buberian theory as a framework for research on couple and family therapy processes

and outcomes. Buber (1999b) suggested that it is within the relationship between the therapist and the client (or between clients in the case of family therapy) that healing takes place, an assertion that is consistently supported in the individual and family therapy literature (see also Friedman, 2008). Reviews of the psychotherapy literature indicate that the therapeutic relationship, or therapeutic alliance, is the therapist-influenced factor most strongly associated with successful therapy outcomes (Davis, Lebow, & Sprenkle, 2012; Fife, Whiting, Davis, & Bradford, 2014; Horvath, 2001; Lambert & Barley, 2001). However, the vast majority of data supporting this conclusion were collected by quantitative survey instruments developed by the researchers rather than by asking clients about their experience in therapy. Qualitative studies informed by Buberian theory could be developed that focus on the therapists' and clients' experience of the therapist–client relationship, the therapist's way of being with clients, and the influence of the therapeutic relationship on clients' therapy experience. Researchers could investigate how the therapist's way of being influences the therapeutic relationships or how it influences the way of being between family members. Other therapy-related research questions include: How does way of being present itself phenomenologically in the way therapists and clients respond in therapeutic relationships? What are clients' experiences with the therapist's way of being toward them, and how does this influence clients' engagement in therapy? What therapeutic events are associated with moments when clients experience being treated as a whole person? What invites change in clients' way of being in therapy and what facilitates dialogue between family members?

The transformative power of dialogue in couple and family therapy. Cooper et al. (2013) suggest research that looks at the transformative power of dialogue (as is posited by dialogical therapies): What facilitates dialogue and what are the therapeutic outcomes? Should therapists strive to consistently maintain an *I–Thou* stance toward clients, or is it helpful to relate to clients in an *I–It* manner at times? Researchers could interview both clients and therapists about their experience of therapy, particularly focusing on aspects of Buber's notion of dialogue.

Theoretical analysis of couple and family therapy theories and approaches. Couple and family therapy models are intended to guide therapists in their efforts to facilitate improved relationships in clients' lives. However, family therapy models differ greatly in the way they conceptualize people, relationships, and interpersonal behavior. The varied and disparate theoretical assumptions and clinical applications of these approaches invite researchers to critically examine the underlying assumptions of the theories, a process Knapp (2009) called critical theorizing. In this process, theory can serve a sensitizing function and enable one to see things that were overlooked or hidden. Buber's ideas about human being and relationships raise the question of whether family therapy models allow for genuine dialogue. Researchers could conduct a systematic theoretical analysis of family therapy models in light of Buber's dialogical theory and analyze how the models promote or facilitate *I–Thou* or *I–It* interactions and relationships (e.g., Fife & Hachquet, 2011).

Theoretical analysis of common theories of social psychology and family science. Similar to the theoretical analysis of family therapy models, scholars could utilize Buber's philosophy of dialogue as a framework for analyzing prominent theories of social psychology and family science (e.g., social exchange theory, structuralism, functionalism, feminism, symbolic interactionism). Knapp (2009) warned that a discipline that uses "an approach that engages in theory and research exclusively within the confines of its own logic, assumptions, language, and so forth, limits what we can know" and may result in "at best, premature understandings of phenomena and, at worst, incorrect or inadequate knowledge claims" (pp. 135–136). Buber's ideas about way of being and relationships provide an alternative theoretical perspective from which to view prominent social science theories and invite scholars to engage in dialogical, rather than monological, theorizing (Knapp, 2009).

Conclusion

The influence of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue reaches across academic disciplines, communities, and cultures. His philosophical-anthropological work focused on understanding human beings in their uniqueness

and complexity. He saw human being as fundamentally relational and proposed two basic ways of being with others: *I–It* and *I–Thou*. Even though his ideas have received relatively little attention in family theory and research, Buber's dialogical philosophy provides a unique theoretical lens through which to view interpersonal relationships and has significant implications for the field of family studies, particularly qualitative scholars influenced by the interpretive tradition. In many ways, his sensitivity to lived experience and social, cultural, and historical contexts resonates with phenomenological and existential theory. Thus, his theoretical framework has the potential to stimulate new qualitative family research, as well as theoretical analyses of family theories and clinical models. It also has significant implications regarding how qualitative research is conducted and how researchers engage with research participants. Buber's philosophy and the implications of his ideas may invite family scholars to move from the comfort of familiar theories and models onto a "narrow ridge" to consider new ways of looking at family relationships and generate new ideas for qualitative family scholarship.

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