Toward A More Satisfying and Effective Form of Research

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Psychology is not that difficult. This observation led a novelist, who also is a clinical psychologist, to write, "Much of psychology isn't complicated. It's just stuff grandmothers know" (White, 2008, p. 490). Nor is research very difficult. The African-American folklorist and writer Zora Neale Hurston expressed this charmingly: "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose" (Hurston, 1942/1996, p. 143). Yet, despite these realizations, there exist many misapprehensions about the difficulties and nature of research and about its possible role with respect to clinical practice. My aim, in this article, is to help dispel some of these misconceptions and to present expanded approaches to research that can better serve therapists and clients alike, while maintaining the projects' integrity as forms of disciplined inquiry.

Countering Certain Misconceptions About Research

In this section, I mention what I consider to be certain misconceptions about the nature of research and about the relationship of research to other human endeavors. Some of these misunderstandings have surfaced in therapist/counselor communities, some are shared by the public at large, and some are present even among researchers themselves.

Misapprehension #1: Research, clinical practice, and personal growth and development are very different processes and should be kept separate.

This unfortunately too common view has led to an under-appreciation of the common

features of these three activities and how they might synergistically support and enrich one another. However, it is possible to develop a more inclusive view of each of these processes in which each includes important facets of the other two.

It should be obvious that effective therapeutic practice and authentic self-development already include "research aspects." The "good" therapist is thoughtful, careful, observant, and at least informally keeps track of which therapeutic practices seem to work best or least, with which sorts of clients, under which conditions, and so on. Similarly, in attempting to consider and foster one's own psychospiritual development, one is again observant of one's process, noting what facilitates or interferes with progress, and noting accompaniments and outcomes of various practices and circumstances. In "research," these sorts of practices are simply made more formal, systematic, and explicit, and are documented more thoroughly.

The boundaries between these three areas can be softened rather than hardened, and this can be done whilst still honoring the importance of avoiding dual relationships. By judiciously choosing one's research topic (so that it addresses an issue of great meaning to researcher and potential research participants) and research methods (so that they truly serve the exploration of the topic, without trivialization or distortion), a researcher/practitioner can achieve the felicitous outcome of "research sessions" that simultaneously serve as occasions for enhancing the well-being of the research participants and also provide opportunities for increased personal learning and growth of the researcher.

Misapprehension #2: Research is difficult and involves skill sets different from those used in therapy, counseling, and personal development work.

I included the two opening quotes of this article in order to suggest that research need not be viewed as difficult because, as already mentioned, it involves the same sorts of familiar skills used in other endeavors—therapy, counseling, and personal growth and development—albeit in a more formal and systematized fashion. Personal skills, and even "spiritual" practices, can

become useful tools in research projects, when practiced either in their original forms or in slightly modified forms by both researchers and research participants.

Misapprehension #3: Research is rightly viewed as "empirical," but "empirical" often is inappropriately restricted to quantitative and experimental/intervention types of research.

When the term "empirical" is mentioned, one tends to think of research that is *quantitative* and is based on *experimental/intervention/outcome study designs*. In fact, the true meaning of "empirical" has to do with knowledge that is based on *actual experiences*, rather than on theories, speculations, or rational inferences. It is true that the results of experiments and intervention outcome studies are "empirical," but so are the results of other (non-experimental) quantitative research approaches (e.g., correlational studies, causal-comparative studies, and quasi-experimental studies). The results of *qualitative* research studies (which work with verbal accounts of research participants, rather than with numbers) also are empirical. Indeed, it could be argued that the research materials collected in qualitative studies are even more "empirical" than the numbers collected in quantitative studies, because the former are closer to the research participants' actual experiences than are the latter. In qualitative designs, experiences themselves are directly described; in quantitative designs, experiences have been mediated and transformed (and some might even say distorted) by having to be represented by numbers. This usually is not recognized by those who privilege numerical findings as being somehow more "empirical" (and, hence, more trustworthy?) than verbal accounts. What also is insufficiently recognized is that qualitative studies *can* be used to draw valid conclusions about process and outcome, provided they are carefully designed, include a sufficient number of research participants, and if the findings are examined carefully for meaningful patterns. If properly designed and interpreted, qualitative findings can be just as "evidential" as quantitative findings.

Misapprehension #4: Research must be, and can be, completely objective; the researcher should not be subjectively involved in a research project. Indeed, "subjectivity" in any form is to be avoided.

This privileging of *objectivity* and avoidance of subjectivity favors a stance of the researcher as a separate, distanced, uninvolved participant in the research project. It also favors the use of *objective*, *standardized* assessment instruments over more personal, experiential reports by the research participants themselves. The researcher, along with his or her own expectations, intentions, and biases, always is intimately involved in any research project, and it may be best to explicitly recognize this and optimize possible researcher influences in a study, rather than allow these to remain "unconscious." Also, regarding the objective, numerical scores on standardized assessments, what frequently is not acknowledged is that the assessment items themselves originated with the subjective experiences of research participants, initially expressed verbally and qualitatively.

Misapprehension #5: It is wise for researchers to address "safe" topics, using familiar, well-established research methods.

Both the subject matter and the approaches used in research can be expanded to include innovative research methods and tools (described below) and to address less familiar but meaningful experiences and phenomena. In addition to the usual "deficit" related conditions typically studied by psychologists, greater attention can be devoted to growth-related and exceptional experiences such as spiritual, unitive/mystical, transcendent, peak, nonordinary, transformative, and other transpersonal experiences, and address these in ways that do not pathologize them.

Misapprehension #6: Research is chiefly about information.

Although this is true, research also can be about *transformation*. Indeed, transformation might even be substituted for information, in describing research, if what is transformed is properly described. A research project and its findings can transform the knowledge base of the discipline in which the research is conducted and even the discipline itself, can transform the eventual practices of those whose lives and work are informed by the research, can provide transformative opportunities for persons who contribute to a project as research participants, and can foster possible transformative changes in the researcher.

Misapprehension #7: Research findings are to be shared chiefly with other professionals in one's discipline.

Writing for, and publishing in, professional journals that tend to be read only by peers is appropriate if one's aim is mainly to advance the knowledge base of one's discipline. However, if one wishes one's research findings to make a difference in the lives of others, then it becomes important to write, present, and publish not only for fellow professional researchers, but also for those who are actively engaged in practical applications and also for the public at large. Publishing research findings in peer-reviewed professional journals is important. However, it also is important to supplement these with publications in semi-popular and popular publications, books, newsletters, and other similar formats, and to present one's work and findings in ways that make them available and readily accessible to the public (e.g., more popular presentations, workshops, trainings, public lectures). It also is important to disseminate one's work in ways that make it available to professionals outside of one's specific discipline—i.e., one can engage in projects that have interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary relevance and appeal.

Misapprehension #8: Research reports should be written and formatted in a very conventional, stereotyped, "scholarly and academic" style.

Related to the previous misapprehension (#6), there arises the issue of how to write one's research reports, even those intended for professionals. Need the reports be written in a dull and lifeless academic style? It is possible to make one's research reports more accessible, inviting, and interesting by being more creative in one's writing format and style.

Ways of Expanding Research: Three Recent Inquiry Approaches

In countering misapprehensions of the types mentioned above, researchers working in the context of transpersonal psychology recently have developed expanded approaches to disciplined inquiry that are more inclusive than the usual established research approaches and that more completely address and honor the human experiences being studied. Transpersonal psychology seeks to explore and understand ways in which individuals, societies, and disciplines might become more inclusive and expansive in areas of sense of identity (including ways of being and ways of functioning beyond the typical egocentric mode), development and transformation, conditions of consciousness, ways of knowing, values, and service. It also involves recognizing and honoring the *spiritual* aspects of our being, actions, and ways of thinking. In brief, transpersonal psychology seeks to address the "Mores" (to use a term favored by William James [1902/1985]) of being truly human: ways of going beyond the usual skin-encapsulated ego, with its narrowly constrained forms of knowing, being, and doing.

Like transpersonal psychology itself, its own inquiry approaches assume a pluralistic epistemology and ontology (akin to what James [1912/1976] called a "radical empiricism") and seek to extend and expand the tools and methods of research so that these might more readily encompass a broader range of behaviors, reactions, and experiences of both research participants and researcher. Space limitations allow a presentation of only the most distinctive aspects of three of these recent approaches.

Intuitive Inquiry

The intuitive inquiry approach developed by Rosemarie Anderson (1998, 2000, 2001, 2004) incorporates intuitive and compassionate ways of knowing, interpretation, and expression into all phases of research. It acknowledges, makes explicit, and utilizes the researcher's preexisting and developing knowings and skills, rather than "bracketing" these. The approach is a hermeneutical one that includes five iterative cycles in which the researcher's original interpretations ("lenses") are shaped, nuanced, and possibly transformed by the researcher's progressive interactions with the topic, with his or her own experiences of the topic, with data provided by research participants, and with relevant literature. The approach emphasizes the use of various forms of intuition, sympathetic resonance as a validity indicator, and "embodied writing" as a way of effectively communicating one's findings to others.

Organic Inquiry

The organic inquiry approach, developed by Jennifer Clements and her collaborators (Clements, 2004; Clements, Ettling, Jenett, & Shields, 1998), is a blend of research and spiritual inquiry. Its major emphases include the use of the (Jungian) feeling and intuitive functions (in addition to the typically privileged thinking function) in research; a valuing of the researcher's own "story" in connection with the experiences being studied and how that story might change as a result of confronting it with the stories of research participants; allowing one's research plan and activities to be flexibly guided by new inputs, including inner and "spiritual" knowings; and a seeking not only of *changes of mind* (information that can transform one's own and one's discipline's knowledge base) but also *changes of heart* (transformative changes that are important in the lives of the research participants, the researcher, and the audience/readers of the final research report generated by the research study).

Integral Inquiry

Integral inquiry, developed by the present writer (Braud, 1998a, 1998b, 2004, 2006), is an inclusive and integrated approach to research and disciplined inquiry. The approach might best be summarized by mentioning areas in which greater expansiveness and inclusiveness can be practiced.

- The *aims of research* are expanded to include increments in wisdom as well as knowledge and to emphasize transformation (of research participants, researcher, audience, and society at large) as well as information.

- The researcher's *sources of inspiration* are expanded to include not only findings and theories from psychology, but also those in areas of the natural sciences, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literature, the arts, the spiritual and wisdom traditions, and personal and anecdotal evidence.

- *Types of research questions* are expanded to include those that explore the nature of experiences, the ways experiences have been conceptualized and explained (including historical changes in such explanations), the developmental time course and accompaniments of experiences, and the outcomes or fruits of experiences.

- *Research methods and tools* are expanded to include a variety of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, and approaches with both nomothetic (seeking general laws) and idiographic (emphasizing individual cases) aims. There also is an increased emphasis on the *preparedness or adequateness of the researcher* (see, also, Louchakova, 2005; Schumacher, 1978).

- The *sources and types of data collected* can be expanded to include bodily reactions, sensory impressions, words and thoughts, imagery, feelings and emotions, realizations in altered states of consciousness, sensory and motor automatisms, and intuitional and direct knowing.

- Data can be *analyzed* not only through conventional means in ordinary conditions of consciousness, but also can be *treated* while in altered conditions of consciousness (associated, for example, with meditation or with movements), in order to gain different perspectives and insights regarding findings.

- *Ways of presenting and communicating findings* can be expanded to include statistical summaries, figures and graphs, tabulated results, themes and distillates, participant narratives, researcher stories and indications of the impacts of the study on the researcher, images and expressive art, poetry, metaphors and symbols, fictional conversational formats, and both professional and popular presentations.

Using Already Familiar Personal and Clinical Skills

In the research courses we offer at our Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, we emphasize ways in which already familiar personal and clinical skills can be adapted as research tools. The skills that we treat, systematically, in research courses include working with intention, quieting and slowing, playing, efficient deployment of attention, auditory skills, visual skills, imagery, visualization, imagination, kinesthetic and proprioceptive skills, direct knowing, intuition, empathic identification, accessing typically unconscious processes and materials, careful listening, critical thinking, and "spiritual" skills such as mindfulness, discernment, compassion, and appreciation of differences. We help students identify these skills in themselves, practice these more deliberately in order to enhance these and use them in each of the three major phases of any research project: planning the study and collecting data, treating data, and expressing one's findings. We recommend the use of these and related skills not only by the researcher but also by the research participants and even by the readers of research reports, so that they might more deeply understand and appreciate the research findings.

Conclusion

The kinds of expansions mentioned above may not always be necessary or suitable for every form of research, for all researchers, or for all purposes. However, the enlargement of research praxis and of our understanding of research, in the ways indicated above, can make the research enterprise more accessible and inviting for all, and more adequate for addressing the types of issues that are most meaningful to us in our personal and professional lives and work.

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