

PGCert exercise: The Purpose of Research

Introduction

The article, Researcher as Instrument Brown J. R., (1997), discusses the merits of working with qualitative researchers using a Gestalt approach to help train these researchers to conducting better research.

After introducing this article I will explore qualitative methodology and place this in the context of research, historically and now. With a comparison to quantitative methods I will show how qualitative techniques are better suited to Gestalt psychotherapeutic inquiry. In doing this I will also draw attention to the cultural contexts in which this has developed.

Researcher as Instrument

Researcher as Instrument, Brown J. R., (1997) discusses the positive merits that Gestalt Therapy trained persons may bring to the methods of research bracketed under the umbrella term of Qualitative. Brown, J. R. (1997, p71).

Brown, J. R. (1997, p81) comments on the pouring into the market place of books and journals dealing with qualitative research and further notes there is little or nothing available to assist researchers to develop the techniques, qualities and capabilities that will allow for meaningful results.

Brown discusses the overlap in the approach of the qualitative researcher and that of the Gestalt therapist. The article finishes with a description and reference to the learning courses the author and spouse offer to assist in the training of researchers; and seeks to promote gestalt trainers to those who lack our skills.

The Researcher and the Gestaltist

To promote the potential mutual benefit for gestalt trainers and qualitative researchers is to recognise some relevance of Gestalt theory to qualitative research. This relevance exists in the commonality of skills and attitudes required of both the Gestalt and Qualitative enquirer.

There are a number of ways of doing qualitative research. McLeod, J. (2001) refers to some of the many alternative genres of qualitative inquiry that are alive and thriving

- Ground Theory
- Content Analysis
- Narrative Analysis



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- Participant observation
- Ethnomethodology
- Feminist analysis
- Phenomenology

Such diversity in approach acknowledges the philosophical point that there are many ways of knowing; that in the human sciences there are many alternative or complementary definitions or understandings of reality. McLeod, J. (2001. p7). Qualitative research does not produce data for statistical analysis. In essence qualitative research provides the why result in the research. The research leads to a better understanding of people and their behaviour within their environment.

This contrasts to Quantitative research that concentrates on the what.

To this end Qualitative research is better suited to

- Small-scale research projects, which therefore cannot be considered representative of the population at large
- In-depth questioning making use of open ended questioning techniques
- Intensive and flexible research, allowing the researcher and participant to investigate around the subject, and influence the outcome of the research.
- The results provide much more detail on behaviour, attitudes and motivation and the analysis of the results is much more subjective.
- Where there is less criticality for replication.

Such methodology may seem to fly in the face of conventional research. I use the word conventional to provide for the alternative philosophies of gaining knowledge - (conventional) quantitative, and qualitative enquiry. Historically research has relied on quantitative methodology.

Historical Roots

The common threads within our Western culture - for this is only applicable to our Western, European culture - show how knowledge in both its gaining and dissemination has been subject to and controlled by the society of its day; and at the same time been subject to rival frameworks. For example today there are rival frameworks regarding the origins of the universe. In the 16th Century there were conflicting stances on whether the Earth circled the Sun, or the Sun circled the Earth. I wonder if the origin of the Universe might be held with a similar amusing reference in 500 years.

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In the 16th Century there was a radical reformation within the Western world of the framework employed for gaining knowledge. Up till this time the scientific framework in Europe rested on two authorities - Aristotle and the Church Capra, F. (1988, p53).

Plato and Aristotle

Delving to the time of the Ancient Greeks, Plato and then Aristotle wrestled with the problem of how we gain knowledge, how we learn and recognise that which is about us. Each formulated conflicting theories which have given rival channels of thought right through to our recent history. Plato put forward the theory that we can deal with an infinite variety of things experienced because we are born with a pure conception of the things we come across Richardson, K. (1985 p15). So essentially we are born with the knowledge and it is our experiences that begin to reveal that which we are born with. This is known as classic rationalism.

Within a generation of this came Aristotle (a student at Platos Academy). Aristotles own thinking led to a rival framework to that of Plato. Aristotle argued that it our experience that formulates our ideas and each experience forms an association to another, which in turn is associated further. This work was termed Associationism, and later Empiricism. Richardson K (1985 p17).

From these beginnings a path can be traced to the 16th Century where Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) sought to promote a new philosophy based on Aristotelean concepts. However it is with John Locke (1632-1704) that the birth of Empiricism is accredited.

The development, moulding and honing of quantitative research has been going on for over four hundred years, and is born out of the Age of Enlightenment on the epistemological stance of people such as Locke, Descartes and Newton. Even now our Western culture has the basis of its value system deeply rooted in this time, formulated in their essential outlines in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Capra, F. (1988 p53)

The social, cultural and technological context - the value system - of the time bears heavily on how knowledge was both gained and disseminated. This was the time for putting aside the organic view of nature Capra, F (1988, p56) and biblical doctrines that had held authority for a thousand years. This was the time I think, therefore I am was first uttered by Rene Descartes. Descartes further believed in the certainty of science and evidence.

At this time great strides were being made in mechanics, in particular clock making was at a level of precision and mastery. This provided a means by which the living organism could be described. This mechanistic outlook has and continues to exert a powerful hold on interpretation and analysis within Western research using quantitative methods. Today the tendency is to liken not to a clock but to a



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computer. This also demonstrates clearly how the use of language is so necessary in the furthering and in gaining knowledge.

By applying such mechanistic analysis to living organisms Descartes enabled great strides in Biology and in Medicine.

Newton furthered the work of Descartes, as a result the Newtonian world-machine became a much more complex and subtle structure Capra, F (1988, p70).

Quantitative Research

The nature of quantitative research provides for;

- An objective approach - shunning any influence of the researcher
- Large scale studies - suited to classification of data and statistical analysis
- Empirically driven - relying on experimentation and observation

However, fundamental to all this is the reductionism approach of breaking down the organism to its constituent parts, like dismantling the clock or the computer.

Whilst quantitative techniques have proved highly valuable and successful over these centuries it is at contrary to the philosophical stance of Gestalt psychotherapy. Even more, this philosophy is showing an inability to deal with the views in our world today.

Indeed, I argue, it is at odds with human-ness. To dismantle a clock and understand how the components work and fit together provides knowledge. To apply this to living organisms may provide for how limbs move and eyes sense. For example, a person may suffer pain, and science - medicine - has given us the knowledge to understand the mechanics of this; what preceptors in the body are triggered, which chemicals are released, and offer drugs to counteract the pain. What it will not provide for is why we move, for what we see; for how we interpret the environment. Medicine will not provide for how the person will feel the pain; the effect on the persons perception of the environment at that time; how adjustments are to be made to manage, work around or with, the pain.

Capra (1988) argues for changes, for moving from the mechanistic, reductionism approach to the Solar Age.

This is in contrast to the approach more prevalent in Chinese medicine, yet also under attack from Western culture. There the approach still provides for a more holistic approach, treating mind and body together - Their approach is holistic, if not always in actual practice, then at least in theory Capra, F

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(1988, p125). Thus the pain is seen as part of a larger framework of body mind and soul. Treatment centres on the person rather than being isolated to the specific pain.

Western social values are impacting in some form or other most of the known world, e.g., medicine and law. Whilst the historically led beliefs to research successfully deliver the knowledge we have today its limitations have, in the past 100 years, begun to be recognised.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research techniques have grown and developed over the last one hundred years. This enables, now, researchers to amalgamate both quantitative and qualitative techniques in a way that enhances and benefits research. Qualitative research has its roots in early twentieth century psychoanalytical developments of psychology and psychotherapy.

Denizen and Lincoln (cited by McLeod, J. 2001, p7) show five stages of evolution for qualitative research and this demonstrates its relative youth compared to the grandfather of quantitative research

- Stage 1: began in the early 1900s
- Stage 2: post war (1945) up to the 1970s
- Stage 3 to 5: from the 1970s to the present.

Clearly the development of qualitative enquiry is in its childhood with a growth spurt in these last thirty years. There has been four hundred years of development of quantitative enquiry in the natural sciences. I believe there is great potential to learn from this, and great hope for the future of qualitative enquiry to spark further knowledge and understanding at a more holistic level, and this is a position promoted by Capra, F. (1988) in his book *The Turning Point*, first published by Fontana, 1982. Written twenty years ago this text is even more relevant now and offers the hope and inspiration to look for change in our cosmopolitan, Western society - a holistic paradigm of science and spirit.

Qualitative research approaches that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century include ethnography (this is rarely used within psychotherapy), grounded theory, and discourse analysis. The longer established approaches are Hermeneutics (the interpretation of texts) and Phenomenology. The latter, Phenomenology, is at the very heart of Gestalt Clarkson P (2000, p15)

Phenomenology

Phenomenology was invented by Edmund Husserl in the early 1900s and seeks to describe the essence of every day experience McLeod, J. (2001 p37). There must be a bracketing of assumptions, without interpretation; encouragement to explore afresh, abandoning pre-held beliefs.



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Gestalt psychotherapy is both phenomenological and dialogical. Qualitative research, in all its diverse approaches, sits comfortably with Gestalt psychotherapy because of this. Researcher as Instrument Brown J. R., (1997) supports the contribution to qualitative researchers using a phenomenological approach.

Though it also needs to be noted that both of these longer established approaches have their origins in some of the main currents of western intellectual life McLeod, J. (2001 p54). This too sits comfortably (and unfortunately) with Gestalt psychotherapy in cultural terms.

The Common Ground

Lincoln and Guba (cited by Brown, J. R. 1997, p73) give five axioms of qualitative research:

- 1) Realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic
- 2) Knower and known are interactive, inseparable
- 3) Only time- and context-bound working hypotheses (ideographic statement) are possible
- 4) All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effect
- 5) Inquiry is value-bound

Brown, J. R. further on identifies four major areas where common ground exists between Gestalt practice and qualitative research

- Awareness, The researchers awareness of self, other and field is essential to reveal what is actually going on as we collect data.
- Availability, Being present; the researchers ability to be immediate and in contact with the interviewee/ client participant in the here-and-now. The I-Thou, dialogic relationship, rather than the I-it.
- Self as Instrument, to be in touch with own affective response; to use all our senses; to be alive to the obvious to reverberate to what happens in this interaction so that it becomes part of the dynamic (Polster & Polster, 1973).
- Process Orientated, A process is a succession of events that one experiences, responds to and helps create. (Brown, J.R., 1997, p80). Both Qualitative Researchers and Gestalt Therapists need to follow the tide as it flows [and] maintain a flexible, exploratory attitude (Brown, J.R., 1997, p80). The researcher/therapist forgoes attempts to control the direction of the course of a therapeutic experience or a qualitative study and lays aside a desired outcome (Brown, J.R., 1997, p81)

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Whilst this illuminates where the common ground is with Gestalt psychotherapy and qualitative research it needs to be remembered that Gestalt is a but one aspect of the humanistic movement which itself is within the human sciences, where qualitative enquiry is employed.

Therapeutic models are created adapted, changed, and discarded, and the qualitative research is furthering the understanding in our work and is providing the basis and evidence for acceptance in the professional and scientific community. At the same time by not adhering to the quantitative model there is also a risk to professional acceptance. McLeod, J (2001 p77) relates the pressure to employ the established quantitative methods - those more systemised and less reliant on the creation of an intense relationship between researcher and researched.

Commonality in Psychotherapy

McLeod (2001 p12) psychotherapy has been internally divided into competing approaches or schools of thought. I believe that whilst the different approaches look to justify themselves, at the expense of others through research the danger exists and grows of fragmenting our psychotherapeutic profession and community, to the detriment of all. Evans K (2001) touches on this in interview,

the profession needs to present a better example in terms of toleration and respect that the professional rivalries between different approaches to therapy can diminish

There has been a proliferation in therapeutic models as cited by Shaw (2002):

36 distinct models identified in 1959; 130 models by 1976 (Prochaska & Norcross, 1994); more than 460 models by the early 1990s (Spinelli,1994).

As we are dealing with individuals and to each their own belief systems I see every reason for a proliferation in models. This is very much involved with the confidence, or belief, that the therapy can work. We are each a blurring of humanness, it is expected that the therapy as well the research will be blurring of genres McLeod, J (2001)

The common threads that allow therapy to work have been described by Carl Rogers, cited by Erwin (1997 p43):

- Unconditional positive regard,
- Congruence, or genuineness,
- Empathic understanding.

My plea is for differing models to accept that each model will work, and to recognise no one model will work for everyone and that this does not denigrate or fail the any model but actually recognises the individuality and place a person is in, and at, in choosing a particular model to work with.



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The many approaches of qualitative inquiry serve to enhance our understanding and over time these approaches to research may draw together more fully the contributions offered by the range of psychotherapeutic models available

Conclusion

Qualitative research provides for the gaining of knowledge, for the dissemination of knowledge and for the scrutinisation of knowledge in a way that supports the epistemological stance of, particularly, the Gestalt psychotherapist. However the historical roots of qualitative research and psychoanalysis and psychotherapy needs to serve as a driving force to extend research and knowledge to encompass and reflect more than the values of a Western European, middle class, male dominated culture.

Furthermore we need to embrace the many therapeutic models using research to promote good practice, allowing the blurring the models.

Then perhaps, although a long way off, we will reach Capra's Solar Age.

We are at a turning point in the social and natural sciences and as psychotherapists have the opportunity to promote the effective aspects of our work. This can be achieved by immersion in the breadth of qualitative research techniques at our disposal and seeking to understand and learn. In doing this we must not only communicate with our peers inside and outside of our profession but also endeavour to remain open to scrutiny, inspection and accountability in our work and in our research.

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