

What Do We Mean When We Use The Word ‘Research’?

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I attended the 2003 Society for Existential Analysis Conference – ‘The Im/Possibility of Research in Psychotherapy’ – because the place of research in existential-phenomenological therapy is one with which I have been wrestling for some time as a trainer, supervisor and researcher. This brief paper is written partly in response to what I heard then, and is also an expression of my concern that research should become more possible and should be divested of some of its mystique. My hope is that if existential-phenomenological therapists can demystify therapy we can aspire to demystify research too, and we can begin by approaching the subject with as open and curious an attitude as that which we would extend to any client.

I have resisted the temptation to call what follows something along the lines of ‘Some Random Thoughts...’, or to number the themes to emphasize the piecemeal and subjective nature of what I have written, but I hope that readers will recognise that I am sharing something of an interior monologue in the hope that some, at least, of its sketchy and idiosyncratic elements may strike a cord with them.

It seems to me that a question that can be usefully asked of existential-phenomenological therapists is ‘Where are we with research?’ In raising this, I am thinking of Rollo May’s observation in *Existence* (1958) that *where* we are in terms of our relational world is often a more useful question than how we feel. Are we even in the room with research? What do we mean when we use the word anyway? The word ‘research’ itself can seem intimidating; if you are not a graduate then you may believe (erroneously I think) that you are a stranger to research; if you have an arts degree you may feel estranged from the sorts of ‘scientific’ research increasingly required in the therapy field. Perhaps worst of all, if you have a psychology degree you may have found yourself working with statistical models and computer packages that seem to deliver little of direct relevance to our understanding of the human condition. I recall in my own psychology undergraduate degree that the emphasis was on the generation of statistically significant findings – and human *being* was obscured beneath a concern with observable, measurable behaviour. Nothing essentially wrong with this, of course, especially given that undergraduate psychology is not primarily concerned with therapy, but it is easy to invest research with past meanings and fail to see its present possibilities. One response to the anxiety which the notion of research can give rise to is to

simply reject it as a valid enterprise; in the face of the ‘otherness’ of research we may defensively say it is ‘not what we do’.

It is interesting, when considering research, to start with the formulaic ‘I wonder what you mean when you say x?’ While it is to be hoped that therapist interventions vary in tune with client material, this still seems to be a useful question and, like most useful questions, it is worthwhile asking it of ourselves. So if I ask myself when do I think I am doing research?, I find I respond with a large number of examples. Among these are the following:

A trainee asks me whether I can suggest any literature on x, a topic for which they have been unable to locate any texts

I am invited to facilitate an ‘awayday’ for a group of clinical psychologists who wish to reassess their professional goals

I reflect or self-analyse on an aspect of a therapy session and refer to a paper on this aspect to help me explore further

I read about dementia after a relative has been diagnosed with the condition

I take an issue from therapeutic work to peer supervision

I am prompted by the lack of published material on similarities between existential therapy and, say, cognitive-analytic therapy, to write a paper which attempts to address this gap

While, typically, only the last of these examples would be considered to constitute research as it is generally defined, I think that each provides an example of a form of research when this is considered more broadly and creatively. Each calls me into a particular engagement with the world, one which is characterised by an attempt to explore and make new connections between aspects of this world. Clearly these activities are distinct from the kind of carefully controlled laboratory-style experiments which are designed to fit criterion of reliability, validity and generalisability, (two, at least, might also be viewed as therapy or self-development). Nor are they similar to the observational studies, case studies or surveys and questionnaires that researchers often use. Perhaps these activities might be termed ‘enquiry’ rather than research, as I am in each case enquiring about my world. In this regard, I am reminded of the model of the person as a problem-solving investigator of their world. In this sense I would want to argue that the sort of enquiry of which this paper is the product should count as research.

We often neglect that research carried out by those who are not explicitly existential-phenomenological in their orientation. As an example, the work of Johnstone (1992) provides considerable support for Laing’s thesis that family dynamics rather than inherited genes play a

significant, if not decisive, role in the development of schizophrenia. It may be that we neglect such research as part of a purist rejection of the notion that schizophrenia is an identifiable illness of an individual; more probably we do so because we do not keep abreast of such research. We hold definite views about such matters as an article of faith and many of us fear research which will unsettle these views – just, in fact, the sedimented position which we might note in our client work.

We probably need to make more use of, or at least increase our awareness of, those innovative and relatively recent perspectives in qualitative research which can have a useful dialogue with the existential-phenomenological approach. I am thinking here particularly of the cluster of transpersonal research methods (Braud and Anderson 1998), social constructionist theory and discourse analysis (see Potter *et al.*, 1990 for an overview), and narrative research (Josselson and Lieblich 1999), among others.

The existential-phenomenological tradition has until recently been found for historical reasons largely outside of the universities. There is, consequently, more concentration on dissemination through pedagogy than on accumulation of knowledge via research, as has been the case for psychology since Wundt. A glance at the existential-phenomenological psychotherapy literature shows how it has been dominated by a relatively small number of authors, often first-generation immigrants who have brought an energy and valuable life experience to this orientation. These writers have functioned as a bridge between the undeniably complex and challenging existential-phenomenological literature (particularly that of Continental Europe) and contemporary therapeutic practice. Their embodiment of theory has been crucial to the development of the tradition in the U.K. As might be expected, those practitioners who were attracted to their orbit have been consumed in the activity of training and have, by and large, made a smaller contribution to the existential-phenomenological literature. The situation now is that there is a sizable number of graduates from such trainings, and if even a small proportion of these engage in serious research we can expect a significant expansion in the literature.

It may be that, in the past, existential-phenomenological therapists were mainly to be found in private practice where there has been (relatively) less pressure to produce research. Therapists are increasingly finding they need to build a portfolio of part-time appointments. Quality assurance, funding competition and ethical concerns in provider organizations tend to promote research, though not necessarily of an innovative nature. We can see this when we compare existential-phenomenological therapy with CBT and CAT, where the need to attract and maintain public funding has encouraged a substantial body of outcome research. The historical development of the existential-phenomenological approach in the U.K. is, itself, likely to be of increasing interest to researchers. I have attempted an

historical account myself (1996), and Cooper (2003) documents this more comprehensively. The political and sociological ramifications of this phenomenon could provide the material for any number of projects in future years as our professional identity shifts and develops. *Existential Analysis* itself provides an historical documentation of our debates and interests since 1990.

While on the subject of training I would like to propose that we rethink the notion of research and its place in training programmes. I would argue that, in important respects, the whole of training is a training in research. It is a mistake to think of research as a hurdle in the form of a masters dissertation to be got over. If we take this view then for many, probably the majority, it will be got over like the measles, never to be repeated. Instead, I think we need to take more seriously the idea of research as a personal journey of discovery, or perhaps re-search, a continual transformative process rather than a discrete event. Research must not, of course, remain only of personal significance if it is to have any impact on professional practice – it must be disseminated, and evaluated by our peers, colleagues, and clients.

There is a tension which I have noticed in my work as an external examiner between a tendency for students on person-centred/humanistic trainings to believe that their internal locus of evaluation is paramount, and students on broadly psychodynamic trainings to feel answerable (though they may not use the language) to an external locus of evaluation. There is a tendency among existential trainees to fall back on a few ‘standard’ methodologies – those of Colaizzi or Moustakas – which is every bit as mechanical as the unthinking application of a quantitative research tool. The underlying philosophical notion of the co-created world can be lost in this ‘leap to the known’. I have even seen dissertations that do not include the researcher’s self-analysis or any attempt at imaginative variation, or, even, a return to the co-researchers to check the validity of the exhaustive description. When research is reduced to a pre-determined number of specific steps it is surprisingly easy to miss a few out. It might also be said, in passing, that the great majority of phenomenological research is done in the mould of the Duquesne school of empirical phenomenology and ignores the Continental European tradition. A useful critique of Colaizzi and Moustakas can be found in McLeod (2001); for pointers in the direction of Husserlian phenomenology, as distinct from empirical phenomenology, see Crotty (1996).

Good research is a *living* thing: it should leap off the page to revitalize some aspect of our way of being as therapists. In doing so it mirrors the characteristic of good therapy, that there is a genuine connection between the meaning worlds of client and therapist and, in the meeting, some sharing of experience. Research that is dead on the page cannot be resuscitated to invigorate practice. At best, like Frankenstein’s monster, it

will only be a poor clumsy attempt to mirror living vitality. Of course it is possible to take good research and mis-apply it, just as it is possible to take good literature and pepper everyday conversation with quotations from it. To do so, though, is to use research in a mechanical fashion and to attempt to dress-up or legitimate our practice by reference to 'authorities'. It is understandable that we should sometimes fall into this habit since it is easily learned in the process of essay composition, but just as an understanding of the content of an impressive list of references needs to be demonstrated in the body of an essay, so the research we draw on needs, as far as possible, to be embodied in the being-qualities of the therapist.

I found I resonated with Jenifer Elton Wilson when, in her presentation 'Research as a Way of Being-in-the-World with Others' at the 2003 conference she spoke about case work as research in practice in which the client is co-researcher. We are happy to talk about co-researchers rather than subjects when we refer to phenomenological research methodology, yet we rarely acknowledge the parallels between such research and the search and re-search undertaken jointly by client and therapist. I think that this is an important point which, if fully taken cognizance of, decreases the danger that we abuse our power as therapists.

The development of counselling psychology, and especially of existential counselling psychology, offers the opportunity for existential therapists (or at least those in possession of a psychology degree) to erode the barriers between therapy outside the universities, and therapy as it is taught within the universities. Counselling psychology as an emerging discipline is itself engaged in discussion about what constitutes appropriate research and is open to questioning the notion of the scientist-practitioner as the single way forward. This debate is, in part, fuelled by the need for counselling psychologists to establish a distinctive professional identity. The alternatives to Natural Science methodologies which are being discussed are attractive: I can identify quite readily with Spinelli's notion of the therapist as 'the potential co-author of a new, less problematic, narrative' (2001:6) for the client. Regent's College counselling psychology graduates have begun to add their voices to the debate through, for example, their participation at the last two BPS Division of Counselling Psychology annual conferences. Existential therapists, perhaps because of their inherently sceptical stance to the world, are drawn to those arena where debate about the nature and purpose of the therapeutic endeavour are located, and this arena seems just now to be that of counselling psychology.

Existential-phenomenological therapists, whether psychologists or not, are well placed to critique published research. McLeod (1997) has drawn attention to the inevitability that writers 'impose a simplifying structure' when they report the lived experience of therapy:

...Freud constructs an account of therapy as if he was a detective: many cognitive-behavioural writers produce accounts written as if they were primarily scientists, and so on. The potential danger here is that the genre gets mistaken for the actuality.

(1997:163)

A phenomenological perspective enables the researcher to uncover the assumptions implicit in the text, and notice the ways in which ‘unbiased’ commentators re-write their clients according to their own script. I reported an attempt at such an uncovering in a paper ‘Dialogue or Diatribe?’, published in *Existential Analysis* in 1993.

We need to undertake research to clarify the position of existential-phenomenological therapy in relation to other orientations. Such research might both indicate what distinguishes existential-phenomenological therapy in terms of content and applicability, and say something useful about the nature of ‘therapy’ itself. As practitioners we are imprecise about the efficacy of our approach: some existential therapists will work with clients presenting with symptoms/dis-ease ranging from questions about ‘the good life’ to full-blown psychosis; others limit themselves to the neurotic end of the DSM range. Some existential therapists believe they cannot work with addiction, while others specialise in this particular way of being. Outcome research is problematic for us since we may well view success very differently compared with many other orientations, but this does not exclude us from research, rather it means that we need to create forms of research congruent with our approach.

Much of what has been written engages with classical Freudian psychoanalysis. Rather less – in fact relatively little – has been written distinguishing our approach from other analytical approaches, or from others in common currency such as transactional analysis, Gestalt therapy, rational emotive behaviour therapy, or personal construct therapy. Spinelli (1994) is an honourable exception, and I have attempted to make some observations in papers published in *Existential Analysis* and elsewhere (1993, 1997), but more in the shape of actual research needs to be undertaken. It is, perhaps, time to define existential therapy positively, in relation to these various modalities, rather than negatively in relation to the straw man that (for therapeutic purposes) is Freudian analysis. We need to *show* what existential therapy is, rather than *say* what it is not.

While we may agree that existential-phenomenological therapists have produced relatively less research than have therapists from a number of other approaches (leaving aside for the moment consideration of quality as opposed to quantity), the amount which has been undertaken is far from negligible. If I refer to the most recent edition of *Phenomenological Psychology* I find that of the five articles published between its covers, three focus explicitly on research. Georgi, in a paper titled ‘The question of

validity in qualitative research', distinguishes between the meaning of validity in phenomenological research and that pertaining in test construction, in which researchers are concerned to create tests rather than study lived experience. Halling's paper 'Making phenomenology accessible to a wider audience' illustrates the value of phenomenological research on depression. The third contribution, Davidson's 'Intentionality, Identity, Identity and Delusions of Control in Schizophrenia: A Husserlian Perspective' is informed by case study research. This paper is a revised version of an address he gave to the Third International Congress of Philosophy and Mental Health held in Nice in 1999. I gave a paper on an existential-phenomenological perspective on schizophrenia (based on case study research) at the conference, the collected research papers from which were published in a substantial volume *Phenomenology of Human Identity and Schizophrenia* in 2002. Other papers drawing on empirical research include contributions on 'negative symptoms' of schizophrenia, delusions of control in schizophrenia, and the cognitive neuroscience of agency in schizophrenia.

There is a wealth of unpublished existential-phenomenological research in the form of dissertations and theses available in our libraries: on reading Halling, Popple (1995) on the subjective experience of depression springs to mind, and there are many others.

Writers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger did not engage with research in the modern psychological sense since they were concerned with thought, and with developing new concepts to understand human being, as distinct from research which tends to take concepts as given and so remains bound to the empirical. Binswanger, Strauss, Boss, Laing and other more recent contributors to our orientation did not do empirical research for the same reasons.

In drawing toward a close, it seems to me that we might take a lead from Heidegger, remembering his observation regarding philosophy, 'whether even if *we* can't do anything with it philosophy might not in the end do something *to us*, provided we really engage in it' (1959). Philosophy helps us to take Being seriously. A genuine engagement with the question 'what is appropriate research for the existential-phenomenological practitioner?' might have a dual outcome: it might provide the step change which will move us along our evolutionary path as a profession, and it might also allow us to engage in a useful critique of research in therapy *per se* in much the same way that Spinelli has argued the existential-phenomenological approach can provide a perspective from which to go beyond schoolism to foundational 'being qualities'. As McLeod has stated of the tensions between clinical psychology and psychiatry, and counselling and psychotherapy:

The distinctive values and professional identity of counselling and psychotherapy can be expressed not only through the type of research which counsellors and psychotherapists choose to do, but also in the ways that they engage in debate with more quantitatively oriented researchers from these other disciplines.

(1997: 157)

I am not sure that I arrive at a conclusion to these fairly random non-linear thoughts. I have found it helpful to take a walk through the research territory as I understand it, and to remind myself of some of the ways I have attempted to engage with it. In doing so I notice some new aspects I had not been fully aware of previously and I also get more of a sense of my own relation to research and where I want to go next. In this sense I think that I have just undertaken a small piece of research.

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