

## Self Inquiry

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## Self Inquiry

### THE TRADITION OF SELF INQUIRY AND THE TRANSPERSONAL

- What we understand about reality is dependent entirely on its representations in the world **and** our capacity to perceive them. Neither the “objective” truth nor the “subjective” experience can exist one without the other. Qualitative inquiry involves using one’s perception as a vehicle to understand a piece of reality- the phenomenon you are studying. **In this sense all qualitative research involves the self.**

*“Therefore doth it labour to make good these things that seem and are by the Senses, judged and determined; and the things that are truly, it hides, and envelopeth in such matter, filling what it presents unto thee, with hateful pleasure, that thou canst neither hear what thou shouldst hear, nor see what thou shouldst see.”*  
(Trismegistus, 1623)

- Qualitative inquiry has been at the heart of human experience since antiquity. In the ancient approaches to the search for knowledge or “gnosis” the self was known as a vehicle for comprehension. For example, the Greek philosophers created academies that focused on the development of oneself as a vehicle for understanding reality.

*“Wherefore the longing for the Godly state is a desire for Truth, and especially the [truth] about the Gods, in so much as it doth embrace reception of the sacred [things]—instruction and research; a work that is more holy than is all and every purging rite and temple-service....”* (Plutarch, 2001, p. 179)

Speaking of the role the dream played, by example, in the inner and outer worlds of antiquity Lunt cites White in explaining that *“Assyrians, Egyptians, Hebrews, Greeks and Romans (to mention only the Mediterranean world) were all profoundly convinced of the significance of men’s dreams. Indeed, the gravest personal, political and economic decisions often rested on their interpretation.’ It is also why Plato held that those in charge of the making of laws should follow the guidance given through dreams and insisted that no detail imparted through a vision be altered.”* (Lunt, 2010, pp. 96-97)

- From the earliest centuries CE, the ancient practices of direct inquiry have been overshadowed and ultimately repressed by churches and organised religion. Since the Renaissance and the so-called age of enlightenment, the connection between self and inquiry has been weakened substantially. Self has often been treated by organised religion, and by science, as something unreliable and damaged in its perception.
  - i. Much propaganda regarding the use of self in research was brought about by the church who insisted that humankind could have no direct experience of God because of flaws in character (original sin) and, as a result, the church put herself

in a position to mediate between human beings and their experience of the world. In other words, the church decided what was real or not, what was valuable or not, and what had meaning or not for the individual. Many of these judgments and doctrines insisted that a person go against his or her own direct perception of life, condemning perception as flawed.

- ii. When science began to gain popular power in the “Enlightenment” age, the church began to lose this power of mediation but before long the mantle was taken over by the scientists. Direct experience was not sufficient to be deemed research, findings or knowledge. Findings needed to be validated, replicated and understood by others (scientists) in order to be considered valid. In such an environment the skills of self-inquiry and the research of direct experience continued to languish and even to be persecuted in some parts of the world.
- iii. Cultures (mostly tribal and indigenous) which continued to operate on the basis of direct experience and participation with the sacred have been maligned and marginalised by the modern culture of civilisation, sophistication and technology.
 

*“The man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. The tendency is perfectly understandable, because, for primitives as for the man of all pre-modern societies, the sacred is equivalent to a power and, in the last analysis, to reality. [Whereas]...desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man of modern societies...”*  
(Eliade, 1987)
- iv. In recent decades with the development of qualitative inquiry and the study of human experience in the social sciences, the role of self has begun to be reclaimed. The humanist and transpersonal psychology fields re-assert the central role that the self plays in strong qualitative studies (Braud & Anderson, 1998; Polanyi & Prosch, 1975; Puhakka, 2000; Valle, 1993), the ethnographers and anthropologists are coming to terms with the researcher as participant in research rather than observer and even physical and chemical sciences are presenting understanding that the self has a direct impact on research – both in perceiving (as instrument) the research and directly on the phenomenon under study.
- v. To find the richness of experience that humankind possesses when it comes to self-inquiry one can turn to the mystery traditions of antiquity and the Gnostic inquiries that were well-known and respected at the time. It does not behove us to think that we have come so far as to not need these traditions. On the contrary, we need them more than ever since we have wandered so far from them. And yet, neither would it be prudent to disregard the contributions that scientific method has enabled in improving the rigor and understanding of research.
- vi. The use of self in research--self inquiry-- has the potential to restore a person’s self-regard, their connection to the world

around them and bring meaning to a life that otherwise is meted out through the views of others.

*“ There are many different realms, mansions, ways of being-in-a-world, with different allocations within each of them to its subjective and objective poles. However, my belief is that the subjective-objective format is a constant, like the properties of a figure that are invariable through different sections and projections in geometry.”* (Heron, 2003, p. 13)

- The methods and approaches of the scientific world are more familiar to the contemporary psyche, so we can balance this understanding by learning more of the ancient Gnostic and occult (hidden) approaches to inquiry. In these traditions we will be reminded of the central role of the self and how to engage it once again. Here’s a list of some ancient and medieval sources;
  - i. Eleusinian mysteries
  - ii. Egyptian mysteries
  - iii. Simon Magus
  - iv. Basilides/Abraxas
  - v. Plato and Plutarch
  - vi. Hermes Trismegistus
  - vii. Paracelsus
- In contemporary qualitative inquiry, there are two principal ways of focusing on the self in research:
  - i. Self as instrument – where we are aware that our perception affects and delimits what we find
  - ii. Self as subject – where we ring-fence an experience or phenomenon that is an aspect of our self as the focus for our study

All inquiries involve i) and some involve i) and ii).



## SELF AS PERCEIVER, AS INSTRUMENT

- The understanding of self as perceiver seems straight-forward and yet researchers often fall into the modern fallacy of data as objective, and of “right” and “wrong” findings.
- It is equally fallacious to present all data as equally valid which occurs with the use of today’s relativist and constructivist lenses.
- The step that joins these two approaches is the question “why?” If I can understand why there are discrepancies between my own perception and others, between my understandings from one day to the next, between my point of view and the Other’s, I might get closer to understanding the nature of reality. With perseverance, inconsistencies are worked through, paradoxes resolved, insights gained and knowledge formed. The knowledge that arises from this sort of prolonged, in-depth and applied inquiry has been called “gnosis.”

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*“So, in ordinary science [Wilber] says, if you want to know that a cell has a nucleus, takes sections, stain the cell and look at it under a microscope (1995, p. 273). Similarly in transcendental inquiry, if you want to know if there is a Buddha Nature, take up the practice of zazen (1990, p. 60). What this means is that the checking of [findings] is to make sure you have followed the instruction properly and have had the experience that pre-existent knowledge says you are supposed to have had. This kind of checking is no more than the assessment of experiential training within an established field of practice and discourse. The whole procedure only becomes inquiry when presuppositions built into the instructions are questioned...And this is precisely what many spiritual schools don't like and can't handle.” (Heron, 2003, pp. 46-47)*

- The conscious acknowledgement of this process is what appears transformative about the process of transpersonal research. This attitude to self in research is often referred to as **reflexivity**.

*“The etymological root of the word “reflexive” means “to bend back upon oneself.” In research terms this can be translated as thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the researched...Reflection can be defined as “thinking about” something after the event. Reflexivity, in contrast, involves a more immediate, dynamic and continuing self-awareness.” (Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. ix)*

- Finlay & Gough's (2003) book on reflexivity identifies 5 variants of reflexivity:

- i. Introspection
- ii. Intersubjective reflection
- iii. Mutual collaboration
- iv. Social critique
- v. Ironic deconstruction

- This approach is easier described than done - since we have been pulled so far from both questioning and relying on our own perception. In our education and up-bringing there has been little to support us in our endeavours. Many are content to go through the motions provided or set down by others. For those who are not, a reminder of the help available in finding one's own way:

- i. A receptive approach to inquiry is critical. A sense, as Rosemarie Anderson says (1998), that the inquiry has you, rather than you, it.
- ii. Depth therapy helps you reclaim your own perception, revealing; ways it has been damaged by adapting to your early life conditions, introjected aspects of psyche, and your natural, embodied resources.

*“Any pre-existing structures – not only cognitive ones but emotional and bodily ones, as well – can obscure and distort what the researcher is studying.” (Braud, 1998, p. 227).*

Through a receptive lens “the pre-existing structures” form part of what is being uncovered.

- iii. Dreams will provide clear and direct guidance on inquiries. No interpretation or manipulation is desirable or necessary. (Lunt, 2010)
- iv. Practices such as sitting, incubation etc. provide the space and conditions for intuitive capacities to be restored. (Kingsley, 1999)
- v. Associating with those who support the inquiry will strengthen it, and protection is required from those who would replace it with their own view – this includes theorists, teachers, tutors – anyone with their own agenda.
- vi. Keeping oneself healthy, clean and responsible provides foundations for your self that are very supportive. “*Mens sana in corpore sano.*” (Juvenal).
- vii. A supportive and aligned supervisor of your work will help you stay focused on your own inquiry and approach.
- viii. Thorough use of extant, relevant information sources will support, challenge and develop your own perception and thinking
- ix. Rigorous use of methodology serves as a container for the research process and enables expression to others of the process followed.



## SELF AS PHENOMENON, AS STUDY

- The idea of self as focus for study is a flawed one. What is being observed is just the “self” of which we are aware which is presented and assessed by another, unconscious part of our self.

As Marshall (2001, p. 434) says, citing Bateson, “*The conscious self sees an unconsciously edited version of the world guided by purposes. ‘Of course the whole of the mind could not be reported in a part of the mind.’*” (Bateson, 1972).

Thus the matter of “self-study” is an ever-changing landscape. Through the sustained intention and attention of an inquiry the nature and contents of what is conscious change, giving rise to a sense of a changing of self.

This section outlines some of the processes and practices involved in self-inquiry while recognizing that such a study can never be complete.

- An inquiry or topic might explore an aspect of oneself or one’s experience directly – where one becomes the subject or focus of one’s one study. In a chapter of the Handbook of Action Research, Judi Marshall explores her understanding of Self-Reflective Inquiry practices: “*Each person’s inquiry approach will be distinctive, disciplines cannot be cloned or copied. Rather each person must identify and craft their own qualities and practices. The*

*questioning then becomes how to do them well, how to conduct them with quality and rigour appropriate to their forms, and how to articulate the inquiry processes and sense-making richly and non-defensively.” (2001, p. 433)*

In response to her own question she presents her “*disciplines of inquiry*” describing them as “*open frames*” rather than “*rigid behaviour patterns*”.

**Inner and outer arcs of attention** – in the inner arcs Marshall notices herself; “*perceiving, making meaning, framing issues, choosing how to speak out and so on.*” She looks for “*repetitions, patterns, themes, dilemmas, key phrases that are charged with energy*” and works “*with a multi-dimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical, intuitive, sensory, imaginal and more...*”

It is helpful, if wanting to access unconscious parts of the mind, to use tools, approaches and settings that are *unfamiliar* to the mind. Much insight occurs while ironing, gardening or cooking as the change in activity, bodily awareness, brainwave patterns etc. allows access to parts of the “brain” other than those employed in straight cognition.

Outer arcs of attention move outwards (while the inner arc is still engaged) through “*actively questioning, raising issues with others or seeking ways to test my developing ideas.*” (Marshall, 2001).

**Cycles of action and reflection** – “*engage in some action or exploration, becoming immersed in the chosen territory in an appropriate way, noting as I go along and then taking a step back and reflecting on what I have experienced and done, later moving on to another cycle of engagement.*” (Marshall, 2001, p. 436)

**Agency and communion** – “*...are potentially complementary coping strategies for dealing with the uncertainties and anxieties of being alive. Agency is an expression of independence through self-protection, self-assertion and control of the environment. Communion is the sense of being “at one” with the other organisms or the context, its basis is integration, interdependence, receptivity.*”

- Self-inquiry is not straight-forward. “*Dr. Laing noted that the obvious can be very difficult for people to see. That is because they are self-corrective systems. They are self-corrective against disturbance...Disturbing information can be framed like a pearl so that it doesn’t make a nuisance of itself.*” (Bateson, 1972, p. 435). This internal dynamic means that our impulse is to turn away from data we find difficult. Bateson goes on to give his own definition of how wisdom is attained; “*What is required is not simply a relaxation of consciousness to let the unconscious material gush out. To do this is merely to replace one partial view of the self for the other partial view. I suspect what is needed is the synthesis of the two views and this is more difficult.*” (p.444).

- Marshall (2001) sets out some of the aspects of she means by enacting an inquiry;
  - i. **Inquiring with intent** – “*Inquiry involves intent, a sense of purpose. This may be held tacitly. There may be multiple intents, in accord or discord. Often intents unfold, shift, clarify or become more complex.*”
  - ii. **Doing inquiry** – “tracking reflections, thoughts and feelings,” taking notes, following “arising issues, images, puzzles”, synchronicities “in meeting people of relevance to my curiosities”, rely on physical and intuitive experiences as much as intellectual
  - iii. **Research as political process** – be aware of the different views and purposes of different theorists and methodologists and be aware of how your responses to them inform your own inquiry.
  - iv. **Tracking generativity** – notice what arises in your life and that of those around you as your inquiry progresses. How do these developments link back to the inquiry you are making? Marshall sees herself as “*I am a selective lens for reflecting issues of politics in the legitimization of some kinds of research and academia and the potential marginalisation of others.*” (p.445)
  - v. **Inquiry as life process** – recognition that inquiry is “at the core of my being.” (Marshall, 2001, p. 446)
  
- Although all methods used in a transpersonal paradigm should be imbued with a reflexive attitude, there are specific methods that can serve the direct study of self. Each has its own set of steps and approaches to inquiry that can be read in-depth separately. Examples include:
  - i. **Co-operative inquiry** distinguishes between the Apollonian (rational, linear, systematic) and Dionysian (imaginal, expressive, impromptu) approaches. (Heron, 2003). Involves five to eight cycles of:
    1. First reflection phase
    2. First action phase
    3. Full immersion in action
    4. Second reflection phase
  
  - ii. **Intuitive Inquiry** (Anderson, 2009). Steps include:
    1. Selecting and focusing topic
    2. Setting the stage; collecting data
    3. Incubating data
    4. Analyzing data
    5. Synthesizing findings and communicating



iii. **Organic Research** (Clements, Ettling, Jenett, & Shields, 1998):

1. *Preparing the soil*
2. *Planting the seed*
3. *The roots emerge*
4. *Growing the tree*
5. *Harvesting the fruit*

iv. **Heuristic inquiry** (Moustakas, 1990):

1. *Initial engagement*
2. *Incubation*
3. *Illumination*
4. *Explication*
5. *Creative synthesis*
6. *[Validation]*

v. **Autoethnography** (Holman Jones, 2005):

*“Autoethnography is a balancing act. Autoethnography works to hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or stasis. Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement—between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement. It creates charged moments of clarity, connection and change.”*  
(2005, p. 764)

## IV ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- i. In self inquiry the ethical considerations are no less relevant than other forms of inquiry. The outcomes of the research, as well as its credibility, will be affected by how you care for yourself along the way.
- ii. Many research inquiries in the psychotherapeutic arena are addressing issues and questions that researchers have held since childhood when they could not get the answers they needed.
- iii. Your inquiry will benefit from having the support and attention paid to it that you might have wished for when you were small.
- iv. Engage with a therapist who can see you through your process.
- v. There will be periods of strain and intensity during the research cycle when making sure that the foundational activities of

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eating, sleeping and washing are prioritised. Equally taking time to see your friends, read a novel or enjoy your hobbies is essential to keeping a broader perspective.

- vi. Remain aware of the responsibilities around you. It is not necessary to starve yourself or others to conduct your inquiry. If you feel demands from other areas of your life, reflect on how they are connected to your question.
- vii. Give full consideration to what you wish to reveal of yourself and how.

## V DISCUSSION

What are your fears and desires relating to using self in your inquiry?

What do you think is your natural weakness when it comes to working with yourself? How can you support this?

What prejudices and assumptions has this discussion revealed?

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