

THE ROLE OF INTENT IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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Summary

This research is a phenomenological investigation in the area of the intent of psychological research, its purpose, goals, objectives, or rationale. There is no specific hypothesis; rather, the objective is to explicate the issue of intent with researchers in the field of psychology by utilizing a descriptive methodology. Ten researchers were interviewed in depth, and the results indicate that intent is a significant component of the process and outcome of research in psychology.

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INTENT

Our purpose in this research is to examine the issue of the researcher's intent in psychological research as a part of the broader intent of clarifying in a more rigorous manner the role of the researcher in his or her research (Bebout & Greening, 1981). Through an analysis of researchers' statements about their intents, we intend to clarify existant assumptions and beliefs about the intent of psychological research. Intent is defined as the researcher's purpose, objective, rationale, or goal in doing a particular study. We wish to emphasize from the beginning that this conception of intent is broader than the work of Rosenthal (1965) on experimenter expectancy. Rosenthal views all nonobjective features, including intent or "bias," as intrusions that confound research and need to be eliminated or neutralized.

This article addresses intent within the phenomenological framework, which, as defined by Giorgi (1970, p. 126), is "the fundamental viewpoint toward man and the world that the scientist brings or adopts, with respect to his work as a scientist, whether this viewpoint is made explicit or remains implicit." In this model subjective influences such as intent are no longer viewed as contaminating objectivity but as contributing a vital element to research. Subjective "biases" are included, articulated, and, within certain circumscribing limits, utilized to inform research (Carrere & Weiss, 1982). Intent, as a constituent of approach, should be considered in a dialogue with method and content. Therefore, our next intent is to describe empirically the manner in which the selection of methodology and content reflect the intent of the researcher.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This issue has been neglected in the professional literature, in the training of researchers, and ultimately in the personal process that forms the underlying foundations of the development of a research project. We reviewed 21 textbooks on research methodology. Such textbooks are used to provide newcomers with an introduction to research methodology and to ways of regarding it, giving them some ideas of how a science sees itself (Romanyshyn, 1978). In these textbooks the major reasons given for the purposes of research were knowledge for its own sake, the devel-

opment of theory, and the prediction and control of phenomena. However, no one source contained as much as a chapter or sub-heading dealing directly with the intent of the researcher. Typically, there were one or two paragraphs in the introduction or first chapter that dealt with intent in a broad, general manner.

We propose that the major reason for this absence of discussion is that the predominant empirical framework of science emphasizes "objective" methodology in an attempt to minimize the impact of the subjective, including the intent of the researcher. Psychology as a field is willing to consider intent as an important determinant of volitional behavior in general, with the notable exception of the behavior of the researcher engaged in scientific research.

SELECTION OF METHOD

Because of the lack of previous research in the area, we selected a methodology that would explore the potential scope of the issue, outlining potential areas of investigation. The method also needed to be experientially based, as intent is a personal issue that can best be discussed in experiential terms (Giorgi, 1970). In addition, we were concerned that because of the traditional avoidance of "subjectivity," researchers would not have considered their intent in depth. Therefore we decided on an interview format that would be open ended but also probing, so as to tap the participants' experience of intent as distinct from their theoretical knowledge.

A methodology developed by Colaizzi (1978) was modified somewhat in this study. We developed a series of open-ended questions from a description of our own approach in the area of research, our biases, values, and beliefs. The questions were then field tested to determine if they would yield analyzable data and if they comprehensively covered the participants' experience of intent. The field testing led us to add aspects of experience suggested by the participants that had not been anticipated. The questions are as follows:

- (1) Tell me about a research project you have done that had particular meaning or impact for you. I am especially interested in your sense of intent or purpose in doing this work: your objective,

rationale, or goal. Was this something that you thought about during the process? When did this happen, and would you describe the experience? Begin with the first thoughts or experiences that you feel are in any way related, and continue through the actual implementation of the research. Did the experience change over time? How so?

- (2) In what way did your selection of this particular area to research connect with your intent in doing the research? Have you considered communicating the results of your research with others, or connecting this research with the world in some other way? In what ways might this research connect with your professional growth and development?
- (3) I want to ask you now to consider the area of your own research from a broader perspective. What is your personal intent in doing current and future psychological research? What kinds of intents or objectives do you see as justifiable as the grounds for psychological research? What kinds of intents would not be personally justifiable to you?
- (4) Finally, please answer the same question, but this time in a more general context. As a researcher viewing the field of psychological research in general, are there intents or purposes that you see as specifically justifiable or not justifiable as the grounds for psychological research?

The final interviews were conducted with ten faculty members from Georgia State University who do psychological research as a major part of their vocation and who have control over what areas they choose to study. Five clinical and five experimental researchers participated. All participants also agreed that they perceived themselves as fitting the above description. We consider them to be an appropriate sample, as they are experienced in the area of study and sufficiently articulate to describe their experiences. The usual concern with generalizability does not apply here, as our interest is in the description of a phenomenon rather than in its frequency or distribution.

In the interviews I (first author) actively pursued the clarification of the experiential material offered by the participants. I made summary statements clarifying what I heard as the participant's meaning, and summarizing the content of what he or she was saying. This provided the participants an opportunity to hear how I understood them, and then to modify or validate those statements, allowing the participants' involvement in the process

of clarifying meaning. The process is quite similar to that described by Egan (1975) as the basic interviewing format. It is also similar to the methodology used by Jean Piaget (1968).

METHOD OF ANALYZING THE DATA

Utilizing audiotapes, each interview was condensed into a series of significant statements or themes based on the interview questions. This process was checked for accuracy against the original interviews. There should be nothing in the original interview that is not accounted for in this cluster of themes, and there should be nothing in the cluster of themes that is not implied in the original protocols. This is a process of going "beyond what is given in the original data and at the same time, stay[ing] with it" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59).

At this point, thematic clusters are compared across participants and the same kind of synthesis and analysis takes place. Finally, the results are integrated into an exhaustive narrative description of the investigated theme. ;

RESULTS¹

In terms of our first intent, that of explicating the intent of researchers in psychology, the personal significance of research is the theme that most clearly emerged from these results. Most dramatically, eight of ten participants listed their personal interest and curiosity not only as a primary intent but also as a requirement for their participation in any research project. There was a strong belief that research of high quality was more likely to result in those instances in which the researcher felt personally identified with the intent of the research.

When asked to classify intents as justifiable or as not justifiable, some participants refused to exclude any intents at all, and others relegated them to low priority or felt they were acceptable only as secondary intents, providing that one of their primary intents had been fulfilled. Intents related to external motivations were generally considered as secondary, whereas intents with internal personal motivations were seen as primary. For example, several participants were willing to accept tenure and pro-

motion as secondary intents, but saw them as insufficient as the primary intent of a research project.

In terms of our second intent, concerning the relationship between the researcher's intent and his or her choice of topic and method, the results indicate that the intent of these researchers played a major role in the selection of their research topics. As was mentioned previously, all of these participants control the direction of their own research and are, therefore, free to follow their own intents. For example, one researcher linked shifts in his research topics with his movement through stages of the life cycle. Another researcher described her work in sex role stereotypes as motivated by her perception of herself as being among the first generation of women in clinical training. A majority of the participants also explicitly or implicitly made a connection between their intent and their methodology. Some stressed the importance of publishing research as an intent and therefore using a methodology that would be accepted as valid in a peer review. As another example consistent with these findings, in the present study it seemed clear that a highly personal, phenomenological methodology needed to be used, in view of our intent to show the important role of the person of the researcher in psychological research.

Another issue that emerged was the relative justifiability of basic versus applied intents. Only one of the participants listed potential applicability as a criterion for participation in a research project. Most expressed a preference for research that had applied value as a secondary intent, believing that it is impossible to make a priori judgments as to the eventual usefulness of any research, or from what areas useful research will emerge. In general, the participants believed that the goals of science would be maximized by having competent researchers investigate areas that were inherently of interest to them.

Going beyond their personal intent, participants discussed potential negative applications of their research and their degree of responsibility in such instances. The researchers generally felt that these two were separate issues and that the justifiability of a research project should be judged solely by the intent of the researcher and not the ways in which others applied that research. Two participants disagreed; one said that under these circumstances there was an obligation to use further research to present counter-arguments. The other felt that researchers are

responsible for what they create and that it is not justifiable to work on a project that has inherently more negative applications than positive.

DISCUSSION

The issue of intent moves us toward a model of research that acknowledges the personalization of science. Personal interest and curiosity are by far the primary intents of the psychological researchers studied.

These results support the existential-phenomenological view of research as an interactional process, and contradict the view of the predominant paradigm of the researcher as isolated from the subject. The fact that the intent of psychological research is a strongly personal issue is contrary to the assumptive base of the predominant paradigm. We therefore suggest that the predominant model of research and the role of the researcher represents an idealized view of science rather than a descriptive one, a model of how science might work under ideal acontextual circumstances rather than a model truly reflective of lived experience. Therefore, the dialoguing of intent raises issues at a paradigmatic level, the ground in which the figure of intent is embedded.

If it were true that most, if not all, research proceeds as we, and our participants, have described, then what are the implications of maintaining the idealized model as if it were a descriptive one? This discrepancy contributes to confusing and inadequate training of future researchers by creating an intimidating environment that discourages a personal involvement in research, the very factor that our researchers believe to be a prerequisite for meaningful research. In addition, psychology as a field steers away from many topic areas that don't fit well within the idealized model (Giorgi, 1970). These are topics that are likely to call upon the personal involvement of the researcher and therefore are those most likely to be of significance to that researcher and the community at large.

Finally, let us look metaphorically at the field of psychology with the attitude of a client in psychotherapy. If a client always measured himself or herself against unreasonable standards, and had expectations beyond anyone's reach, one might label that

maladaptive and expect to see a chronic sense of frustration, disappointment, and deflated sense of self-worth. Psychology today struggles with issues of relevance and validity, striving toward an idealized model, rather than developing an approach that is grounded in the lived world. The task for the field is a convergence of theory and practice, the development of a theory and approach that is grounded in and reflective of everyday experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this research confirm that intent is an element in the development and execution of a research project. Researchers identify specific intents for their work, and those intents are operational throughout the research process. Intent plays a major role in the selection of research topics and methodology and, therefore, is an important variable in shaping the directions of psychology as a field. This is not a linear process in which an a priori approach or intent dictates method and content, but should be viewed instead as a dialogal, interactional whole. Intent emerges as a major contributing factor in this process, and researchers believe that there is a direct relationship between intent and the quality and meaningfulness of the final results.

We would like to see psychology as a field acknowledge the personalized, interactional nature of research, and to begin to conceptualize research in a more accurately descriptive model. Raising the issue of intent to the level of dialogue is a part of this process. It would be useful if reports of future research include a section labeled "intent." This would assist readers in making a meaningful connection with the researcher, increase their understanding of the research and help them judge its merit. Labeling a research report in this manner would also help to implement the basic guidelines for research suggested by this journal regarding the importance of describing the author's relationship to his or her work (Bebout & Greening, 1981). We are currently undertaking further analysis of the relationship between intent, topic selection, and methodology in the hope of demonstrating their interdependent relationship.

NOTE

1. Due to limitations of space, we are only able to present this final summary. Those interested in reviewing an interview transcript and full description of the thematic clusters may contact us directly.

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