
The "Discernment of a Human Face" in Research: A Reaction to Van Hesteren's *Human Science and Counselling*

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A fairly persistent yearning has existed on the part of counsellors for a body of research which is relevant (Krumboltz & Mitchell, 1979), integrated with counselling practice (Heppner & Anderson, 1985), and representative of human complexity and uniqueness (Gelso, 1979). Van Hesteren has written an important article around the theme that counselling researchers should consider using a "human science" orientation, in particular constructs and analytical methods from phenomenology, to "allow the nature of the subject under study to determine the most meaningful research methodology or combination of methodologies" (p. 2). Research is seen by Van Hesteren as a continuous, constructive process in which the validity and relevance of research findings are never assumed to have been achieved but, instead, such characteristics as an energetic "quest" and "imaginative variations" are put into practice. Above all, his message seems to be that the research process is a human endeavour which should recognize the elusiveness of perceiving and understanding the essence of human activities and contributions.

On first reading the article, I was struck by several practical, and humanly superficial, reactions. The references are superb; the author has drawn together recent and "classical" listings which will provide me and my students with a Westcoast winter or two of pursuit and contemplation. In addition, the issues raised by the author provided me with a further reminder of the general neglect of philosophy of science in the graduate programs for counsellors with which I am familiar. Van Hesteren has raised issues about sources of knowledge, relativity of judgments, self understanding and development, and the purposes of counselling. . . . intriguing fodder for extended discussion with colleagues! I was also struck by the role of the researcher's self and self-development in the choice of professional issues and topics with which to become engaged. I wondered if the article was a personal documentation of Kegan's (1982) disembeddedness, whereby counselling practitioners develop and grow to a more "inclusive" stage—showing dissatisfaction with isolated "techniques" (in this case, of doing research) which characterize part of a profession but do not characterize humankind.

My other preliminary reaction had to do with the terminology selected by the author from the extensive reference material. The complexity of some of the concepts seems exaggerated by terms which are particularized to a branch of philosophy. A problem, which Van Hesteren seems to be well aware of, is that of conveying the central definitions to readers, to other researchers, and to the field in general in a way which provides for clear meaning and impact. The author's quoting *ten* definitions of phenomenology, after giving us the guideline that "the only genuine way to understand and to appreciate phenomenology is to 'do' phenomenology" (p. 204) is a clear example of the communication problem. Unfortunately, many of us react to encounters with difficult, unusual terms by distancing ourselves from the enterprise. Clearly, it takes hard work to stay engaged with the phenomenological-hermeneutic point of view; as the author wisely acknowledges in his summary, "qualitative methodologies" should not be chosen by default by those who have an aversion to the complexities of quantitative methods and statistics. The problem of providing for clear communication seems to apply to *any* research or conceptual approach which attempts to address the complexities of human behaviour and existence. The aversion to quantitative methods, to which the author refers, seems to have been created by specialized statistical terminology and by conceptualizations addressed to probabilistic relationships and such complexities as interactions among variables. Heppner and Anderson (1985) commented, "The increased sophistication is sometimes reflected in highly specialized language, which at times builds a semantic wall between the researcher and practitioner" (p. 546). The "semantic wall" seems to be a hazard of phenomenological approaches to counselling research, as well.

BUT HOW TO IMPROVE COUNSELLING RESEARCH?

The ideas presented by Van Hesteren are enlightening and potentially expanding but, at times, I was uncertain about what particular aspects of current counselling research were troublesome to him. The "blame" for granting a high priority to publishing (p. 217) does not fall logically on the "received view" of doing research since many published works of questionable contributive value have been position papers, isolated personal statements, and undocumented counselling approaches. An inference seems to underlie much of the article regarding such unfortunate characteristics as presumed objectivity, a search for certainty, and reductive elements of quantitative approaches. Van Hesteren offers a thoughtful response to any demands that might continue to exist, in counsellor preparation programs or by journal editors, that our research must show these characteristics. Perhaps attempts at quantification, particularly those which have involved the use of standardized testing instruments, have masked the many human interpretations and selec-

tions which have taken place in the collection of information about the persons we wish to understand. Because the particularly bothersome flaws are not specified by Van Hesteren, it is difficult at times to appreciate the transformations he wishes to have us consider.

Similarly, a clearer distinction seems needed concerning what is research and what is not. During my reading of the sections on post-formal operational thought and “all human research . . . is a mode of existential therapy” (p. 212), I wondered if Van Hesteren was including all counsellor activity as research. In the sense used in most of our literature in counselling and the social sciences, research refers to “systematic inquiry which is directed towards understanding, predicting, or controlling behavior with some expectation that the results can be generalized to other settings or to other people” (Knowles, 1985, p. 203). Some of the concerns raised about research, for example that it does not provide for the intriguing variations among individuals, seem based on too *much* reliance on research to provide such understanding. In the work I do, for example, in the area of loss and loneliness, I am aware of the power of communication and understanding that can be provided by poetry, music, and dance—none of which I would consider to be research endeavours.

An issue arising from the lack of definition of research is a neglect of what might be said about the place of generalization, or what Guba and Lincoln (1982) have called “transferability.” Van Hesteren makes a clear case against searching for unalterable conclusions about a person or people in general but, presumably, research activity should yield some transferable statement, together with increased understanding of contingencies, important contextual information, and disjunctions. For example, in our studies of adolescent loneliness we became aware of the *many* ways in which loneliness is experienced as well as the generally recurring tendency to confuse fears of loneliness with loneliness itself. Both types of information, the many varieties and the general tendency, have been useful in our later counselling endeavours with adolescents.

Van Hesteren’s ideas appear to have the power to improve counselling research in at least two phases in the research process (Knowles, 1985): conceptualizing the nature of the area and drawing inferences and interpretations from the information collected. His article emphasizes the need to respect the complexities of each person we study and to be aware of our own selves in the delimitation of research areas. The many places in which interpretations occur are clearly noted, together with some very practical guidelines about considering other interpretations or the interpretations of other people including the subjects themselves. More than anything else, the article provided me with an awareness of the *value context* within which research occurs. The suggestions about deliberate psychological education within researchers’ educational preparation are well taken. The issues which he raises appear to

make particular contributions to increasing awareness of the values each of us has as we approach research in counselling. Perhaps the major flaw in many quantitative approaches, to date, has been the lack of acknowledgment of the context of values and human interpretation that characterize research.

As one reader, I would benefit from further submissions by the author to elaborate on some of the many ideas presented in this article. In particular, I look forward to reading examples of research which demonstrate some of the "adaequatio" he presents in this article. Research "in a different key" could be conducted, for example, on the impact his "shared journey" approach has on counsellors in training. The counselling field in Canada is small enough to be sensitive to the impact of exemplary research which demonstrates how we can keep the human face in all aspects of our work, including research.

References

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