

AN INTRODUCTION TO ORGANIC INQUIRY: HONORING THE TRANSPERSONAL AND SPIRITUAL IN RESEARCH PRAXIS

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The Editors of this *Journal* asked me to write a brief introduction to Jennifer Clements' paper on Organic Inquiry. I provide my introductory comments in the form of an imaginary "Letter to a Student," in which I describe the history, nature, strengths, and limitations of this approach.

Dear Student,

Thank you for your recent message. You asked if I were familiar with the Organic Inquiry approach to research, and whether this approach might be suitable for your research project.

I have had the privilege of observing the growth of the organic approach from its inception by the research team of Jennifer Clements, Dorothy Ettling, Dianne Jenett, Lisa Shields, and Nora Taylor, in 1994, when it was called *Organic Research*; to its most recent development, primarily in the hands of Jennifer Clements, as *Organic Inquiry*. Over this 10-year time span, the approach has been extended and expanded through the inclusion and articulation of a greater number of ways of working with the collected data and presenting the findings, and through the gradual addition and elaboration of a particular conceptual and theoretical framework. The approach already has been used, in some form, in at least 86 dissertations in at least 17 graduate schools¹. Both students and faculty have remarked on the inspirational nature of this form of inquiry.

In my view, Organic Inquiry is one of a very small number of truly transpersonal research approaches, in terms of its aims and the resources accessed during its conduct. Here are some of its most important features:

- its offering of a format for including trans-egoic, liminal, or transliminal (see, e.g., Sanders, Thalbourne, & Delin, 2000; Thalbourne, Bartemucci, Delin, Fox, & Nofi, 1997) influences within a context of disciplined inquiry;
- the overarching importance of the psychological and spiritual preparation and adequateness (*adaequatio*; see Schumacher, 1978, pp. 39–60) of the researcher, and the importance of the active use of transpersonally-relevant resources (e.g., contemplation, dreams, intuition, synchronicities, dialogue with an inner figure or muse) in such preparation;
- the notion that research may result in *transformation* (of the investigator, research participants, and reader/audience) as well as *information*;
- the inclusion of alternative modes of knowing such as feeling, sensing, and intuiting in all phases of the research project;
- its emphasis on the use, value, and power of stories;

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- its valuing of describing the context of discovery as well as the context of justification (see Reichenbach, 1938; White, 1998) in research reports;
- its indication of the need for letting go of egoic control and preset methodological structures in the service of new knowledge;
- its emphasis on the power of intention;
- its formal invitation to the readers/audience of its research report to involve themselves fully in what is being presented to them—to involve their hearts as well as their heads;
- its suggested indicators of transformation (increased access to and appreciation of Self, Spirit, and Service); and
- its various methodological innovations, including the use and comparisons of early and late researcher stories, creation of a *group story* as a nomothetic summary of study findings, bodily indicators of validity (e.g., chills, tears, feelings of certainty; Rosemarie Anderson, 1998, 2000, had previously suggested similar processes of *sympathetic resonance* as validity indicators), the concept of *transformational validity*, and the use of *early reader reactions* as a test for the latter (similar to Rosemarie Anderson's, 1998, 2000, earlier suggestion of the use of *resonance panels* for validation purposes).

Some of these features are shared with other qualitative research approaches, and others are new to the research context. What is most distinctive about the Organic Inquiry approach is the rich *combination* of many of the features and the much greater than usual *emphasis* of some of these features—particularly the suggested sources of inspiration, the necessary release from egoic and other constraints during certain phases of the research, and the researcher's aim of transformational changes in the researcher, research participants, and reader/audience of the final research report.

Over the years, I have become aware of various criticisms or reservations about this approach. This is understandable because several of Organic Inquiry's assumptions, emphases, and aims have remained either unfamiliar or underappreciated by those who have been governed by more conventional research forms. I think researchers may have to “stretch” a bit, and experience something akin to a useful paradigm shift in order to more fully apprehend the transpersonal and psychospiritual values and facets embodied in the Organic Inquiry approach.

Some assumptions of Organic Inquiry that may be questioned or resisted by more conventional researchers include the emphasis on subjective experience throughout the research process (not only in the research participants, but also in the researcher and in the prospective “consumers” of the final report); concepts and recommended techniques informed and inspired by feminist, Jungian, spiritual, and mystical traditions; the importance of ways of knowing other than thinking (*viz.*, feeling, sensing, and intuiting) in research; the power of stories and *storying* (see Bradt, 1997) in conveying knowledge and fostering change; and the difficulty of objectively categorizing human experience. Categories may exist, but as mutable perceptions, rather than as concepts with firm boundaries. Some conventional researchers—especially those of an *either/or* persuasion—will be uncomfortable with an approach that blends knowledge acquisition with the psychospiritual development of the researcher and with anticipated “clinical” and other practical

impacts upon the research participants, preferring, instead, to keep these three activities and aims more rigidly compartmentalized.

I have heard and solicited comments regarding Organic Inquiry from researchers in transpersonal psychology. I present, below, ten criticisms of the approach that I have encountered, along with brief indications of how advocates of Organic Inquiry might respond to each criticism. The responses below represent only my thoughts, without the benefit of further input from my colleagues. If you decide to use Organic Inquiry in your own research, it is important to be aware of these arguments and counterarguments.

1. Organic Inquiry is a set of values, indeed honorable values, but does not provide sufficiently specific methods, praxis, or structure that allow researchers, especially those new to research, to follow with clarity and rigor. Most of the procedures used by organic researchers are borrowed from more rigorous methods. In borrowing procedures from other qualitative methods, organic researchers may be using procedures in a manner contrary to their intent. As the field of qualitative research is evolving rapidly, new methods and procedures are introduced almost yearly, such as action inquiry and narrative methods in recent years. From a feminist, cultural, and interpretive perspective, it is important to respect the contextual integrity of these procedures (Rosemarie Anderson, personal communication, March 31, 2004).

Response: Organic Inquiry is an *approach*, rather than a specific *method*. Like other large approaches, it recommends the use of specific methods or tools in its service. There are actually very few unique *methods* (i.e., *specific tools*, as opposed to *more general approaches, umbrellas, or canopies*) that can be used in research. The quantitative methods have been worked out well and are very familiar. The qualitative methods generally involve fairly limited ways of gaining information (interviews, questionnaires), of working with the data (coding, developing major themes and variations, developing essential summaries or vignettes), and of presenting the findings (vignettes, portraits, narratives, themes). All of these methods can be used within the general framework or stance of Organic Inquiry.

2. Many methods are “organic”; approaches such as ethnography, field studies, oral history methods, narrative methods, grounded theory, and others are inherently organic, evolving, and free-flowing.

Response: Organic Inquiry is distinctive in its *strong* emphasis on the organic nature of its process, in its recognition of the transpersonal and spiritual resources that might contribute to the inspiration and flexibility of the researcher and the research, and in its emphasis on releasing egoic control during certain research phases.

3. Many of the qualities of Organic Inquiry that appear to distinguish the method are not unique to this approach. Feminist, narrative, heuristic, and ethnographic methods privilege the researcher’s story or perspective; other transpersonal methods privilege a spiritual perspective; cultural, narrative, oral history, and ethnographic methods privilege storytelling; and so on. Not acknowledging the similarity of Organic Inquiry to other methods can make the approach look naïve at

best and narcissistic at worst (Rosemarie Anderson, personal communication, February 23, 2004).

Response: The advocates of Organic Inquiry present the approach as one among many, with the aim of supplementing, rather than supplanting, other approaches. Perhaps Organic Inquiry advocates could emphasize the approach's overlaps with other approaches more explicitly and in greater detail. Organic Inquiry's "uniqueness" lies in how it combines and emphasizes its various facets, rather than in its particular components. However, the approach does have unique methodological features (mentioned above).

4. There is danger of self-absorption, solipsism, and even narcissism if the approach is not used carefully. Although it is important for researchers, particularly qualitative researchers, to acknowledge their own perspectives, an exclusive focus on the researcher's story can make a research project self-referential (Rosemarie Anderson, personal communication, February 23, 2004).

Response: These are, indeed, dangers. Organic Inquiry is not recommended for any and every researcher, but for those who are sufficiently mature, self-aware, and prepared. The researcher's story is only one facet of the approach, albeit a very important one; it is complemented by the presented individual and group stories of the research participants, as well as by theme presentations and other data summaries.

5. There seems to be too much emphasis on the researcher, as compared to the research participants. In terms of the researcher's transformation, such an emphasis is important. However, in terms of the usual informational aim of research, the content of the participants' stories deserves greater emphasis and attention, as do the possible transformative changes of the participants.

Response: The researcher story really is an essential core in the ways the inquiry assesses data. The emphasis on the early and late researcher stories serves well one of the major aims of this approach—the possible transformation of the researcher. In addition, the researcher's transformative changes, as indicated in these stories, can serve as a model or trigger for similar changes in the reader/audience. There are dangers in this way of working and a need for careful monitoring of the researcher's motives throughout this potentially narcissistic exercise. These dangers might be more thoroughly addressed in the future development of the approach.

6. There is an admitted Jungian emphasis in Organic Inquiry. However, it should not be assumed without careful consideration of the culture studied that it is necessarily appropriate to use a modified Jungian typology for analyzing data in cultures outside of the Northern European and North American contexts (Rosemarie Anderson, personal communication, February 23, 2004).

Response: Although Jung is clearly associated with the four "functions" of thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting, these appear to be basic forms of knowing that are generally applicable. Of course the priorities of these forms differ from individual to individual and from culture to culture. Organic Inquiry might be augmented by the introduction of forms of knowing beyond these four.

7. *Is this really “research” or is it a psychotherapeutic or psychospiritual process?*

Response: An aim of Organic Inquiry is to expand the usual conception of “research” so that researchers are more sensitive to the possible life impacts of their work on themselves, their participants, and their audience. Organic Inquirers prefer inclusive, integrated, *both/and* approaches to exclusive, compartmentalized, *either/or* approaches to human endeavors.

8. *Organic Inquiry has not yet developed sufficient means of establishing the reliability, validity, generality, and communal consensus of its findings.*

Response: Some of these concerns are more relevant to certain ontological and epistemic (e.g., positivist/postpositivist) inquiry paradigms than to others (e.g., interpretive/constructionist, emancipatory; see Mertens, 1998), and are more relevant to certain research types (e.g., quantitative research) than to others (e.g., qualitative inquiry). However, Organic Inquiry does include both conventional and novel means of addressing these features of its findings. Further, Organic Inquiry deliberately focuses on *experiences* rather than on “objective reality.” The developers of Organic Inquiry recognize that additional work is needed in the area of validation methods and validity indicators.

9. *Organic Inquiry might be used, especially by graduate students, as an excuse for lack of planning and for procrastination, and as an occasion for overprivileging spontaneity and an “anything goes” approach to research.*

Response: Yes, this may happen, but this would be a misuse of the approach that would betray a lack of understanding of its nature. There actually is a good deal of structure inherent in the Organic Inquiry approach, there are certain tools (methods) that one can definitely plan to use (in an a priori manner), and there is an even greater need for maturity, critical thinking, mindfulness, and discernment in Organic Inquiry than there is in many other forms of research.

10. *Organic Inquiry is not yet a finished approach to conducting research.*

Response: This is quite so, nor does anyone maintain that Organic Inquiry is a completed and polished approach. Its very nature precludes such finality. Important variations and refinements can be contributed by each user of the approach, based on the user’s unique ways of accessing and becoming inspired by transpersonal and spiritual sources and resources.

So, as closing advice, let me say that whether Organic Inquiry is an appropriate approach for you depends on the nature of your research project and upon your own characteristics as a researcher. This approach is best suited for topics that have a transpersonal or spiritual dimension, for exploring experiences identical or similar to those that you yourself have had, and for studying topics that have passionate meaning for you. I have already mentioned some of the qualities you must possess to use the approach well. Doing Organic Inquiry is demanding and challenging. The prize is not only an advance in the knowledge base of the disciplines of transpersonal studies and psychology, but a contribution to transformative change in yourself and in others directly and indirectly involved in the research project.

I hope these comments have increased your understanding of Organic Inquiry, and I hope they will help you decide whether this approach might suit you and your research topic and questions.

With best wishes,

William Braud

¹Note: For the interested reader, selected works guided by an organic inquiry approach follow.

Ettling, Dorothy, Arvold, Nancy, & Hayes, Neomi. (1998). *Creating a culture of empowerment in a learning organization*. Oakland, CA: Interconnections.

Ettling, Dorothy, & Hayes, Neomi. (1997). Learning to learn: Women creating learning communities. *Revision: A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation*, 20(1), 28–31.

The following Organic Studies are dissertations on record with the respective schools.

California Institute of Integral Studies

Jenett, Dianne Elkins (1999), *Red rice for Bhagavati/cooking for Kannaki: An ethnographic/organic inquiry of the Pongala ritual at Attukal Temple, Kerala, South India*.

California School of Professional Psychology

Pinard, Rose Ann (2000), *Integrative dialogue: From fragmentation to a reverential unfolding of wholeness and mutuality*.

Saybrook Institute, California

Curry, Deah (2003), *Healing presence: Experiencing the medicine in the naturopathic relationship—An organic inquiry*.

Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, California, by year:

2003

Caldwell, Philipa Ann Redlich, *Putting cancer into words: The potential benefits of listening to survivors' stories for women now facing this trauma*; Cary, Peggy, *The self-perceived experience of multiplicity as an ordinary psychological state*; Gauthier, Julie Audette, *The new inner partnership as a result of the hero's journey at midlife: An organic inquiry with 10 men and 8 women*; Magnussen, Sandra, *The experience of being a Tibetan Buddhist disciple and a Western psychotherapist and the impact such experience has on the practice of therapy*; Diane Therese, *Messengers from the soul: Women's shoes as instruments of psychological and spiritual growth*.

2002

Collins, Ginger L., *Thirteen moons: Healing the menstrual relationship*; Hewett, Michael Crane, "A ripple in the water." *The role of organic inquiry in developing an integral approach in transpersonal research: Presented as a one-act play and video*; Lounsberry, Joyce Beverly, *The power of the drum: A multicultural journey into spiritual transformations and mind-body healing experienced by eight professional women drummers*.

2000

Cioffica, Dea Michaela, *The sacred search for voice: An organic inquiry into the creative mirroring process of collage and story*; Giles, Sophie Parker, *The unnested woman: An investigation of dreams of midlife women who have experienced divorce from a long-term mate*; Loffer, Shirley Lyn, *Returning to ourselves: Women thriving with chronic illness*;

Seeley, Robin, *Sacred callings: The process of moving into vocation at midlife as seen through story and reflection in a council of nine women.*

2001

Sowerby, David Francis, *The light of inner guidance: A heuristic study of the recognition and interpretation of intuition.*

1999

Hutter, Denise Marie, *Weaving the fabric of culture: The emergence of personal and collective wisdom in young adults participating in a wilderness rite of passage*; Gopfert, Caryl Reimer, *Student experiences of betrayal in the Zen Buddhist teacher/student relationship*; Sholem, Jane, *Listening to the labyrinth: An organic and intuitive inquiry*; Veltrop, Marilyn R., *Business leaders in transition: An organic inquiry into eight transformational journeys.*

1997

Loos, Linda K., *Sitting in council: An ecopsychological approach to working with stories in wilderness rites of passage*; Safken, Annick, *Sufi stories as vehicles for self development: Exploration, using in-depth interviews, of the self-perceived effects of the study of Sufi stories*; Sidle, Leslie, *Happily ever after again: Love relationships of divorced women at midlife.*

1996

Ettlíng, Dorothy, & Clark, Robin, *Crossing the borders* (unpublished manuscript); Newton, Susan, *Exploring the interstices: The space between in the body/mind disciplines of aikido and fencing*; Taylor, Nora, *Women's experience of the descent into the underworld: The path of Inanna: A feminist and heuristic inquiry.*

1995

Shields, Lisa, *The experience of beauty, body image, and the feminine in three generations of mothers and daughters*; Spencer, Linda Bushell, *The transpersonal and healing dimensions of painting: Life reviews of ten artists who have experienced trauma.*

1994

Ettlíng, Dorothy, *A phenomenological study of the creative arts as a pathway to embodiment in the personal transformation process of nine women.*

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WHITE, R. A. (1998). Becoming more human as we work: The reflexive role of exceptional human experience. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 128–145). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The Author

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