

# On Qualitative Methods and Researcher Qualities and Preparation

**William Braud**

In transpersonal psychology, often we are interested in studying psychospiritual experiences for which standardized measures have not yet been developed and for which personal, subjective reports still provide the most accurate and most useful indicators. Further, we are especially interested in how events are *experienced*, since events as they are registered, perceived, and interpreted (i.e., their meanings) often are more relevant and salient than the events that "actually" occurred.

Qualitative reports, and especially case studies, often provide the only appropriate way to study complex and subtle variables as they interact dynamically in the everyday lives of research participants. While standardized instruments can provide a gain in objectivity and reliability, they may also bring an artificiality and superficiality that does not always do justice to the types of processes of concern to transpersonal researchers. Qualitative approaches bring increased ambiguity as to some aspects of the studied phenomena. They do not allow unequivocal conclusions about specific sources of "effects" or complete confidence about directions of causation. However, this is balanced by their ability to address a fuller and more realistic form of what is studied.

While we seek to develop nomothetic approaches that could allow us to explain, predict, and control what we are studying, we also value an idiographic approach that provides broad and deep ("thick") descriptions and understandings of our subject matter. From such rich individual descriptions, we may discern more general principles--the universal may emerge from the particular. This is especially likely when one studies processes that are, themselves, characterized by great import and universality--e.g., processes of identification, disidentification, liminality, and reidentification; concepts of self and individuation; concepts of healing and wholeness; or the dynamic interplay between effort and surrender in following a spiritual path.

Qualitative explorations and case studies have proved their usefulness in many areas of science, medicine, and psychology. They may prove even more useful and necessary in a field, such as transpersonal psychology, which devotes itself to the study of consciousness and psychospiritual development which involve so many subtle yet complex experiential aspects. Further, case studies can allow us to learn about changes and developments that occur over *long time periods* in the life of an individual, providing a temporal window that other methods cannot always provide.

Those engaged in transpersonal studies recognize the possibility of distortion and of bias in

investigations that are very dependent upon subjective reports, self-reflection, and narration. It also recognizes that potential biases and distortions--albeit in different forms--are present in all forms of investigation, including well-controlled experimental designs. By attempting to explicate and articulate one's viewpoints, assumptions, and biases, the investigator may be less influenced by them than would be the case if they were kept hidden and obscured by seemingly more objective approaches.

Since the investigator is the "measuring instrument" par excellence in qualitative studies, the degree of presence, clarity, mindfulness, discernment, and thoughtfulness of the researcher is critical to the success of a research endeavor. These are personal skills that can be developed or fostered in other parts of our whole person educational program and then applied in the context of research. Thus, clinical and self-development trainings are also research trainings, and one's research accomplishments can provide feedback regarding the presence of these skills, as well as indications of how they might be in need of modification in particular aspects. Doing research on problems or processes with which the researcher already has great familiarity, experience, and interest can increase the sophistication of the research effort and increase the quality and depth of perception and understanding of one's observations and conclusions. In a particular form of qualitative research called *grounded theory*, the importance of such preparation or adequateness of the investigator is recognized and known by a special term--*theoretical sensitivity*.

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