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Heuristic Inquiry

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The heuristic approach to qualitative research was pioneered by American humanistic psychologist Clark Moustakas. Although it is an exploratory approach to research, it is really quite different from other approaches in that it is not concerned with discovering theories or testing hypotheses, but is concerned directly with human knowing and especially, with self-inquiry. The term *heuristic* derives from the Greek word *heuriskein*, which means to *find* or *discover*, and is used by Moustakas to describe the process of an inner search for knowledge, aimed at discovering the nature and meaning of an experience. It is an approach that offers a significant departure from mainstream research in that it explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the researcher to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research.

In this respect, heuristic inquiry (HI) anticipates the growing awareness of the participatory position in which researchers find themselves placed. Although rarely acknowledged, in general research is often autobiographical in the sense that the research topic and research question are usually motivated by personal interests and concerns, and the results and findings of the research can have personal impact on the researcher in both subtle and profound ways. In the capture of data, the researcher can accumulate and access a range of tacit knowing that results from the participatory nature of the process. What HI does is make this participatory process explicit, and moreover, it makes this the major focus of inquiry.

To some extent, HI has remained on the periphery of the qualitative approach, and it is easy to overlook [p. 390 ↓] its relevance to almost all research in the human and social sciences. It is a method that is being taken up gradually in such fields as education, psychology, psychotherapy, and counseling, as well as in theological and transpersonal studies.

There is clearly more involved in HI than researchers simply analyzing their own experience. Nor is it merely a variation on phenomenological inquiry. The strength of HI is in the way it sets out a systematic and transparent methodology for self-inquiry. Indeed, the heuristic approach is more systematic and rigorous than might usually be imagined, and as a consequence it is extremely demanding.

Moustakas stresses that HI is a way of knowing, involving a personal encounter; as he puts it, “there must have been actual autobiographical connections” (1990, p. 14). The self of the researcher is present throughout the process, the researcher experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge, promoted by self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery. In effect, it is the salience of the research topic and research question for the researcher that is being acknowledged. Indeed, what explicitly can be the focus of the approach is the transformative effect of HI on the researcher's own experience.

The Development of HI

Heuristic research follows in a long and ancient tradition of self-inquiry, a method of inquiry that was desperately in need of being reinvented. It re-emerged in the 1950s and '60s, when Moustakas developed the idea of HI through his own self-exploration of loneliness. In 1985, Bruce Douglass and Moustakas, in an influential paper, outlined a model of the heuristic process that included three phases: *immersion* (exploration of a question, problem or theme), *acquisition* (collection of data), and *realization* (synthesis). Then, in 1990, Moustakas elaborated the model further, identifying a core conceptual framework, with seven basic phases of inquiry.

In many respects, HI bears a striking resemblance to such approaches as autoethnographic research, which emphasizes the cultural context of experience, and also with autobiographical research, which emphasizes the life-story. There are also many similarities with William Braud and Rosemarie Anderson's transpersonal inquiry, with John Heron's idea of lived inquiry, and with mindful inquiry, a synthesis of four intellectual traditions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical social theory, and Buddhism that has been developed by Valerie Bentz and Jeremy Shapiro. It is a matter of note that integration in the literature of these overlapping methodologies is sadly rather lacking.

The Influence of Michael Polanyi

The influence of the ideas of Michael Polanyi, a philosopher of science, on Moustakas cannot be overestimated. The concepts of tacit knowing and indwelling, and even the term *heuristic* itself, all stem directly from the work of Polanyi. These ideas were central to his major work, *Personal Knowledge* (1958). Polanyi's critique of "scientific detachment" has been characterized as a *participative realism*, and a *heuristic philosophy*. Polanyi argues that at the root of all claims to objective scientific knowledge there is always a reliance upon personal knowledge. Such ideas may have been a little before their time, and marginalized by other philosophers, but it is to Moustakas's credit that he has taken Polanyi's ideas and used them so effectively.

The influence of Polanyi can be seen most clearly in Moustakas's core conceptual framework. This includes: the need to identify with the focus of the inquiry; self-dialogue with the phenomenon being explored; the power of revelation in tacit knowing; and the key processes of intuition, indwelling and focusing. This is all set within the context of an internal frame of reference, within which all experience needs to be understood.

The Seven Phases of Heuristic Research

In practice, HI entails creating a story that captures the qualities, meanings and essence of a human experience. The process begins with a question or problem to which the researcher seeks an answer. This question or problem, whether explicitly or implicitly, will always reflect a personal concern of the researcher with respect to understanding them self, and the human world in which they live. Moustakas's heuristic approach offers a structured sequence involving seven phases of inquiry.

Practical and Critical Issues

HI will not be for everyone, but for anyone interested in self-inquiry who wants a structured approach within which to work and who is not intimidated by research that

can lead to unpredictable avenues of inquiry that can become a quest with no seeming closure, then it is to be seriously recommended.

It is useful to point out that, in effect, it is not the researcher who chooses the research question, but the research question that chooses them! Invariably, the research question is deeply personal in origin, and it may come to light as a major preoccupation that has been around for a significantly long time.

HI is a research process that is difficult to set any clear boundaries to, particularly with respect to duration and scope. It is a method that can be best described as following one's instinct, but at the same time requiring the highest degree of transparency and thoroughness. It is a method of inquiry that should not be undertaken lightly.

HI highlights the importance of working with the heuristic process of others, especially with the historical recordings of previous inquiry. Indeed, it turns out that the works of writers, poets, artists, spiritual leaders, and scientists can all be usefully treated as the creative products of HI, which are validated by a participatory sharing with others, who in turn may be inspired to engage in their own heuristic study. And so the great chain of HI is moved along, originally as part of the ancient oral tradition, then down through the centuries as recorded and written tradition, and most recently as part of the empirical scientific tradition.

From a clinical perspective, there is a very striking similarity between the methods of HI and the practices of counseling and psychotherapy, particularly with respect to the use of the "self." It is therefore a method of research that particularly resonates with inquiry into counseling and psychotherapy-related issues.

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HI is not just a methodology, since it is possible to adapt the heuristic approach for specific purposes within other approaches to research. At the heart of the approach is a process of heuristic discernment, which can be recognized as a fundamental skill or process useful in any type of inquiry. This notion of discernment describes a participatory process of reflection and discovery, leading to fresh insight, greater awareness, or new conceptual or practical distinctions. It is at work at both the macro

and micro levels of inquiry, and it not only helps promote reflexivity, but also is involved in the planning of inquiry, the collecting and analyzing of data, and the dissemination of the findings. It can be regarded as the basic skill that every qualitative (and arguably, every quantitative) researcher must develop.

Another example is the skill of heuristic indwelling, which is especially important with helping in the development of the skill of reflexivity. In addition, it is possible to view qualitative analysis as a process involving the systematic and rigorous application of indwelling or discernment. This process is particularly important in at least three ways: (1) indwelling especially stresses the participatory nature of tacit knowing, (2) indwelling is crucially involved in the sifting through and interpretation of data, and (3) indwelling seems to offer the possibility of a specific methodological tool within qualitative research.

HI is of importance to any researcher who is faced with the dilemma of the inauthentic exclusion of his or her own experience from his or her field of research. The promise of HI is that it offers a systematic way of incorporating the self into inquiry methods while ensuring a high level of reflexivity and transparency. Furthermore, it holds out the promise that some of the most significant, exciting, and urgent life events and extraordinary human experiences might be researched more closely.

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See also

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