

Organic Inquiry

Preparation...inspiration...integration

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Organic Inquiry

Organic Inquiry is an approach to research which seeks to allow for the presence and utilization of ways of knowing beyond the merely rational. The researcher is encouraged to make use of altered states of consciousness at all stages of the research process, in particular the extension of ordinary awareness above the egoic level and beyond the thinking function. Furthermore, the research is designed to be conducted in collaboration with others, with the research participants, and it strongly emphasizes the use of stories to understand the topic being studied. Organic Inquiry is undertaken with the clear intention to provide transformation, not merely information. It is an approach best suited to research topics concerned with spiritual and subtle experience, and topics of which the researcher has significant personal experience.

It is 'organic' because it is living, it can change and grow with the progression of the research. It honours the reality of the life of the researchers and participants and readers. When originally developed in the 1990s by Jennifer Clements, Dorothy Etting, Diane Jenett, Nora Taylor and Lisa Shields, the women were specifically looking ways to research which would honour the sacred feminine. They wanted to include co-operation and interdependency as positive values in research, and incorporate diversity as a way of exploring equality rather than hierarchy.

Three Stage Process

The organic researcher operates in a constantly repeating form of

- Preparation
- Inspiration
- Integration

Researcher preparation is one of the most important features of good organic research. Are you ready for it? This research method demands that the researcher is someone who can enter in to her own experience of the topic under review and see it clearly – tell her own story. She must then detach from that story and gather the stories of others, and explore those stories for what they are. Then she must integrate all those stories, with her own story, and be sufficiently detached to see what the transformation has been. Furthermore, she must be able to move in and out of personal experience and transpersonal awareness easily, distinguishing subject and object, self and other, spiritual and material (Clements, 2011). She must be able

to hold and understand the co-arising of the Oneness and the multiplicity. Researchers who are insufficiently personally prepared for organic inquiry are unable to meet the rigors demanded by this method. It is suited to people with a mature psycho-spiritual practice. (Braud (2004), Clements (2011)). This ought to make organic inquiry a very good fit for research by transpersonal psychotherapists.

The main features of organic inquiry (taken from Braud, 2004):-

- its offering of a format for including trans-egoic, liminal, or transliminal influences within a context of disciplined inquiry;
- the overarching importance of the psychological and spiritual preparation and adequateness 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;
- its valuing of describing the context of discovery as well as the context of justification 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, the concept of transformational validity, and the use of early reader reactions as a test for the latter.

Although other methods offer some of these features to a greater or lesser extent, it is the combination of the features in organic inquiry which allows it to claim status as a research approach in and of itself.

The Tree – the Five principles of organic research as originally conceived

It has five principles, (Clements et al. 1998)



- The sacred
- The personal
- The chthonic
- The relational
- The transformative

Sacred – the soil is prepared, old habits and expectations are unearthed

Personal – the seed is planted – this represents the initial experience of the topic by the researcher, the topic has deep personal significance

Cthonic – the roots emerge, invisible, a mysterious underground aspect of the project.

Relational – the branches of the growing tree are the participants' stories which connect to the trunk of the tree

Transformational – the harvest of the fruit. Changes of mind and heart.

Organic Inquirer as Alchemist



The important research skill of being able to move in and out of liminal and spiritual space which organic inquiry emphasizes so effectively can be seen in the alchemical maxim 'solve et coagule'. Robert Romanyshyn's work on alchemical hermeneutics (2013) provides a good juxtaposition for organic inquiry. He explores the creative and transformational aspects of alchemy, seeking to craft if not a research method from this, certainly a research approach. Alchemy is a profoundly natural model, as is organic inquiry. In alchemy we explore the elements, and the natural process of transformation which can result through engaging with the energy of the different elements. Through a continual process of purification, dissolution and coagulation the alchemist moves through the process, as the organic inquirer has a continual process of preparation, inspiration, and integration.

Validity

In OI validity is assessed in terms of its transformative effect – in other words does the research reach and affect the readers own story about this issue. Early readers can be invited to test validity in this way, for example your academic tutor. I recall working with one student who worked with organic inquiry, who one day brought her nearly final draft to a tutorial and we sat and wept – the experience of change in her had opened her heart to her participants, led her to understand her material in an entirely different way, and this burgeoned out of her and landed. Her final dissertation also profoundly moved me as I

read it, similarly moving me to tears not because of her skillful writing, but because of the authenticity of her journey. It was an extraordinary and impactful piece of research.

The validity criteria for organic inquiry need to be carefully assessed and the researcher needs to be aware of ensuring they hold questions of validity firmly in mind.

Criticisms of Organic Inquiry

William Braud (2004) has set out ten criticisms in his paper on Organic Inquiry, many of which seem to come from Rosemarie Anderson – comparison between the two methods (organic and intuitive inquiry) reveals that there is considerably more structure in intuitive inquiry, and many of Anderson's criticisms are focused on the lack of structure in organic inquiry. When choosing a research approach the wise researcher will consider their capacity to bring flexibility to a structured approach, and structure to an unstructured approach. The clearest criticisms of organic inquiry are:

- As organic inquiry does not offer a clear method of its own researchers may lack rigor, and borrow from other methods but do so inadequately (*although surely all methods borrow from other methods? Is a researcher incapable of understanding the paradigm from which a method arises and thus of assessing its efficacy within the context of their research?*)
- The narcissistic researcher can get carried away and put too much emphasis on themselves in the study and not enough on the research and the data. Spontaneity can be overprivileged by inexperienced researchers, who can be sloppy, procrastinate and lack direction with the approach. (*All research suffers when the researcher is inadequately prepared, and organic inquiry puts very extensive emphasis on researcher capacity*).

Conclusion

Organic inquiry is a loose but powerful crucible within which research can be carried out. The organic inquirer must be someone who is disciplined and mature and able to guard against sloppy, narcissistic, rambling and undisciplined research behaviour. The benefit of adopting an organic inquiry approach is that the research can excel in its capacity to hold the researcher's subjective understanding, gleaned consciously from liminal and spiritual encounter with the material. The approach honours the community of participants, and makes their stories and narratives important – it helps to reveal what experience really is, allowing the results to be authentic and have profound resonance. The conscious aim of the research is transformation for all involved. This research approach is particularly

relevant for those inquiring in to the spiritual and the subtle, for those who understand and work with alchemy, and for those wishing to bring a feminist or conscious participatory aspect to their work.

Points for consideration

- How do you use the alchemical process of 'solve et coagulae' in your daily life and psychotherapy work? Can you see how this is a movement in and out of liminal and spiritual space? Can you see how this is the organic structure proposed by this approach?
- How do stories increase knowledge? Why is it important to honour the teller of the story?
- What is the difference between a coresearcher, a collaborator, a participant and a research subject? How does the role of the researcher change in relation to these namings? What is the potential upside and downside of these different ways of being with your research group?
- Are you up to the psycho-spiritual task of being a good organic researcher? What will it challenge in you?

Your way of knowing is a private herb garden.

Enclose it with a hedge of meditation, and self-discipline, and helpfulness to others.

Then everything you've done before will be brought as a sacrifice to the mother goddess.

And each day, as you eat the herbs, The garden grows more bare and empty.

Lalla (Trans. Coleman Barks in Bly (1995))

Further Reading

- Braud, W. (2004). An Introduction to Organic Inquiry: Honouring the Transpersonal and Spiritual in Research Praxis. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. 36(1), 23-26.
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- Clements, J., Ettling, D., Jenett, D., & Shields, L. (1998). Organic research: Feminine spirituality meets transpersonal research. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 114-127). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lalla [n.d.] trans Barks, C. in Bly, R. (1995). *The Soul is Here for its own Joy*. New Jersey. Ecco.
- Romanyshyn, R. (2013). *The Wounded Researcher. Research with soul in mind*. New Orleans. Spring Journal Books.