
PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH CRITIQUE

by

John Rowan

I am angry about what happens in higher education. The PhD system and its siblings the MA and MSc system and its cousin the MPhil system is a serious block to the development of any education where people could learn what they need to know, and discover what they need to find out.

In this system the dissertation or thesis is rigidly bound by a research paradigm which is hostile to human mental life and persistently ignores it in favour of investigating behaviour and abstract models of behaviour.

For years I was disturbed by stories of how people I knew had put in ideas for theses which they had really been interested in. Their exciting ideas, arising out of their work and their experience, had been subjected to a straitjacket of independent variables, dependent variables, systematic rotation of conditions, tight experimental controls, random assignment of control groups and all the rest of the old-paradigm rigmarole, which as Mitroff (1974) has pointed out, has very little to do with the way real scientists actually work in the process of discovery. In the 1970s I wrote a poem about this, which may or may not be found elsewhere in this issue. *

Later I found in Maslow (1966) and in Mitroff (1974) the idea that old paradigm research is essentially a very masculine activity, in the sense of the social stereotype of masculinity being aggressive, confident, competitive, arrogant and so forth. In that way the problem of research linked up with the problems of peace and of the environment - problems which are all traceable back to a patriarchal consciousness which sees all things as exploitable.

Then I went through seven years of agony with my own PhD thesis, which I eventually abandoned. I had to spend two years arguing about it until it was accepted, and then found the set-up so constricting that I could not bring myself to carry it through. In the end all I had to publish was the research plan, and that was interesting enough to be selected to appear in a book (Rowan 1979).

Later I became involved in supervising and examining other people's work for Antioch University. This is supposed to be a very liberal college, and some of the theses were quite unorthodox. I had a hand in encouraging some of the students to do more adventurous theses, and that was fine. But I

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remember one occasion when the opposite happened. One particular student had taken on a topic which was very interesting but quite ambitious and difficult - a rather philosophical examination of a sensitive area of human experience. It turned out that he was not really adept enough at philosophical argument to carry this through; so I encouraged him to turn it more into a conceptual discussion of existing work in the field. This was quite a painful thing for him to accept and carry out. Again, when this was done, I felt that the discussion was not really sharp enough or deep enough to pass muster, and so I guided him into simply writing a critical account of the existing work in the field. This again was painful and stressful for him to accept. But this he did in an adequate scholarly way, and the thesis duly got through. But it was very boring, and the original spark had got completely lost. The whole thing had been quite agonising to the student. I was unhappy, and he was unhappy, but the system had been satisfied.

On another occasion a student produced a research plan which didn't seem to me to hold water. He revised it, and it still wasn't adequate. He revised it again, changing the topic, and it still didn't seem sufficient to me. So he switched to another examiner, and I had lost a student and to some degree lost a friend. The system had been too much for me again.

Out of these sort of experiences Peter Reason and I got together a book (Reason & Rowan 1981) to challenge the whole research paradigm on which the system is

based. We got together about forty authors, in the end, who agreed with us, and the result is an absolute blockbuster, containing sections on philosophy, methodology, training and - the biggest section of all - examples of research carried out in accordance with the new paradigm.

Later more books came out saying similar things, particularly Berg & Smith (1985), which again brings together a Number of different papers under the same banner, this time clinical research, which they say has the following characteristics:

- (1) *direct involvement with and/or observation of human beings or social systems;*
- (2) *commitment to a process of self-scrutiny by the researcher as he or she conducts the research;*
- (3) *willingness to change theory or method in response to the research experience during the research itself;*
- (4) *description of social systems that is dense or thick and favours depth over breadth in any single undertaking; and*
- (5) *participation of the social system being studied, under the assumption that much of the information of interest is only accessible to or reportable by its members.*

Another excellent book is Lincoln & Guba (1985), which quotes our work and builds on it. Quite independently, Alvin Mahrer (1985) has been putting forward his own critique of existing research

methods in counselling and psychotherapy, and suggesting better ways of doing it. Allen (1980) shows how a similar approach can be used in organizational work, for the benefit of all concerned.

It now seems as if this kind of research is less masculine, in the bad sense, than old paradigm research. Because of its emphasis on personal involvement, the interweaving of researcher and subject, the knitting of one research cycle to the next and so on, new paradigm research is more feminine, again in terms of the social stereotypes. I remember one time when I was co-leading a three-day workshop on new paradigm research, on the second day one of the women participants came up to me and said - "It's not fair. I've spent ten years trying to turn myself into a man, and now you come along and want me to turn back again into a woman!"

So the anger has been transformed into something constructive and

creative, which students can use in the years to come to say to their supervisors and examiners "I want to do it my way. I have here people in many fields of research who are on my side, and who say it is OK and valid to do it my way. Who are you to say they are all wrong? You profess to be reasonable - now prove it!"

Those who find all this of some personal concern might like to go back to Carl Rogers (1969, 1981) who was saying this kind of thing years before any of us. His paper **Current assumptions in graduate education: A passionate statement** is still just as valid and just as important today as when it first came out in 1963. Other very relevant and interesting books are Mitroff & Kilmann (1978), which uses Jungian concepts and has something to say about masculinity, and Reinharz (1979), which starts to move into feminist territory, in a very positive and useful way.

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