

Buddhism and Qualitative Research 1

I published the Italicised text below more than two years ago. I am glad to say that since then we have made huge progress on the issue at its core, the professionalisation of qualitative research. Within the coming weeks a study will be published that tells us that the research profession wants professional standards/qualifications and that this will be implemented shortly. So you may soon have several ways of gaining professional standing: a basic level qualification currently in development plus our MRS Advanced Practitioners Course . Read on to understand why this matters and how I expressed it two years ago:

Subjective experience [SE] is at the centre of qualitative studies. You could say with considerable accuracy that qualitative research is the study of such experience. The ideas that brought us the possibility of working with subjective experience were developed early in the 20th Century by Edmund Husserl: the school of thought he started was called ***phenomenology***:

In its most basic form, phenomenology creates conditions for the objective study of topics usually regarded as subjective: consciousness and the content of conscious experience such as judgments, perceptions, and emotions. Although phenomenology seeks to be scientific, it does not attempt to study consciousness from the perspective of clinical psychology or neurology. Instead, it seeks through systematic reflection to determine the essential properties and structures of experience.

There are lots of clues for qualitative researchers here, particularly the idea that we can, by using reflection, determine what experience is made up of and how it works to affect choices and decisions in the everyday world. You will see more about this in my challenge to Behavioural Economics and the idea about the unconscious nature of System 1 thinking.

<http://www.langmaidpractice.com/wrong/>

Gathering accounts of experiences and reflecting on them to determine their meaning and purpose is pretty much what we're trying to do in qualitative research

Husserl is someone who has not been too kindly treated by history. Partly this has to do with the fact that the brand of philosophy he conceived was given a daunting name, 'phenomenology' – one of those big words, as James Joyce was to say, that 'make us afraid'.

So, it was Husserl who opened the door to the idea that the contents of consciousness, including feelings and material leaking through from the deeper levels of the mind, could be explored to increase understanding of our experience of – and intentions towards – the world.

How can we use this approach?

In my view this question is best asked differently: who has the best, most accurate and

useful analysis of SE?

There are a number of notable efforts from western psychology. Freud's account, Analytic Psychology (Jung), Gestalt, Humanism and Behaviourism - and there are things of great value in each of these. Maslow's hierarchy, Rogers' Person Centred approach and Cialdini's work on influence together with a variety of theories of motivation also repay study and application to our understanding of choices and decisions.

But I believe an even better analysis is to be found in the texts of Buddhism. Their analysis starts with the subjective life of the human being, then works out through society to the physical environment.

Why do I prefer this analysis?

- 1. It is founded in 2,500 years of contemplation.*
- 2. It is non-theistic and yet retains a sense of our spiritual as well as animal natures. It makes room both for our altruistic and self-destructive tendencies: aspects which impersonal, scientific accounts find it hard to explain.*
- 3. It offers a compelling & complete description of Need States or feelings that compose our states of mind and direct our actions.*
- 4. It suggests many thousands of fluctuations in our minds in every day, which accurately reflects my experience. Yet does so without overwhelm or confusion.*
- 5. Its Ten Worlds offers a complete yet manageable description of life states that is all-inclusive on the one hand, while on the other offering the smallest number of categories to cover all of our experiences.*
- 6. Above all it is non-judgmental, we will each spend time in all of these worlds and from them we may reach out to buy, to compete, gain status, or to serve. They are chapters in the way we live and for that reason of immense value to any serious student of what matters and what influences us.*

*From my own studies I think there are two main reasons why qualitative research is descending into reportage and failing to mine the real nature of SE. **Firstly, it requires a considerable amount of study to understand how our reports of reality are constructed and what influences them.** That study shows us quickly that the 'mind' is not a blank slate receiving information from the senses, but is always pre-loaded with its own operating system which means that sensory information is interpreted in the light of both past experience, present preoccupations*

and future intentions. It is through these filters that we respond to brands and communications. The most fashionable filter at present is Kahneman's System One and Two.

*Second, whichever models we use to shape our analysis of SE, **it takes time, knowledge & practice** both to understand our model and to apply it. Then it requires more time to explain to your client how the model works and how it can be of use. It also requires a deal of wisdom to know when a model will be helpful in understanding or predicting behaviour and when to use a different one.*

In other words, qualitative research is becoming diminished due to the lack of knowledge, skills and acumen about the nature of SE among qualitative researchers. Quite simply too many of us lack 'Well-stocked minds' and this is accelerated by our insane offer to clients that we can generate miracles of insight without study and reflection - and we can do this in a week. In the end, friends, our greed & impetuosity will prove our undoing.

Even Hobbits knew better:

"There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world."

JRR Tolkien, "The Hobbit"