

GRACE NOTES V

DR SALMA SIDDIQUE considers the way research has its own agenda

MY EARLIEST MEMORY of research was the 1980s TV advertising slogan: 'Eight out of ten cats prefer it to their usual dry food.' I always understood this as eight out of ten cats prefer Whiskas. The slogan was later revised, following complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority, to: 'eight out of ten owners, who expressed a preference, said their cat prefers it.' Research findings were used to support the product rather than illuminating the cats' existential position!

Research is the act of telling a story 'about something done by someone' through the act of measuring, journaling, listening, observing and collecting notes on understandings of what's going on. Gadamer (1976) argues that the researcher as well as the process of research is shaped by 'historically effected consciousness' implying that the search for truth, is at odds with the method of humanities research, which is intrinsically influenced by the scientific methods of observation, experimentation and hypothesis testing. Nowadays most of us would accept that scientific knowledge is socially constructed and serves the interests of dominant groups which are shaped by gender, ethnicity, social class, psycho-geography, economics, history and those who like to tell us how the world works or doesn't work. The researcher and the researched hold a set of values, beliefs, techniques and etiquettes that are products of the cultural contexts in which they have grown up. These then determine the knowledge they refer to in creating their own customised hierarchy of evidence for their individual stories and collective myths.

Our learning is essentially a product of our cultural understanding of 'seeing is believing'. To test this phenomenon, Simon and Chabris (1999) reproduced the invisible gorilla experiment of 1975. This involved subjects watching a brief video of two groups of people passing a ball. The subjects were to count the number of passes made by a particular team (players in white t-shirts). During the experiment a woman dressed in a dark gorilla suit walks through the sequence. At the end of the session most subjects did not report seeing the gorilla. Instead they focused on counting indicating that attention is based on perception, expectations, and coloured by the requirements of the task.

How do we avoid being swept up by the dominant view and/or the focus of the initial task and expectations? A well known example of this is Hans Christian Andersen's 'Emperor's New Clothes'. The folktale of a pact of two tailors contracted by the Emperor's court to create a suit of clothes using a technique so advanced, that the fine cloth produced was invisible to the naked eye, and to anyone who didn't 'appreciate' its quality. At the fitting of the suit the Emperor was praised by all around him on a spectacular choice of outfit. Word spread through the kingdom about the Emperor's beautiful new suit of clothing not able to be seen by anyone who was ignorant or incompetent. At the parade the Emperor passed through the astounded crowds until a child calls out 'but he isn't wearing any clothes.'

What can psychotherapy research learn from this? Do we need to be in the position of the child to question what we see? What value do we put on our own evidence-based practice? We need to appreciate that the researcher's perspective is influential and researchers usually have their own agendas. This view was observed by Shakespeare (1996) when he wrote in his book review of Oliver Sacks' popular text 'The Man who mistook his wife for a hat' as the 'man who mistook his patients for a literary career!' How can we keep the focus on the clients' needs?

We need to be more discerning – no single research approach has all the answers; all are open to interpretation and discourses of persuasion. We need to be more research literate so we can question other research and not just rely on catchy slogans or slick arguments. Perhaps we can start by appreciating our own experiences in the therapy room and asking our clients how they want their stories to be told?

References

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