

## LETTER

### Research problems: Objectivity

The purpose of the following analysis of the article "Issues in Coping Research" (L. Joan Brailey, *Nursing Papers*, Spring 1984, Vol. 16, No. 1) is not intended as a criticism of its content. Instead, it is to provide a different perspective of the difficulties that are inherent in socio-behavioral research.

Initially, the very selection of a research problem requires the strictest of scrutiny. Presently, the nursing profession is so caught up in a web of enthusiasm with research that a deceptive dimension is present of what research can and cannot do. Partly, perhaps because of the "halo" which has permeated research nowadays and partly because of the unconscious belief that it is a panacea for all problems. Nurses at times attempt to investigate phenomena or things which are simply incapable of being studied through objective scientific approaches (Hochbaum, 1960).

Most experienced dissertation chairpersons will tell you that many doctoral students believe that a topic or area of interest they have identified for investigation is of great significance because very little research has been directed in that area. Most often, however, the reason for that belief is simply because the students have not carried out a thorough search of the relevant literature. If in fact such an observation by the students is accurate, then the question of why the topic or area has not been investigated is raised and analysed. Rarely, the reason for this would be an oversight by hungry investigators; it would probably be because the variable(s) cannot properly and adequately be scientifically controlled.

Let us now examine the three research issues which Brailey has identified:

1. To study coping effectiveness, accurate data of how individuals cope with stress of daily living must be obtained. Stress and coping with stress have in fact been extensively investigated (Alexander, 1950; Kutash & Schlesinger, 1980; Mahl, 1953; Saranson & Spielberger, 1979; Selye, 1956, 1976, 1980). Brailey proceeds to explain four different methods of data collection about coping strategies and their advantages and disadvantages. According to Dickstein (1977), the possibility of inaccurate self-perception is related to the nature of the self and this raises an interesting question. If the behavior of individuals is partly determined by their subjective self-impressions, it follows that complete understanding would require

knowledge of how individuals view themselves as well as having an objective evaluation of their ability. Behavior may be more readily predictable from knowledge of others' attribution to them.

2. Investigators must be able to delineate clearly the function of coping in order to establish its effectiveness. A basic characteristic of human development is the common desire every person has to keep feelings of uncertainty at a minimum so that the self-concept is not threatened. The entire process of human growth and development is a progressive series of adaptation in which anxiety plays an important role and acts as a symptom of stress which is a normal, adaptive, and recurring event in daily living and cannot be avoided. A stress-free environment is a non-conducive one for growth. It is hard to understand why Brailey considers that the function of coping needs to be investigated.

3. Once the functions of coping strategies usually employed have been established, researchers "must decide on ways to measure the efficacy of strategies used in fulfilling the stated functions." Sound research rests to a significant extent on the objectivity of the researcher and this is not always easy to maintain. This objectivity is threatened when the object of the investigation is people, something so closely related to the investigator's own basic motivations and needs (Hochbaum, 1960). Therefore, although data collection methodology is an integral part of research, its importance does not precede that of sample selection. Coping mechanisms of daily living by individuals vary as apples do, especially when the population of North American society is so diverse because of multi- and transculturalism. Generalization of research findings will be very limited, even questionable. For example, subjects' coping repertoires and their effectiveness could be genetically, socio-economically, developmentally, psychologically, and environmentally dependent. Data obtained must take all these variables into account and that is not an easy matter. I am not of course referring to statistical manipulation through the use of ANCOVA or other tests.

In conclusion, perhaps the reason why Brailey's belief that research in the processes of coping with daily stresses is limited is probably because they cannot be very objectively investigated.

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