

## Research in Spiritual Care and Therapy

Thomas St. James O'Connor, ThD  
Professor, Delton Glebe Chair, Pastoral Counselling  
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary  
CPE & PCE Supervisor, CAPPE

### Introduction:

Research has grown in volume and interest in recent years in spiritual care and therapy. With the development of evidence based spiritual care and therapy, research has come to play a more prominent role in clinical work. Specialists in CAPPE are expected to read research and implement relevant research into their clinical practice. They are also encouraged to do research in their specialty ... "contribute to the growing body of knowledge." (Handbook, Practice, III, 4, H & 5, E) Research is as standard of practice in the field. This paper presents some of the resources for research, describes and compares three kinds of research. The paper also outlines how to do a review of the literature on a clinical population, summarizes the nature and importance of evidenced based spiritual care and therapy and offers suggestions for developing a research poster for educational events.

### Resources:

There is a growing body of knowledge on research methods in pastoral care and counselling. There are many good texts in other disciplines as well.

Berg, B. (1997) *Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Toronto: Allyn and Bacon.

Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.) (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. New York: Sage.

O'Connor, T. (2003) Research in spirituality and health care. *Spiritual Care and Therapy: Integrative Perspectives* by P. VanKatwyk, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 141-152.

Sprenkle, D. & Moon, S. (Eds.) (1996) *Research Methods in Family Therapy* 1<sup>st</sup> edition, New York: Guilford Press.

Swinton, J. & Mowat, H., (2006) *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* London: SCM.

VandeCreek, L., Bender, H. & Jordan, M. (1994) *Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling* Decatur, GA; Journal of Pastoral Care Publications

VandeCreek, L. (1995) *Spiritual Needs and Pastoral Services: Readings in Research* Decatur, GA; Journal of Pastoral Care Publications.

### Kinds of Research

Bruce Berg believes "the purpose of research is to discover answers to questions through the application of systematic procedures." (1997, 7). Within spiritual care and therapy,

there are three systematic procedures or methods: quantitative, qualitative which includes case study and hermeneutical.

**Quantitative:** This is the method that most associate with research. Quantitative research seeks to prove or disprove theory. The research question usually is developed into a thesis (answer). The thesis is subdivided into hypotheses which are proved or disproved. If the hypotheses are found true then the thesis is true. Quantitative research employs a variety of methods using large samples and statistical analysis. This research method seeks to reduce and eliminate research bias. It assumes an objective truth that can be discovered through research. The randomized control trial is the highest form of quantitative research. Larry VandeCreek and George Fitchett are two exemplars who have utilized this methodology. Harold Koenig and David Larson from medicine have used this method in studying religious and spiritual care.

**Qualitative:** This research has emerged in the social sciences in the last 30 years. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not seek to prove or disprove theory but rather to discover theory. Qualitative research assumes that researcher bias is inherent in any method and so qualitative researchers often declare their bias in the research report. Truth is viewed here as more subjective and socially constructed. There are a variety of methods used in qualitative research. Usually, the researcher becomes part of the research field, observes and interviews participants in the field around a open ended question, records the interviews through audiotapes and transcribes the tapes. The transcribed interviews are the data and then coded in finding an answer to the research question. Four methods that are often used in qualitative research are ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology and feminist. Elizabeth Meakes and Thomas St. James O'Connor have done a substantial amount of qualitative research in spiritual care and therapy. Many students in theology especially in DMin programs have utilized qualitative research in doing the dissertation. Case study is a research method often categorized on the border between qualitative and hermeneutical research (see below). Douglas Sprenkle and Sidney Moon describe two types of case studies: formal and informal. Usually case study involves an indepth analysis of a case with a strong implications for clinical practice. Charles Gerkin uses case study effectively in his writings. George Fitchett argues that case study should be the method of choice for spiritual care and therapy.

**Hermeneutical:** Hermeneutical research is the most dominant method in theology and is often associated with systematic theology. Paul Tillich and David Tracy are exemplars. Its data is written texts and a critical interpretive lens is used in understanding and explaining these texts. Since Anton Boisen coined the phrase "living human document," hermeneutical research has become more relevant for spiritual care and therapy. Critical events, patients/clients, the helping relationship and the practitioner are all considered living human documents. Here hermeneutical research blends with case study. Charles Gerkin in his narrative hermeneutical view of practical theology is a good example. This interpretive process includes the sources of sacred texts and traditions, the social sciences and the living experience of the client and clinician. The goal of these interpretations from the three sources is transformation. Table 1 compares the three research methods in spiritual care and therapy.

**Three Kinds of Research in Spiritual Care and Therapy:  
Hermeneutical, Qualitative and Quantitative  
Table 1**

<b>Research Concepts</b>	<b>Hermeneutical</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>	<b>Quantitative</b>
Research question	often	Open-ended and discovery orientated	Most often
Answer to question (thesis)	yes	No-does not prove but discovers	Yes
View of truth	Objective and subjective can be viewed as constructed	Objective and/or constructed-truth is discovered	Objective truth is verified or disproven
Hypothesis	Not usually	Not usually	Usually and seeks to prove or disprove hypothesis
Sample and data	Written texts are the data and enough texts are used to deal with question	People and their experiences-empirical research. Data is gathered through interviews, observations and other means.	People Empirical research. Data is gathered through measurement tools
Randomized sample	No	Purposeful	Usually
Reliability	Not usually	Not generalizable	Yes, generalizable
Validity	Not used here	Yes	Yes
Measurement tools	no	Not usually	Many - statistically reliable and valid
Independent & dependent var.	no	No	Yes
Analysis & discussion	Hermeneutical-interpretation is standpoint dependent	Coding of data (i.e., interviews, etc.)-constant comparative method. Data needs to be interpreted & related to research question	Statistical analysis of data to support or disprove hypothesis. Facts speak for themselves
Implications for practice	yes	Yes	Yes
Varieties of methods	yes	Yes	Yes
Randomized control trial	no	No	Highest form of research
Triangulation	Not usually	Yes	yes

## **Review of the Literature:**

Essential to any form of research is a review of the literature around the research question. What is a review of the literature? It is

- Summary of body of knowledge around research question
- Involves summarizing research that is quantitative, qualitative, case studies, theoretical, hermeneutical
- Not all research is equal. The research must be critically examined
- Examines first studies that are directly related to the research question. What have others done on your question and what have they found?
- What are the gaps in the research around your question? What has not been done? Are there any disagreements in the research? What should be done?
- If there are no studies or few then one goes to the related literature.
- Related literature is research connected to question but not directly on it.
- Related literature can be vast.

Doing a review of the literature involves:

- Searching relevant databases-ATLA, Medline, etc. using key words focusing on research that is directly on question. It is helpful to consult a librarian.
- Critically examine the studies noting gaps and inconsistencies-criticize studies.
- Summarize findings on your question.
- Do manual searches of relevant Journals on your topic based on journal for the last five years.
- Check with an expert in the area to find out relevant articles and books.
- Check bibliographies of good articles.
- Go to related research-watch that you don't get lost in it.
- Keep looking and relate anything you find to research question.
- Reread the material that you have found.
- Summarize and thematize body of knowledge using APA style.

## **Evidence Based (Research Informed) Spiritual Care and Therapy**

What is evidence based spiritual care and therapy? It is the judicious use of scientific evidence on spirituality and religion in the spiritual care and therapy of patients/clients. There are different levels of evidence and all are not regarded as equal. At McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario) faculty of health sciences (an originator of evidence based health care), various levels of evidence are noted: (O'Connor & Meakes, 1998)

1. Quantitative research with Randomized Control Trials (RCT) that has been replicated being the highest form of evidence.
2. Qualitative research studies
3. Case Studies
4. Theoretical discussion
5. Anecdotal evidence with an emphasis on clinical wisdom.

Certainly, all the evidence needs to be critically reviewed as there are studies which are poorly done with questionable findings. At McMaster, there is an ongoing debate over what constitutes evidence. One of the former assistant deans of the faculty of health sciences wonders: what kind of evidence and for whom? Many family doctors believe that clinical wisdom should be at the top of the hierarchy and evidence feeds that.

I like to look at evidence as the result of the search for truth (O'Connor, 2002b) whether in science, theology, social sciences, therapy, spiritual care. The job of the chaplain and pastoral counselor is to offer the best service to clients/patients and that means implementing and using the best evidence in spiritual care and therapy. Some believe evidence-based spiritual care is an oxymoron (O'Connor, 2002a)... that they come from two different paradigms and can not meet. How can one measure grace and spiritual care? I like to think of it as more of a paradox. I use Ian Barbour's four relationships between science and religion from *Religion and Science*: a) conflict; b) separate and different; c) meeting on the boundaries; d) integration. Evidence based spiritual care exists in the last two relationships.

My journey with evidence based spiritual care and therapy has been mixed. I like it and endorse it knowing that one ought to be searching the research for good evidence that will help patients/clients. I also believe that we should engage in research on spiritual care. Evidence has to be integrated into one's spiritual care approach and so clinical wisdom is important. I experience many spiritual care clinicians and pastoral counselors who resist this for a variety of reasons. My commitment to evidence based spiritual care and therapy is shown in a requirement of my students to take a graduate course in research. They must do a literature review on spiritual care and therapy of a population that they work with clinically. Then they are required to put their literature review into a poster and present it at the University, the hospital, a conference and/or to peers. There is huge anxiety over this; some students give up on it but many complete it. Some have won awards from the Society for Pastoral Counselling Research (SPCR) for their posters.

**References:** O'Connor, T & Meakes, E (1998) Hope in the midst of challenge: Evidence based pastoral care *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 52(4), 359-368; O'Connor, T (2002a) Is evidence based spiritual care an oxymoron? *Journal of Religion and Health* 41(3), 253-261; O'Connor, T.(2002b) The search for truth: Case for evidence based chaplaincy" *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 13, 1, 185-194.

### **Research Poster:**

Most conferences today in the social sciences offer a venue for research posters. These posters can be completed research projects, research-in-progress and/or a literature review with a desire to do the research. Usually, the research poster has a title which is a form of the research question. There is a summary of the literature, a description of the method and findings with discussion. The poster can also just contain the literature search and a description of the proposed method without findings. Usually, the researchers present their posters to listeners and engage in dialogue about the research. Both CAPPE and SPCR have venues for research posters and this is a good place for both novice and seasoned researchers to present their work.