

How Much Research Do We Need?

By Ken Gergen



I recently listened to a group of researchers presenting their findings on important social issues: poverty, crime, deficits in school systems, and religious conflict. As I listened I also found myself in private conversation. All these papers were based, it seems, on the assumption that careful research is essential for sound decision-making. And for this reason, the social sciences are dedicated to training professionals in research practices. Thus we have course requirements and countless volumes on methods of research, measurement, and statistical analysis. For many of us, research publications are also our ticket to success. And if our students are to succeed, they must demonstrate the capacity to carry out research. Here my concerns began to deepen. Doesn't the idea of research carry with it the assumption of a stable world? If the world were continuously in motion, then the research of today would be of little value in making decisions for tomorrow. Research would function like a snapshot from the window of a moving train, of scant value in predicting the landscape an hour hence.

The internal dialogue quickened: what if the subjects of our research could – through their processes of relating – suddenly alter the patterns of behavior that our research seemed to reveal? And in fact, what if our revealing to them the concerns of our research set this process in motion, and they decided to change their course of action? I don't at all feel we should abandon all research into human behavior, but I do begin to feel that most of our research confronts something like the situation I am suggesting here. And if this is so, we might ask ourselves why we are exclusively emphasizing research. Would it be far better to invest more of our time in creating the future together than trying to put the present – now indeed the past – under a microscope? What could we accomplish if we replaced the countless hours devoted to the countless number of largely unread research reports with building together more promising ways of life? What if we didn't explore what is wrong with the “mentally ill,” family life, communities, education, and organizations, for example, and collaborated on creating new futures?

Appreciative Inquiry consultants will effortlessly appreciate these reflections. After all, they are largely replacing old-fashioned consulting methods – based on researching the organization for purposes of better decision-making – with processes of collective future building. Perhaps such efforts – with all their success – can provide a model for the social sciences more generally. We should not abandon all research practices, but we should earnestly explore the potentials of replacing our concern with “what is the case,” to “what could we achieve together?”