Energy led research
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Abstract
Energy led research was conceived as a supplemental methodological approach in the PhD research project “Organic growth” carried out by Mille Themsen Duvander between 2013-2018 with a classical grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, Glaser 1998). Yet with the inspiration of social constructionism (Gergen, 1982, 2008) and especially future forming research (Gergen, 2015), a need for a supplemental method occurred. The theory of organic growth is influenced by quantum scientific inspirations and that is why energy led research has similar inspirations (Bohm, 2005; Zohar and Marshall, 1990).

Energy led research describes the micro navigation of the everyday work of the relational researcher with the project and the group being studied; How to follow the energy in certain directions, how to be able to listen to intuition to follow the ‘pull’ of the project and how to be open and trusting the process in order to co-create valuable results with and for the group being studied. In the paper are presented four steps in a step-by-step guide, five basic assumptions and six key requirements for the researcher wanting to experiment with an energy led research approach.

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Introduction

Energy led research is inspired by future forming research (Gergen, 2015), a sort of research interested in co-creating the future. If we are to transform our current understanding of research as mirroring the world - into the understanding of research co-creating the future - we need to develop new methodological approaches. Energy led research is one suggestion for a new approach concerned with the researcher's micro management of the time and tasks in a research project. It is a suggestion on how to handle this management, in relation to the people in the group being studied, in the most beneficial way, in order to create theory that are shaping the future, not making sure everything is exactly as it was or as it “should be” (Gergen, 2015).

What if we replaced the persistent rush to establish “What is the case” and began to ask, “What kind of world could we build?” This would be to place the researcher’s values in the forefront of his/her activities. Rather than their latent presence in the choice of terminology and methodology and in the vain hopes that an absent audience will somehow make use of one’s work, what if purposeful and passionate visions supplied the source of inquiry? Given a valued vision of the possible, the challenge for research would not be to illuminate what is, but to create what is to become. (Gergen, 2015, p. 295)

In the methodological framework of grounded theory every action is guided by the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1998) and to be able to create research that co-creates the future with the group being studied, the researcher needs to be sensitive to what is happening in that group, in the wider field of the theoretical area but also in the world today. This need is being met with energy led research, where energy leads the way. But first a concept clarification.

Definition

Energy led research refers to the micro management of the researcher and the collaborative partners in a research process, in order to take the right decisions on what to do when and in what order. In grounded theory you follow a specific rule when producing empirical data, coding the data and analyzing - by memoing ideas constantly - all of these three things simultaneously. Other types of research have more linear work processes, for example
where you conduct all of your data first and then go back and analyse and thereafter write it up.

Energy is understood and used in many ways, both within and outside the scientific field. In this approach energy is understood as human energy, relational energy and wholeness energy. These are suggested forms of energy humans can experience and tap into. Human energy characterizes the energy that humans can experience in and from their own micro system; their own fulfilled set of body, mind, spirit, and the whole of what they are and are a part of (Lowen, 1988). Relational energy is the energy experienced in the relations between people (Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016). Energy levels shift and are exchanged between people and one can for example experience to be uplifted or drained in a meeting with another. The understanding of wholeness energy is inspired from the quantum perspective of interconnectedness - that everything is connected to everything on the smallest scale of our known world (Bohm, 2005). These three levels of understanding energy are descriptive and created to give language to understand how to interact with energy in different ways, because the basic assumption of energy is the captured in the concept of wholeness, where everything is connected. This concept can seem a bit fluffy and hard to grasp, hence the expanded language here. The phd researcher C. de Jong tested this hypothesis in his research project: “The soul of a person might be the first condensation of energy” (C. de Jong, in press). He refers to the Max Planck Institute Munich, where researchers are doing profound work in relation to the beginning of the universe and the researchers are now backtracking what was happening 300.000 years after the big bang. They claim that back then, there was only energy in emptiness (ESA, 2015). Nothing existed, no time, no form. From a social constructionist view that is one way of creating language around energy where metaphysical forms of energy are connected to the energy field of the single person.

In relation to this perspective, energy is here also understood as a stream of consciousness that is flowing. It can be accessed by humans by asking questions like “What do we have energy on?”, “What pops up as fun, easy, light - so easy that we can’t stop ourselves from doing it?”, “What would be raising the energy level?” and “What is pulling us now?”. To follow a pull also means to be led (Hagel, Brown and Davison, 2012). This understanding of sensing and following the energy may seem to be associated with personal endeavors but that is only relevant because the single micro system is compounding of the body, the mind, the spirit and everything else. The whole system is used as a guiding system in the relational
realm as well. In addition to this, the future forming researcher has a basic understanding that everything is relational, including the researcher being a relational self. More about these basic assumptions in a later section.

The second word in the concept is to be led and this means to have the courage to be led. To let go of some control and get into a state of mind that are softer and with freer boundaries. To lean into a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). To let go and follow the stream, where the energy is high and to place the next research task exactly in that stream and co-creating from that inspired place. To be led is to be present in micro moments. The researcher needs to take a position of being “local-emergent” instead of “elite, a priori” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), which resonates with this approach, because the researcher needs to be stationed in the present moment at any time to be aware of what is emerging. It requires a high degree of improvisation as a supplement to the rigorous system of the core method. McNamee & Hosking describe it this way:

Rather than work with design and method, we prefer minimal structures and improvisation. Of course, some important decisions must be made before we embark on any inquiry. Yet (...) even these emerge within a particular relational community and then are more or less open to crediting or discrediting by those with whom we conduct our inquiry. (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, p.68)

Word number three is research and that is here understood in a rather traditional sense as scientific research, with a systematic, methodological approach. A project that creates new knowledge about a specific area, carried out by one or several researchers associated with research institutions such as universities. Having clarified the three key concepts we will look at the context of which the approach was born.

The background: PhD research on organic growth

To gain further understanding of energy led research it is relevant to look at the roots of this method. The research project was a grounded theory inquiry into the community of appreciative inquiry practitioners - people from different parts of the world practicing the organizational development approach called appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider, 1985, 2017). Following grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1998) and asking "what is the main problem for this group and how do they resolve it on a regular basis" led to the development of the theory of organic growth (Duvander, in press). The theory of organic
growth is one suggestion of how these practitioners, in their everyday life, strive to develop in sustainable ways. The six keywords of organic growth are 1. Balance, 2. Flow, 3. Healing, 4. Trust 2.0, 5. Energy and 6. Wholeness and several of the categories were lit by inspiration from quantum physics (Bohm, 2005). After the grounded theory of organic growth was conceived on behalf of the data interaction process, inspiration was also retrieved from Laloux’ understanding of employees working in organizations “of the future” (Laloux, 2014) as well as from theories on social learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bandura, 1977) and on flourishing (Fredrickson, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Dweck; 2010; Dweck and Leggett, 1988). The empirical basis of the project consists of 24 qualitative research interviews, two interactive research workshops with representatives from the group being studied and participant observations at two community gatherings.

Five fundamental principles for energy led research

It is relevant to present some foundational principles for the thinking behind energy led research for the purpose of exploring the basic thought lines behind. The following principles shows five background perspectives.

1. Everything is related in wholeness
The first premise for energy led research is the understanding that everything is related in wholeness (Bohm, 2005) and that human being and human development are fundamentally relational (Gergen, 2008). The understanding of everything as connected in wholeness is inspired from the research in social constructionism and quantum theory and this understanding opens up for possibilities of being guided via energy and to understand how energy can be a guideline, because of the ability to tap into this energetic field of wholeness by using intuition. And when directed towards the whole field, then the decisions made on behalf of this is to benefit to the whole of ‘everything’ and therefore not harmful but basically warm. In practice this means that there is no sense in hurting each other if everything - and therefore everyone - are connected.

2. The relational self as a single micro ecosystem
The second premise is centered around the understanding of creating and co-creating in relationships and the relation to the single micro system. To start with the last part, the single micro system may need a concept clarification: The understanding of the world divided into different layers or systems are inspired from Bronfenbrenner’s work on ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), where he works with 5 systems to which the individual is related,
going from the closets relationships in the family to the larger macro systems. In the phd project where energy led research was born, it became important to work with the concept of the relational self as a system, too. To understand a relational self as a single micro system opens up for understanding a human as just another system in the wholeness, and the arguments for this systems perspective were found both in the biological world, where the human body consists of many, many cells and bacteria among others (Lipton, 2008), and were also found in the understanding of the self as having a system of a body, a mind, spirit, habits, experiences, stories, competencies and everything else that belongs to a single human system (Duvander, in press). The understanding of this self is harmoniously related to the understanding of everything as relational in wholeness, because the single human system is not separated or fragmented from others but always fundamentally existing within the whole, it is merely the perspective that varies. The single micro cell of a human body is possible to observe with special technical tools and can be interesting to study and learn about, but it makes zero sense to talk about it without including the whole of the body, and the cooperation and communication within this intelligent system. Within this perspective, the self or the single micro system, is interesting enough to study and learn about but make no sense without including the whole.

3. Energy as an important factor
A third basic assumption of energy led research is that energy exists as an important factor in our world and it is possible for humans to observe energy, connect with it and make sense of it (Zohar and Marshall, 1990). Einstein said that mass equals energy and later scientists have shown how mass is made up of quantum entities that humans can measure either as particles or as waves. How to understand or use energy may still require loads of research, yet this approach do take into account that energy exists and that it is possible for a researcher to make use of it as a guide. From a social constructionist perspective one could argue that energy is a phenomenon humans socially interact with and make sense of and that there is benefit in naming and articulating this because it has utility for the people using it.

4. Change and consciousness
The fourth premise is an understanding of the world as expanding and of human consciousness to be expanding too (Laszlo, 2008). Laszlo refers to this expansion as a quantum leap and presents thoughts and models showing an urgency within the human evolution regarding the shape of the earth. In different arenas change are happening at a
global scale, within economic, ecological and financial arenas, but also within the civil society such as families and work structures (Laszlo, 2008). Laszlo suggests that a quantum leap in the global brain is undergoing. This means that the shared consciousness and energetic network of all humans information processes is about to transform in a crucial way and depending on the pace and extent of this transformation, the earth will either go through a breakdown or a breakthrough. To choose to make use of energy led research, one must accept the basic assumption, that everything is expanding and that the transformation of consciousness is another important step in the global growth, because if not, there are no need to research from the emergent future and to co-create future forming research. This leads to the final basic assumption.

5. Emergence and the emergent future
The fifth basic assumption for energy led research is the trust in emergence and the sensing of what is happening in the emergent future. In the management field Scharmer & Kaufer would call this “Leading from the emerging future” with the concept theory U (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). To be able to do that, instead of learning by reflecting on the past, one needs to learn from the future as it emerges, as Scharmer calls “presencing” (See Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013 for a full introduction to theory U).

From pioneer researchers such as Gergen and Scharmer we know that humans need to lead from the emerging future and that research needs to be future forming. To transform such ideas into a practical human approach, developing tools is key. Energy led research is a suggestion and articulation of a research process that is in micro management guided by what emerges, down to every minute and second of the research process. According to Scharmer this requires an ability to sense emerging potentials:

The challenge is to develop the capacity for “precognition", the ability to sense and actualize emerging potentials. To do this, leaders must be able to see the emerging opportunities before they become manifest in the marketplace. This kind of knowledge can be thought of as tacit knowledge prior to its embodiment, or “self-transcending” knowledge. (Scharmer, 2000, p. 3)

This resonates with energy led research in that the ability to sense and act into the emerging future is key when co-creating research and theories co-forming the future. In the following
will be given practical examples from the PhD research project about organic growth of how the researcher was guided by energy.

Examples of energy-led research

The first example is the writing of the chapter on energy-led research. The name “energy-led research” was born in August 2017, and was quickly googled in order to see if something was already named that. Nothing came up. The following is a note from the research logbook:

Today, I had a meeting about my research and during lunch I got a “cave” like feeling. I wanted to disappear with my research and my writings and then return when I was done. When I rode my bike, something in my mind said “Write the chapter on energy-led research. Write the chapter on energy-led research” and kept repeating. And it took 50 minutes to write two pages. It just flowed. (Research logbook)

Many writers and authors know about that phenomenon of writing; being inspired and writing, experiencing almost only typing and being a medium for some kind of energy that runs through the body, and into the fingers. If we are open to follow such a guidance and accept that form of micro management of research processes, and if researchers have the ability to listen to and follow that subtle voice, then we might be able to stay in flow states over longer periods of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). There are several of other examples, yet they are small, because the inner voice is often small and quiet:

During this little section (have been writing non-stop, did not leave the chair for 1,5 hours) a voice in my head said “go get some fresh air”. Usually my mind would say “no, break is not until 15 o’clock and maybe a break is inappropriate, because you are going to be a researcher and you are under pressure and you are doing very important work - you owe your workplace, your advisor, your manager, your family, your participants and interview persons to perform above the expected level - so you just work through that break”.

See that is exactly to miss the point. To be able to stay in the flow, the researcher needs to follow those small guidances. To step out and get some air. Or walk for 10 minutes to clear
the head. Or stretch the back. And when following that pull, the effectivity often raises afterwards, when working mostly or only from inspiration.

Asking a little more critically into this suggested approach and the questions would be: Why not do as often done, work to follow the to-do list, work while uninspired, work while tired or disturbed? Another example shed light upon that:

Tonight, I have worked for 3 hours. This Saturday evening, I started by copying my method section out of the dissertation and into a separate document, that is 40 pages, because I needed to revise it before sending it to my advisor before a call. When copying the chapter, the comments did not follow! Tried to copy it back in, and neither the comments nor the new revisions were coming through! After that spending 1,5 hours on finding all of the revisions made to the chapter and adjusting them in the old chapter that has indeed all the comments. Phew. (Research logbook)

Most researchers may know such an experience and from a time optimizing perspective, it can be wise to act when in flow and get back in flow, if out, before acting again. That being said, the researcher does not have to be a saint. The patterns of working through lunches, working many hours - weekends, holidays, at night - is well known to the author. There is a potential to evolve over the years and through the next research projects. Most of the examples are collected from around the time where energy led research surfaced as an approach and those months consisted primarily of writing tasks. But loads of situations have been a relational following of the energy in the room, even before the method were put into language:

When we started the research workshop we talked about whether to follow the plan that I had prepared or improvise. They of course voted for improvising, so we did that. They went into groups with people they felt drawn to, co-created some relevant questions and then interviewed each other in a walk and talk. (Research logbook)

It is not always positive energy that guides the way though. The method is called energy led, because energy may not be loaded with value. Sometimes strong energy guides the way as this example shows:
Last month I had a meeting with some scientific colleagues in my organization, one being quite sceptical about the project which reminded me of the Rosenthal effect. I prepared for the meeting and showed up with all my presence and authority and curiosity and trust in the project. After the meeting I analyzed the conversation bit by bit. And even though it was not a nice experience in the moment, I went home and wrote seven pages in a day. (Research logbook)

In describing the approach of energy led research, it may be valuable to clarify when to be systematic and to follow energy. The study of organic growth can be used as example. When carrying out the study, the method and detailed steps of grounded theory was followed very closely: Interviewing, coding, writing memos, treating everything as data and finally writing it up. That is the big picture, the greater structure for the work and that is very systematic. On the other hand, the energy led research is, as mentioned earlier, all of the micro moments. And that may not be systematic in a traditional fashion.

Six key requirements for the researcher

A step by step guide can make it easy for a reader to apply an approach. The main guide here is for the researcher and the group being studied to follow the energy. To be able to follow the energy takes some specific requirements for the researcher and the group and that is why six key requirements will be described. Ending up this section a mini step by step guide will be introduced, after the introduction of six special competencies: 1. Openness, 2. Trust in the process, 3. Letting go of control, 4. Intuition, 5. Emotional intelligence and 6. Ability to be supported. These will be explored in the following:

1. The researcher needs to possess great openness to be able to take all that in, which is a good match for the research. That is both methodological approaches that might fit good - but which are not easy to understand nor to follow, or which requires very much reading. But also interview persons that the researcher did not like as a first impression but have energy on contacting again and that turns out to be a relevant resource for the research. The same goes for theoretical perspectives; some are more preferable for the researcher than others, but the researcher needs to be open. An example from this research project is, that I wanted to do an inquiry into the field of AI practitioners and hoped that I would come up with something bigger and better and higher in appreciation and positive feelings. Yet what showed up were concepts
like balance and organic growth that to me, personally, seemed to be a bit of pity, but that was what this specific group and research called for. And I needed to be open to that and follow that.

2. Trust is another important factor, because if the researcher experience doubt, he might not be able to take wise decisions following this method. It can be hard to have and to continue to have that amount of trust: “The fear of one’s own creativity is real and often only too real. Trusting to emergence and delimiting is hard. Trusting to intuition to be verified, trusting to ability in the face of big stakes is hard” (Glaser, 1998, p.186). Doubt can be of value if it opens up to new questions and space to co-create the new, but trust is needed to be able to know when to follow what.

3. Letting go of control is another requirement for a researcher using this approach. For some researchers this is a hard request to meet. Control is needed in many ways of a research project, and sometimes one needs more control with the greater amount of chaos. To be led by energy the researcher learns to be able to hold greater spaces of the unknown and to hold these spaces as long as it takes, gives the absolute fruits of the works. Scharmer operates with two important components in theory U related to this (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013) that is; 1. letting go, which are aimed to be happening just before hitting the lowest place in the U and 2. letting come, which is the first step coming from the button and turning up toward right.

4. Intuition, also inspired from Scharmer's work and grounded theory, is the ability to listen to inner guidance, to connect to the intention (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013; Anderson, 2000) and act as an instrument (Glaser, 1998). The concept of intuition helps give language to what happens in a more concrete manner for the researcher and the group being studied, when they are tuning in to follow the energy of the micro moments. The concept of intuition is often tied to the understanding of 'individual' but this approach encourages an understanding of relational intuition, through dialogue, because this approach is relevant for researcher co-creating research with a group of people.

5. Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) is another key factor for the researcher using an energy led research approach because the qualitative researcher needs to be sensitive to micro moments while absorbing the wholeness at the same time.
Where much former research has studied emotions directly or reserved research on emotions for fields like arts, mental health or child development, this is a different stance, because it invites in the emotions of the researcher, and not only invites them in, it gives them a front seat (Collins & Cooper, 2014, Gergen, 2015). McLaughlin points to the fact that reason and emotions are often falsely polarized, and she emphasizes that thinking and feeling are completely linked in research processes (McLaughlin, 2003). “Our capacity to function intellectually is highly dependent on our emotional state. When we are preoccupied our minds are literally occupied with something and we have no space to pay attention, to take in and listen to anything else” (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 73). Emotional intelligence is important for a qualitative researcher in order to be able to connect better with the participants, to listen better and understand the lifeworld of the people in the group being studied (Collins & Cooper, 2014).

6. Ability to be supported
In the process of energy led research, there is a stronger focus on support for the researcher, because it is necessary to have and get help, in order for the researcher to quickly get back into flow, when out. Since relationships and wholeness are fundamental for future forming research, it is obvious to prioritize shared support. Yet many social researchers still work under conditions of modern academia and therefore join a culture of the individual's ability to design, carry out and write up research processes, even though the study is a research with a group of people.

These six requirements may be a great supplement for a social researcher. When using energy led research it is key. The logical abilities are much needed in order to carry out most of the scientific operations. To co-create future forming research with and to be able to come up with a theory or a piece of research aligned with the people in the group being studied, the researcher can benefit from having this approach.

Four steps of energy led research
Based upon the five fundamental principles and of the six requirements of the researcher, a suggestion for a step by step guide is provided here:

1. The first step towards using energy led research as approach will be to ask if the method is relevant in relation to other chosen methods and to the chosen epistemology and theories of the research project.
2. The next step would be for the researcher to start training oneself to tune into micro moments together with co-researchers and the group being studied.

3. This will lead to the third step because the researcher will need to reflect upon the six requirements of the researcher in order to train and be able to tune into micro moments. The six requirements will help prepare that ground.

4. The fourth step would be to keep training how to focus on micro moments and adjust from there as well as keeping track of the process, for example by writing a scientific logbook or other sorts of documenting.

The encouragement would be to try it out and experiment, because when following this approach, new approaches may emerge in order to articulate and support that current research project as best as possible.

Advantages and limitations

Working with this approach in supplement to grounded theory, there are several boundaries to this methodological perspective: Energy led research emerged during a phd research project and therefore it has not been tried outside this area yet. The method was born in the context of a future forming qualitative research project and has not yet been tested in other forms of research. A key principle in energy led research is that there are no boundaries. Everything is connected on the quantum level (Bohm, 2005). On the physical level there are boundaries though. And it is wise to know where they are when communicating. While this approach may not resonate with many researchers, it may resonate with specific groups of researchers. One could imagine that researchers using the approach of future forming research may benefit from this approach as well as researchers working from an appreciative inquiry approach. Some grounded theory researchers may also find this approach valuable because it articulates, in a more detailed way, how to let things emerge and follow what emerges during the study. One final group could be highly sensitive researchers, because these may be aware of their own state of mind, their own flow and sensitive towards work tasks and collaborative partners as well as ideas, methods and theories possibly entering the research project.

A final point to reflect on is the words chosen for this energy led research: During the study the work of Scharmer’s work "Leading from the emergent future" was found to be compelling and this method could have been called "Research from the emergent future" as it correlates
very well. The decision was taken to go with the phrase that emerged spontaneously instead, to emphasize how to follow the pull of the energy.

Further use of energy led research

The closing of this text will not include a conclusion or a summary, rather it will serve as an invitation to reflect on possible experiments and applications of this approach. If research are invited to be future forming these years, then we need new methods which lets the researchers be open to the whole that they are part of and act according to that. To stay in the flow, to be able to create, deconstruct and rebuild fast and help benefit the involved people, that is, the practitioners in the substantive field of area.

We also need to be aware of the fact that if researchers are to put their values and visions in front of their research, then the studies might in certain perspectives mirror not the world, but the researcher and the group being studied. If the researcher is honest in sharing values, then the audience might easily see the mirroring and understand how that study can help create social change. Honest sharing can happen for example through insight into the researcher’s logbook. In other fields, the researcher sharing values would be called bias. If we are to create future forming research, we need to accept that the social science researcher is not a bias but a resource to enrich and inspire the future being formed with the group being studied.

If researchers are able to try out this method, for the micro management of their research, many may find it possible to stay in flow longer, write and create more inspired, find the right people and methods, involve the participants in beneficial ways and have research creating changes in practices - and by that forming the future as it emerges.

Bibliography


