

## Theory and Meaning in Counseling Research: Comment on Strong (1991)

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Although distinctions between theory-driven and naive empirical approaches to research are recognized as valuable, the distinction Strong (1991) makes between them is questionable. An argument is made that the more relevant debate is between qualitative and quantitative approaches to counseling research. Some of the differences between the two approaches, as they relate to Strong's ideas, are presented. A proposal is set forth stating that until a more accurate account of events in counseling is achieved, research that is driven by formal theory is of no greater scientific value than less theoretical approaches.

Strong (1991) has constructed an interesting argument in favor of theory-driven research in counseling. At the same time, he has contrasted theory-driven research with what he refers to as naive empiricism. The latter is equated, in Strong's view, with alternative (Hoshmand, 1989) or qualitative approaches to research. Although we agree with much of what Strong has to say, we believe that the parallel he draws between naive empiricism and alternative methods is misleading. Theory-driven methods are not exclusively quantitative, nor are empirical methods exclusively qualitative. We believe that progress in advancing scientific knowledge of counseling, however that is achieved, will occur more rapidly when counseling psychologists obtain a correct understanding of the basic facts of counseling. Therefore, the critical problem facing counseling researchers is finding scientific paradigms that are suitable for studying counseling phenomena. Questions about whether the methods of inquiry are theory driven are secondary to the task of finding out what it is about counseling that makes it counseling in the first place.

The debate is not between an approach that is theory driven and one that can be characterized as naive empiricism because both of these approaches are identified with the "received" view of science. Theory-driven research is only one variation of the received or natural science version of inquiry. Natural science methods also include the observation and quantification of facts. Skinner's (1938) work provides an excellent example of naive empirical research within the quantitative tradition. Freud provided a classic example of theory-driven qualitative research (Kvale, 1986). In addition, Darwin's (1859) theory of evolution is an example of the fruits of naive empiricism at its best. All three scientists adhered to the philosophical assumptions that underlay the received view. Accordingly, Strong is actually discussing two aspects of the received view rather than the received view and alternative methods.

Stated simply, we contend that the more relevant debate is between (a) scientific approaches that seek the dynamic underlying causes of counseling events and (b) scientific approaches that seek to understand the meaning counseling events have for those participating in the counseling. These contrasting goals lead to quite divergent methods of data collection and analysis (Patton, in press). Thus, when the distinction is made in this way, the laboratory experiment, the correlation study, or the content analysis, for example, become recognizable methods of data collection in counseling research that are derived from the received view. A formal theory may or may not accompany any of these methods, but what all of the methods share is the analysis of data by recourse to quantification. By contrast, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, grounded theory, conversation analysis, phenomenology, and ethnography are some of the approaches in the alternative tradition (Hoshmand, 1989; Patton, in press). These approaches to data collection use materials that arise from the actions of the research participants themselves and require the use of qualitative techniques for the analysis of the data thus collected.

### Genuine Differences Between the Two Approaches

Although a protracted exposition of the differences between scientific approaches to studying counseling that seek underlying laws and causes (quantitative) and those that seek meaning (qualitative) is beyond the scope of this response, we address some of the key points, including some of those alluded to by Strong (1991).

### *Lawfulness*

The received view of science assumes that all behavior is determined and is ultimately explainable in terms of underlying and lawful physical processes. The task of the researcher is to discover those laws, often by developing theories. The mind, if it enters the picture at all, is construed as a sensory organ (i.e., the brain). The assumption of lawfulness allows the researcher to use methods of the physical sciences to study and quantify human behavior in terms of the mechanisms

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that cause it. In this way, humans are conceptualized as the products of the physical forces that act upon them (Lewin, 1935).

Qualitative approaches allow for a broadened set of assumptions about human nature. Humans can be seen as agents having free will and the capacity to transcend those forces acting upon them (Rychlak, 1981). In this view, the person's interpersonal behavior is not rule governed as much as it is rule interpreted (Garfinkel, 1967). That is, the mind is seen as active and constructive rather than as a tabula rasa or a feedback loop (Patton, in press; Patton & Sullivan, 1980). This point of view seems to be consistent with that of most practicing counselors (Jensen & Bergin, 1988). The conflict between the ontological assumptions about the mind in the received view of science and those assumptions of practicing counselors may be at the base of the perceived rift between research and practice in counseling psychology.

### Causes

The notion of cause figures prominently in Strong's (1991) argument. Strong and most scientists in the positivistic tradition construe causes as external (to the mind), linear antecedents of behavior. Mental acts and behaviors are seen as necessary responses to impinging stimuli. Assuming this form of determinism allows scientists to interpret human action within the confines of the physical science (Galilean) framework.

Aristotle proposed a more comprehensive way to view causality. In considering the notion of cause, one should note that the Greek word translated as *cause* might also be translated as *responsibility* (Rychlak, 1981) or as *reason* (Gingrich, 1965). Aristotle suggested four possible types of causes for any given object of study: material, efficient, formal, and final (Robinson, 1981; Rychlak, 1981). Material and efficient causes are those that deal with the actual substance and behavior of the object of study. The received view deals primarily with these causes.

Qualitative research is directed at formal and final cause explanations of behavior. These causes deal more with the patterns and purposes of a phenomenon. They are "characterized by an emphasis on understanding or illuminating *meaning* [italics added]" (Hoshmand, 1989, p. 13). In the qualitative view, human action can be understood as semantic (meaningful) rather than simply mechanical or lawful (Packer, 1985; Sartre, 1953).

### Bias

Strong (1991) accurately asserts that "facts are objective only in the sense that reality is allowed to speak within the framework from which observation flows" (p. 207). Yet, this statement seems to contradict his thesis that theory-driven science is the most bias-free approach. Theories are analytic frameworks by which observations are delimited. Explanation by recourse to theory guarantees that bias will influence the results. With regard to the act of counseling itself, Pepinsky (1963) noted some years ago the use of bias to the counselor

and the extent to which the counselor's bias induces the client to converge toward the counselor's "psychological grammar" (Pepinsky & Karst, 1964). In a series of theory-driven laboratory experiments (cf. Pepinsky & Patton, 1971), evidence for the social influence process was obtained by observing the client's predicted convergence toward or divergence from the counselor's bias. In that same series of experiments, even the bias of the experimenter who conducted a particular study was seen to influence the laboratory appearance of social influence.

Contrary to Strong's (1991) assertion, researchers do not claim that qualitative approaches are free from the effects of bias. The difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches lies in the way bias is dealt with by the researcher. Quantitative and theory-driven approaches have the biases embedded in their theories and methods. Thus, one purpose in such research is to prove or disprove one's bias. The potential conflict of interest is apparent here. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, typically seek to set aside bias rather than to prove it (Jackson & Patton, 1990). The task for the qualitative researchers is to continually explicate his or her biases in the process of data collection and analysis so that it is recognizably distinct from the meaning given to events by the persons being studied. Although it is not possible to identify and remove all research bias, advocates of qualitative approaches think it is better to acknowledge and deal with biases than to bury them in theory or method.

### Theory

Strong's (1991) assertion that counseling research has suffered from too little theoretical research is the exact opposite of our observation. Counseling research has suffered from too much of some theoretical research. That is, much of the research in counseling has been aimed at supporting or refuting theories, constructs of which have little to do with the sense counselors and clients make of their encounters. We suggest that this has been the source of the accumulation of unconnected facts mentioned by Strong. The failure of these efforts to produce any coherent, enduring explanations of counseling is based on the fact that counseling psychologists have not been studying the actual events of counseling, but rather events as researchers define them. There will be adequate theories of the process of counseling and its outcomes when the constructs embedded in those theories mean the same thing to the researcher that they mean to the counselor and the client. To formulate such theories, we shall have to begin to observe more closely how counselors and clients create, understand, and deal with their own behavior in counseling.

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The Publications and Communications Board of the American Psychological Association announces the appointment of Robert J. Sternberg, Yale University, as editor of *Psychological Bulletin* for a 6-year term beginning in 1991. Beginning immediately, manuscripts should be directed to

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