

# SAGE Research Methods Cases

## Awareness of Spiritual Freedom through Imaginal Response to Mystical Poetry: An Intuitive Inquiry

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Book Title: SAGE Research Methods Cases

Chapter Title: "Awareness of Spiritual Freedom through Imaginal Response to Mystical Poetry: An Intuitive Inquiry"

Pub. Date: 2013

Access Date: February 17, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Ltd.

City: London

Print ISBN:

Online ISBN: 9781446273050

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013505060>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013505060>

# Awareness of Spiritual Freedom through Imaginal Response to Mystical Poetry: An Intuitive Inquiry

## Link to the Research Output

- Netzer, D. (2008). *Mystical poetry and imagination: Inspiring transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom (Doctoral dissertation)*. Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA (ProQuest DA3316128).

This case example features *intuitive inquiry*, a qualitative method, which incorporates hermeneutic and heuristic features, honoring the participants' subjective experience and the researcher's subjective perception of the data. Intuitive inquiry invites the researcher to honor his or her own voice, to be fully attuned to internal and external experiences (including intuition, imagination, and felt senses). It was a highly suitable method with which to approach this case of participants' imaginal response to mystical poetry because the researcher's interest in this topic emerged out of her own spiritual experience when responding to mystical poetry through mental imagery and creative expression rather than in an analytical manner. I sought to examine the effects of imaginal responses to mystical poetry and uncover transpersonal qualities in the nature of participants' responses, a task that required keen observation and attention to subtle nuances. This case describes how intuitive inquiry provided the supportive scaffolding to bolster the validity of qualitative data interpretation. Extracting from my dissertation draft, I provide examples for the method's balance of structure and flexibility—thinking and feeling—that emerge in the process of transforming my initial concept of the phenomenon into a multidimensional understanding of my participants' experiences.

# Learning Outcomes

- Understand the key features, structure, and application of intuitive inquiry through all phases of a study
- Become familiarized with a transpersonal approach to qualitative research that often results in personal transformation of the researcher, participants, and readers
- Recognize the role of the researcher as facilitator and subjective interpreter of empirical data, and learn about the challenges of a heuristic, hermeneutical method

## Introduction

This case describes how intuitive inquiry, a transpersonal research method, served to formally structure my doctoral dissertation. The topic I chose for this study emerged from my longtime interest in and benefit from the practice of mental imaging as a medium of healing and transpersonal development (transpersonal psychology studies human personality but also inquires about different states of consciousness, the spiritual dimension of life, and the far reaches of human potential).

Transpersonal research methods aim to support researchers in the process of studying transformative human experiences and other phenomena of higher consciousness or spiritual nature by accepting the validity of multiple ways of knowing, or epistemologies (e.g. feelings, intuition, dreams, and altered states of consciousness), as a form of *radical empiricism*—a term coined by William James to denote a highly experiential form of empiricism that is inclusive of observations as well as non-observable data, as actual and relevant to the study of human experience.

## Topic

My dissertation study was designed to empirically examine the value of imaginal processes, such as mental imaging and creative expression, as inspirational of

participants' awareness of their spiritual freedom (spiritual freedom was defined as recognition for that which extends infinitely beyond one's personal boundaries, including oneself, others, the visible and the invisible, and the known and the unknown).

I facilitated several workshops in which small groups of participants listened to a recitation of selected mystical poetry and were asked to respond to the poems via mental imagery and creative expression rather than in an analytical manner. The mystical poetry served as a vehicle to transport the participants into an imaginal realm depicted by the mystical poet. The participants' resonance with the poems, directly perceived through their imagination and creative expression as *immediate knowing*, was compared to their verbal discussion and analysis of their experiences as expression of *discursive thought*.

## Choosing a Method: Intuitive Inquiry

*Intuitive inquiry*, conceived and developed by Rosemarie Anderson since 1995, combines hermeneutic and heuristic approaches in a transpersonal research method. It emphasizes the validity of the participants' subjective, *constructed* perception of lived experiences (*phenomena*). Moreover, it honors the researcher's subjective discovery (*heuristic*) and interpretive (*hermeneutic*) understanding of the data as meaning-laden information. This method's *transpersonal* approach, in the words of Anderson, cultivates *the ways of the heart* in scientific research of human experience, by embracing the symbolic, archetypal, imaginal, and other latent dimensions of being human.

In intuitive inquiry, the researcher may choose to use both *qualitative* (e.g. interviews) and *quantitative* (e.g. scales) methods of data gathering (in this case, only qualitative data were gathered). The researcher is presented with rigorous approaches to bolster validity, assessing the efficacy of the study (the degree to which the findings increased the readers' knowledge of the topic and transformed their understanding of their own experiences). Greater *efficacy validity* means greater transferability and generalizability (the degree to which the findings carry over, beyond the participants' individual experience). The researcher may share the findings with the participants (member check) to assess accurate description and understanding of their experience. In addition, a *resonance panel* of reviewers may further assess the findings. This is

a group of qualified, nonparticipants, who relate to the participants' experience and are charged with examining the researcher's interpretive findings and communicating their degree of resonance (agreement) with the study's conclusions in terms of how accurately the findings mirror their own experience.

Intuitive inquiry was well suited as the method for my research because of its sensitivity to the researcher's heuristic connection with the topic. This method required me to acknowledge the *lenses* with which I examined my topic and to be mindful of my assumptions as integral to the process of hermeneutic uncovering of new meaning. Intuitive inquiry also suited my researcher temperament, in that it balanced, harmonized, and synthesized intellectual rigor with other ways of knowing, through attention to body sensation, intuition, synchronicities, dreams, and creative expression (refer to the original study for an example of a final *creative synthesis*, a feature of Moustakas' heuristic research).

## Intuition as a Way of Knowing

Anderson goes to great lengths to establish intuition as a profound mode of knowing. Far from a whim or a guess, intuition has been defined as direct apprehension, inspiration, embodied knowing, imaginal perception, sudden or immediate knowledge that may be felt as ineffable and not always rational, or tapping into the collective unconscious or the numinous (in Jungian terms). Honoring intuition is intrinsic to creativity and in turn makes unpredictable, groundbreaking discovery possible.

To these familiar definitions of intuition, Anderson adds two more forms of intuitive knowing that validate the researcher's interpretation of data. These are *empathic identification* (understanding others' experiences through our capacity for compassion—stepping into others' shoes with feeling) and *knowing through our wounds* (our deepest wounds often open us to our greatest sensitivity for others' struggles and making us more accessible, more open to hearing the undertones in the vulnerability of research participants, who share personally meaningful experiences with the researcher).

# Stages of Research

In the process of intuitive inquiry, five successive, often iterative cycles of interpretation unfold. The cycles (which repeat until the researcher experiences a saturation that readies him or her to move forward) carry the researcher through all phases of the study:

- Clarifying a research topic via imaginal dialogue
- Identifying one's existing understanding (preliminary lenses) of the phenomenon in question through engagement with the literature
- Gathering data and articulating descriptive (non-interpretive) findings
- Interpreting findings and transforming the researcher's preliminary lenses through the understanding of participants' experiences
- Integrating one's discovery with the existing literature

The first two cycles of intuitive inquiry constitute the *forward arc* of the hermeneutic circle. The last three cycles constitute the *return arc*. In Cycles 1–2, the researcher sets out on the research journey and articulates the topic and the preliminary understanding of the topic, which stems from prior experience and the literature. In Cycles 3–5, the researcher completes the hermeneutic circle by transforming his or her preliminary understanding of the topic via the understanding (gained through interpretive analysis) of the participants' experiences.

The process in each cycle of my intuitive inquiry was manifold. I kept detailed accounts of thoughts, feelings, recognition of analogies and symbols in my daily experiences that inspired insight pertinent to the study, as well as dreams and artwork that were expressed during the year of study (see examples in the complete dissertation, available on ProQuest). Ultimately I had to discern which of these experiences spoke directly to the transformation of knowledge pertaining to the study and which had to be processed discretely, as part of my personal growth in light of undergoing the inquiry process along with the study's participants.

# Cycle 1: Clarifying the Topic via Imaginal Dialogue

Intuitive inquiry offers a unique process to facilitate the clarification of the topic. From the outset of this inquiry journey, the researcher is invited to choose a topic of personal interest and to relate to this calling in an imaginal and creative manner. The researcher immerses himself or herself (as in Moustakas' heuristic research) in texts or images that inform, inspire, and catalyze the initial engagement with the inquiry, allowing thoughts, impressions, and images to surface. Insight from this process aids to clarify and identify the potential audience with whom the researcher wishes to communicate his or her findings, as well as discern whether the topic is compelling, manageable, or delimited for the scope of the study (e.g. thesis or dissertation). Furthermore, through this imaginal exercise, researchers articulate clear, concrete (scientifically researchable), and promising research questions that aim at new realization or discovery of a phenomenon that begs fuller understanding.

In my case, I began Cycle 1 by identifying my keen interest in the topic of the mystic's poetic imagination as a path of spiritual development. I immersed myself in my topic by engaging in imaginal meditations, poetry writing, and creative expression, which resulted in further refinement of the topic—a focus on spiritual awakening via imaginal resonance with mystical poetry, which I defined (drawing on the literature and my personal experience) as *transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom*. The images I engaged during this process were largely derived from the natural world, which led me to delimit my poetry selection to nature-inspired poems.

Feeling ready to continue into the next cycle, I embarked on the literature review and began to establish a strong theoretical foundation with which to approach the ephemeral experience of imaginal response to mystical poetry; but in the process of literature review, I began to lose my creative engagement with the topic. This was the first time in which I felt the iterative nature of the method's cycles. I consciously began to pay closer attention to feelings and analogical images in my daily life. Soon after this recognition, I had the opportunity to do a walking meditation in a labyrinth. The meditation led me



back to the personal nature of my process, and the labyrinth walk became my Cycle 1 dialogue partner. The following is an exemplary excerpt from my journal writing:

The labyrinth path offers itself as a container for my intention of transformative search and research. Like the spinning of a cocoon, it has a predictable movement and progress of holding and embracing. Yet with each turn, one is closer to the possibility of change; the kind of change that necessitates leaving something behind, relinquishing control and placing faith in *meaning birthing form* ... I set an intention to unfold a process of discovery, at once actively and receptively. Along the way, however, fears creep up, concerns that I made a mistake ... As I come to the center of the labyrinth I feel the weight of my concerns drop into its inner circle. I pause and intentionally relinquish the tension I brought with me, which I built within me over weeks of over-concern with the outcome of my dissertation project rather than a focus on the process ...

## Reflections on Cycle 1

Walking the labyrinth path was reflective of the searching and researching I experienced as I deepened my connection with the topic of my study. I also understood, more fully, the transpersonal symbolism of the labyrinth walk and linked it with what one of my professors at the time, the late William Braud, discussed in his article *The Ley and the Labyrinth*. My inquiry was like a labyrinth walk—an *idiographic* path that has its own logic and pattern to be discovered only by walking it. The researcher is asked to trust in the wisdom of the labyrinth's pattern even when it seems that it is leading one away from the center toward which one is consciously heading. The experience of walking the labyrinth was, therefore, not merely the objective experience of walking in pre-delineated circles. Rather, the intention with which I entered the experience and the meaning I ascribed it throughout the experience formed (constructed) the labyrinth walk for me in a subjective and particular way; it helped me reconnect to my topic of spiritual freedom, experience a glimpse of spiritual freedom, and realign with intuitive inquiry's emphasis on inner knowing and trust in the intuitive unfolding of the inquiry.

## Cycle 2: Identifying Preliminarily Lenses and Literature Review

The literature review in intuitive inquiry resembles conventional approaches to literature review in the social sciences. The researcher selects theoretical, empirical, literary, or historical texts with which to establish a *pre-understanding* of the topic (prior to data collection), which is then distilled into a list of *preliminary lenses*. And yet, the method invites multiple ways of knowing in this discernment process—the analytical as well as the intuitive, creative, and embodied. As a supplement for formal literature review, Anderson suggests exercises to loosen this process (a brainstorming of sort), so it is more permeable to intuitive navigation of the literature (discovering texts in related areas one might not consider if consulting the rational mind only). The outcome of this investigative and contemplative process is the list of Cycle 2 lenses, which identifies conscious and unconscious processes that influenced the researcher's preliminary assumptions about the topic. Once data gathering ensues, the researcher may not go back to change these lenses. Their transformation, based on data analysis, is articulated in Cycle 4.

The following are two examples out of the seven preliminary lenses I have articulated at the conclusion of Cycle 2. The first exemplifies a theoretical, literature-based understanding; the second depicts my intuitive, experiential knowing:

- The phenomenological qualities of intention, direction, and action are aspects of the mental image and creative expression. They are also present in transpersonal development, in which internal processes and awareness are externalized in the form of action in the world. Action is the fruition of ongoing spiritual practice in the direction of balance of the personal and all that is beyond it, but inclusive of it. In the process of imaginal resonance with mystical poetry, the poem may prompt an intention within the listener, in response to the poet's intention, which is embedded in the poem. The mental imaging process may reveal the personal direction this intention might take in the individual's daily life. Finally, the expression of this insight in a material

- way (via creative art expression) represents an opportunity to externalize an internal process and act on it in a material way.
- Imagination is a medium for transpersonal experience, healing, and transformation owing to its bridging qualities, linking the sensorial and the spiritual. To gain insight via the imagination, one has to give primacy to intuition and imaginal processes over intellectual interpretation.

## Reflections on Cycle 2

In my case, the literature review was multidisciplinary. It included theories of the imagination from phenomenology and psychology, empirical research on neurological dimensions of mental imagery in healing and transformation, spiritual texts on mystical poetry, and studies pertaining to creative arts. By searching for theories of the imagination, I sought to contain what seemed (as indeed it is) vast and ineffable. My introspective, image-based dialogues in Cycle 2 (see examples in the original manuscript) have revealed to me that I tend to give primacy to what I perceive as seminal, established, and formalized, but that I find true engagement and resonance with the lived experience. The further I progressed on the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle of intuitive inquiry, the more I realized that theory is only sufficient as a preliminary container and that true transpersonal realization is found in practice and experience.

## Cycle 3: Data Gathering and Descriptive Findings

As with other research methods, the intuitive inquirer must determine the sources of data, the criteria for selection of participants to provide firsthand accounts (or published sources of information), and the procedures to be undertaken in the process of data gathering. In my case, the participants were adults who expressed keen interest in spirituality and creative expression. I determined that I would facilitate several small-group workshops. I created a design that included six steps of data gathering as follows:

- Mental imaging in response to the recitation of a mystical poem
- Verbal descriptive report of the mental image in present tense
- Recording of the description in writing
- Creative expression in art media
- Embodied writing (an expressive writing technique developed by Rosemarie Anderson)
- Brief, written reports of awareness of changes in mood, bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings during the session

I was careful not to ask the participants for their intellectual understanding of the poems, nor discuss my own experience and my connection with imaginal response to mystical poetry. Similarly, the questionnaires, at 1 week and 1 month following the experiential session, focused on the participants' experiences through brief, written reports pertaining to their awareness of analogical relationships between the imaginal resonance process and subsequent everyday experiences as well as shifts in habitual patterns.

## Reflections on Cycle 3

In my case, by the end of Cycle 3, I gathered all the data and organized them verbatim along with the associated artwork. I created a *response profile* for each of the 24 participants, which included the poem they listened to, their reported mental image, their artwork, and embodied writing. Units of meaning were organized in a thematic content analysis format. The following is an example of one poem (written by Colette Aboulker-Muscat), presented as a mental imaging exercise, and the initial report given by one participant's as well as her creative expression (due to the limited scope of this article, only a partial representation of this participant's data profile is given).

Facilitator's guidance and poetry recitation:

Close your eyes. Uncross your legs. Regulate your breathing with long exhalations through the mouth and normal inhalation through the nose. Beginning with a long exhalation through the mouth, count three cycles of breathing. Now,

See, sense, and feel that ...

*Merging into the sea, I don't disappear*

*But feel one?*

*With the whole.*

Breathe out once. Know that ...

*One and complete, I add to the Eternal soul*

*Linked with all the souls, And I live.*

Breathe out once and open your eyes.

...

Participant's description of her mental image (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Expressive art image created by participant 3-02. Oil pastels on paper (12# x 18#).



I see slow motion of running from the shore toward the gentle waves of the ocean. I feel no fear as I enter the warm water. All around is gray (it had been black and white), but

as I enter and touch the water, the water becomes a very beautiful, bright aqua blue. My body fully enters the water and begins to spread out like a great, clear jellyfish, and I begin to feel the energy of all the other animals and plants in the ocean. The water itself becomes clear but yet still has the blue color to it. It is warm and comforting. I don't feel alone or frightened by the water. I feel I have become the water and especially have become the fish and seaweed.

## Cycle 4: Interpretation of Findings and Transformation of Lenses

To interpret the data, the researcher applies select procedures that are unique to his or her approach to the findings. At the end of this cycle, the researcher reexamines his or her preliminary lenses and evaluates the lenses' transformation (i.e. how has the pre-understanding of the topic changed in light of the new data?) Detailed articulation of these changes constitutes a successful completion of Cycle 4.

In my case, I have undertaken multiple stages of *incubating* the data (as in Moustakas' heuristic tradition) and encircling the data in a hermeneutic manner (including multiple ways of knowing). The following are three examples of the intuitive approaches I took to data interpretation:

- *Reverie*: A form of dream-like ruminative reflection that focuses on feelings, sensations, and images (while thinkers are bound to a linear, reflective tracing of perception, the dreamer receives the whole before the parts).
- *Imaginal resonance*: A process I developed, responding to the data through mental imaging and creative expression (e.g. poetry, visual art, music, and creative movement). This mode was particularly useful in responding directly to the mystical poetry and to the artwork generated by the participants, since they, too, engaged in imaginal resonance.
- *Embodied writing*: An expressive approach to writing developed by Rosemarie Anderson that invites presence and inward tuning to the subtle ways in which the body communicates, as well as an opportunity to be verbally expressive in a way that is not divorced from the original experience.



In addition, I critically examined my preliminary lenses. For example, I compared indications for participants' trust in their *immediate knowing*—trust in their unique resonance with the poem—and subsequent *reasoning, questioning* of the experience, the addition of *commentary, comparison* to past experience, *anticipation* of the future, and *self-judgment*. Hermeneutical analysis, with reference to the theoretical assumptions articulated in Cycle 2, uncovered symbolic expression of participants' intention for awakening and development; imaginal directions, such as introversion and expansion; and depiction of actions, such as connection with others and liberation.

## Reflections on Cycle 4

The data directly demonstrated that many of the participants of this study experienced transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom, to varying degrees, while responding to the mystical poems through imaginal resonance and creative expression. Participants reported a sense of peace, comfort, fearlessness, warmth, pleasure, connection, emptiness filled with life, expansiveness, oneness, clarity, presence of self and universe, stillness, and happiness (some of these qualities are reflected in the participant example provided in this article).

However, as the immediate knowing of the initial, resonant image diminished, doubt of the experience began to creep in. *The presence of transpersonal symbols within the participants' images did not always translate into transpersonal action* (i.e. perceiving the analogy between the image's symbolic meaning and its application in daily life toward spiritual freedom did not necessarily result in active change in qualities, such as fear and self-limiting beliefs, which limit spiritual freedom). Whereas, a single experience of imaginal resonance with mystical poetry provided inspiration for transpersonal *awareness* of spiritual freedom, integration of the unique experience required independent reengagement with the images, which otherwise appeared to fade away.

At the end of Cycle 4, I returned to my preliminary research lenses and revised or expanded them to reflect my findings and shift in understanding. The following is an example of one of the seven Cycle 4 lenses, in its final articulation:

Imagination is a medium for transpersonal experience, healing, and transformation owing to its bridging qualities, linking the sensorial and the spiritual. To gain insight via the imagination, one has to give primacy to intuition and imaginal processes and, *temporarily*, suspend intellectual interpretation, in order to experience the receptive and creative benefits of the imagination. Imaginal processes stimulate the senses. When inspired by mystical imagery, resonant images depict embodied experiences that are inclusive of one's own body in relationship to something greater than one's body, and which may evoke feelings such as quiet and peace, as well as joy and delight, but may also indicate discomfort. To fully assess the healing and transformative capacities of the imagination, further research is needed, preferably with a longitudinal design, since true transformation necessitates not only a profound change but one of persistent nature.

## Cycle 5: Integration of Discovery with Existing Literature

This final cycle of intuitive inquiry is a cycle of reevaluation of the entire study through the relationship between the forward arc and the return arc of the hermeneutic circle. I examined and discussed my findings in relationship to the original literature review and referred to additional literature to which my findings led me. In addition, I evaluated the *credibility* and *transferability* (see Donna Mertens' discussion of these methods of verification) of each step in the study, including the design, types of data, and my interpretation of them. I also considered what had remained undisclosed and should be pursued in future research.

Intuitive inquiry is structured enough to address issues of transferability of qualitative data and the credibility of their analysis, yet allows for an intuitive, creative unfolding of the research process and its realizations. The readers, too, are called to assess transferability by assimilating the raw data and discerning whether they resonate with them, and thus find them transferable beyond the specific sample of participants. To sustain its credibility, intuitive inquiry requires that the researcher be rigorously aware of his or her internal processes (e.g. feelings and thoughts) and be open to personal transformation in the process of engaging in the illumination of others' experiences.



## Reflections on Cycle 5

My approach to the study acknowledged the presence of the researcher's personal experience as the initial point of reference. The investigation of a relatively small number of individuals' experiences would be transferable to others as long as the breadth and depth of the research process, presentation of outcomes, and complexity of analysis provided rich enough depictions, which permitted the readers to determine the degree of resonance and identification with the findings beyond the particular experiences of the participants and despite the limited scope of the study.

Returning to the literature, I found that some of the philosophical concepts, theories, and empirical findings I reviewed prior to the study resonated ever more deeply as they were supported by the study's findings. Their persistence (for example, that *the imagination has the capacity to stimulate external reality as well as create vivid, internal representations, which are influential of one's personal and social function, linking perception and action*) naturally overshadowed, in my mind, those less favorable views of the imagination as *epiphenomenal*.

To demonstrate how my findings supported some of the existing literature, I extracted the theoretical and empirical findings reviewed originally and affirmed them by drawing, yet again, directly on the data. To this analysis, I added reports of my own intuitive and contemplative reverie that emerged as the study was coming to a close. I included my own artwork in response to the participants' artwork, poetry that reflected the spirit of my insight, and a creative synthesis (see original study for examples).

Finally, I acknowledged a variety of limitations, which I recognized by looking back at the study as a whole. For example, I realized the paradox of attempting to investigate the experience of spiritual freedom through a structured procedure, limited by time and space. Another problematic aspect of the design was not accounting for the influence of the group context on individuals' experiences even though each participant has undergone his or her own internal process. I suggested that future study and application of the findings of this research can continue to expand on the possibilities embedded in this process, which I believe can benefit individuals' growth and transpersonal

development as well as be extended to interpersonal constellations, such as families and intentional communities.

## Exercises and Discussion Questions

- Intuitive inquiry is best suited for studies that explore subjective experiences to which multiple ways of knowing can be applied (e.g. reasoning, intuition, imagination, embodied knowing, and creative expression). What topics do you envision might benefit from the philosophy and approach of this transpersonal, qualitative method?
- One of the distinctive features of intuitive inquiry is the *transformative potential for researcher and others*. Can you glean any transformative features in this case (changes that occur during the research process in the researcher, the participants, or even the reader), and if so, did you resonate with any of these descriptions?
- Can you name a time in which you relied on *intuition as a way of knowing*, as described in this article, to glean meaning and understanding of your own or others' experiences (e.g. in response to a major life event), and if so, has this mode of interpretation result in a meaningful personal transformation?
- The author did not mention in this case the full range of limitations she acknowledged at the end of her study. What limitations do you see in the study design, which were not mentioned in this case summary?

## Further Reading

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## Web Resources

Well Knowing, R. Anderson's website. Retrieved from <http://www.wellknowingconsulting.org/inquiry.html>

Sofia University Center for the Sacred Feminine (Summary of the intuitive inquiry method). Retrieved from <http://www.sofia.edu/resources/sacredfeminine/research-intuitive.php>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013505060>