

## Psychological Change in the Human Aura

### Part 5A: How We Know

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This article is part of an evolving series that will include a thorough review of scientific findings and controversies about the human biofield. I will be doing much more research in this area, but to start, here's my sense of a balanced research orientation.

Many who have written about the energetic properties of the human biofield draw the ire of skeptics who complain that their writings are speculations without scientific foundation. This critique often fits because many who write in this area do not reference scientific findings or methodological discipline – even if such exist.<sup>1</sup> A balanced view recognizes the benefits of personal observation and the scientific method. These exemplify two primary ways of knowing, qualitative and quantitative, each with its advantages, and they can be used in combination. Personal experience is most immediate and mentally represents sense impressions of the *qualities* of what is being contemplated, thus its “qualitative” label. To know with more precision requires measuring what we are observing and assigning numerical values or *quantities* to our description. This is quantitative knowing.

**Qualitative knowing.** We first learn through personal experience that reaches us through our senses. Even intuitive knowing is represented in the mind as sensory experience. Personal experience has the advantage of being immediately accessible without relying on anyone else. Its disadvantages lie in the latter distinction. It is difficult to compare personal experience with that of other people, because we are comparing individual ways of observing and individual differences in sense impressions and associations. We are not usually measuring things observed this way.

The case history method was invented to make up for some of these shortcomings. It accumulates the experiences of many people to form a broader, deeper and less biased view than what most people can observe individually. These advantages help us develop and test richer conceptual models. Hermeneutics (a traditional term for the disciplined comparison of texts) adds to the case history method a comparison of different authors' conceptual models. This method has been used to establish legal standards, guide religious practitioners, and refine medical treatments. These qualitative methods are best for discerning general principles and recognizing anomalies needing further exploration.

**Quantitative methods.** To further enrich our observations, we can measure them and compare quantitative findings. This is done through applying statistical reasoning to our observations and controlling conditions to facilitate more conclusive statistical inference. This has the advantage of eliminating findings that are chance occurrences and measuring the relative influence of factors that influence outcomes. But quantitative methods are limited by only analyzing observations gathered within a sampled population or a controlled experiment. Some advocates of the scientific method mistake that paradigm for truth, exclude personal observation, and give insufficient weight to personal biases.

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<sup>1</sup> An example is a recently published encyclopedia of energy anatomy by Cyndi Dale (2009). Her primer on energy fields bravely tries to explain them to non-scientific readers but lacks citations of the scientific underpinnings of broad statements that could represent intuitive leaps. For example, her section on Kundalini, a traditional yogic understanding of deep spiritual transformation, differs substantially from what I learned from expert scholar practitioners and texts but lacks citations for me to review her sources. Thus an otherwise comprehensive work is admired for its beautiful design but dismissed by scientifically-minded reviewers on Amazon.com.

*A balanced approach* applies qualitative and quantitative ways of knowing where each is best suited. It uses the findings of each to inform the other. In my writing, I am following a more disciplined approach to knowing than that practiced by many popular writers addressing “New Age” audiences. I am informed by personal observation and am more persuaded by those experiences and intuitions that were later confirmed by events or spiritual texts.<sup>2</sup> I have been helped as well by anecdotal reports of others who have been trained to sense the aura, and guided by teachers from Christian, Buddhist, Yogic,<sup>3</sup> Shamanic and depth psychological traditions. I have also compared psychological texts, some of them summarizing scientific findings, others grounded in the case history method. I conduct my research with an open mind and especially like the approach of H. H. Dalai Lama XIV who says that if scientific findings disprove traditional Buddhist teachings, then Buddhism must change (Dalai Lama, 2005). I support as well the notion that there is no map that completely matches the territory so that knowing must be balanced with mindfulness and flexibility.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal experience sometimes reveals mysteries worth exploring. After a spiritual awakening in 1977, an early teacher suggested I train to read auras. During that training I was doing an aura reading on a day my consciousness seemed especially clear. I was unprepared to sense in my mind’s eye that the subject’s head and shoulders were covered by a veil of bright green petals turned downward. I later found this depicted exactly as I had perceived it in a book by an adept Kundalini yogi. See Goswami, 1999, Figure 25.

<sup>3</sup> An example of a codified spiritual discipline is traditional Kundalini Yoga, which is “based in scripture, oral tradition, individual guidance, expert training, case study, and direct spiritual experience” (Harrigan, 2000, p. 7). The scripture and case study elements ground one’s quest in facts, as do the oral teachings, which translate the symbolic language of scriptures into pragmatic practice instructions. Direct experience validates the teachings within the laboratory of one’s person, and correlation is conducted, though not quantified, across scripture, oral teaching and guidance, and case study. With expert training, the teacher explains and demonstrates. Individual guidance involves the teacher giving practices for apprentices to do in order to have their own experience and develop spiritually (J. S. Harrigan, personal communication, January 12, 2001).” (Seeman, 2001, p. 28)

### References

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