CHAPTER THREE

3. A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AND APPROACH

3.1 Introduction

A qualitative inquiry not only deepens the understanding of the others but affords a greater understanding of ourselves. In a qualitative inquiry, the researcher’s part in shaping the research process is as important as the participant’s. This process can be described as a co-construction by the participant as well as the researcher for a deeper understanding of the psychological world of both the researcher and participant or counsellor and counsellee. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) and Ferrara (1995) mark qualitative research by the "researcher-as-tool" status, of the researcher as a primary data-gathering and interpreting instrument. The respondent or participant can be understood through the interpretations given by the researcher and for such an interpretation, the researcher’s deep involvement becomes imperative. Consequently, the self becomes primary in moving forth toward the goal of better understanding of the psychological world of oneself and the other, which in turn affects overall well-being. Qualitative approach can be considered in different paradigms, phenomenology and hermeneutic being two of them. Even though these two approaches began discretely in the works of philosophers who proposed the initial ideas and later expanded on them, they work in alignment.

3.2 Qualitative approach and Phenomenological hermeneutics

Qualitative approach emphasizes the engagement of the researcher and his/her experiential knowledge for developing understanding. Ravi Priya (2010) calls the research process as transformative, which opens up opportunities for self-reflexivity, and this process sets in motion an empathic connection between the researcher and the participant leading to mutual self-growth and well-being. Other researchers (Clark 2010; Kapur 1999; Patton 2002) argue that qualitative research transforms the
researcher and the research process and serves subjective, introspective, and therapeutic interests as well as plays a crucial role in informing 'change' where meanings are constructed. According to Charmaz (2004), the methods facilitate study of issues in depth and increase understanding where the data may lead toward different, unanticipated directions.

Dalal and Misra (2010) emphasize that post-positivist measures are required in the study of the discipline of psychology, especially for topics of study such as the self. Scholars (Allport, 1963; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Toma, 1997) have leaned toward a qualitative approach and have said that it is essential to adapt methods and find alternative paradigms modelled on critical theories such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, etc. to gain deeper understandings of subjective experiences in the humanities and social sciences. These paradigms could provide emergent ways of what we could understand about the world. Such epistemological understanding about human potential which alternative and qualitative ways of knowing bring about may be useful in various domains, for instance in counselling and psychotherapy situations. Here, human possibilities and psychological skill bases and complexities could provide diverse ways of not merely coping but also lead toward self-enhancement. A construction of psychological reality through phenomenological, subjective and experiential approaches, I believe, can afford a greater understanding of self than the normative one.

The philosophical foundation of phenomenology has developed and been used widely to understand texts and in praxis in clinical psychology and counselling. It seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. It is an attempt to apprehend the meaning of human experience as it is lived. Phenomenology focuses on discovery, description and meaning in contrast to prediction, measurement and control. It is not static but reflects a dynamic and evolving nature and evokes a profoundly reflective inquiry into human meaning. Chessick (1995) claims that this approach is crucial to understanding the subjective world and 'lived experience,' to 'seeing' the other's experience as is. The position is not considered as something separate from one’s own being and therefore to be studied objectively, but one of finding meaning and empathy. The aim of a phenomenological study is to rediscover the person and the existential reality for that person without forcing our
preconceptions onto it. This along with grasping the experiences of the person also preserves the dignity and autonomy of the self.

Phenomenological approaches have lateralised into various forms following the philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Heidegger followed by Gadamer and Ricouer have primarily talked about the 'beingness' in the world. They emphasized the interpretive nature of phenomenology and the ideas of *dialogue, preunderstanding* and *tradition*. According to van Manen (2002) every kind of human awareness is considered as interpretive. Phenomenological hermeneutics also claims that meanings are mediated through myth, religion, art and language. The meanings derived ultimately tie up with the meanings of being, the self, and self-identity. This 'methodology' or approach is most relevant to the study of the Mahābhārata. The characters and contexts may be phenomenologically apprehended through the hermeneutic paradigm which focuses on the dialogue, textual meaning, historicity and interpretation.

The phenomenological hermeneutic approach focuses on the mode of being in the world where an understanding and reconstruction of experience and knowledge occurs. The individual and experience co-constitute each other and do not exist without the other. Although the basic grounding is in understanding of the 'lived experiences', this particular method focuses especially on the situated meaning of a human in the world. Laverty (2003) analyses that the understanding is not a way we know the world but the way we are. Meanings are formed reciprocally by the world and by the way we understand the world. It is a movement through existence, a world, as a space of possibilities.

Sherma, (2008, p.4) explains the phenomenologists' position on why “understanding” is more in tune with the human sciences than explanation is. She summarizes Dilthey, Heidegger, and later Gadamer, who theorize that all forms of understanding arise from the shared human ability to elicit meaning. The human nature to ‘live’ and ‘relive’ these experiences provides the knowledge and thereby the understanding and the mastery of the fullness and forms of the ‘text’ contributes to the understanding of meaning. The psychological function of the phenomenological-hermeneutic method divulges itself in the challenge of interpretation. A reenactment of the expression of lived experience occurs in understanding and apprehending
something pathically and then placing this within a larger frame of reference. Experiencing and then integrating this new understanding into our cognitive frameworks allows for assimilation of the new knowledge into the self-structure and provides enhanced perspectives. These new perspectives further the grasp of the meanings of the world such that a keener perception is apprehended. Dilthey asserts that this understanding is integral to the human sciences and is closer to the fullness of the experience of life than the descriptive causal explanations of natural science.

Michrina & Richards (1996) further elaborate to say that the epistemological basis in the above paradigm is intersubjective, that is, one is trying to experience and/or to understand the feelings and thoughts of others, by using one's full human potential: emotions, interpersonal experience, and intellect. The word ‘hermeneutic’ refers to the construction of a description of a whole scene or phenomenon through an incremental analysis of information. Taken together they refer to a method of holistic description through incremental analysis of dialogue. The method offers descriptions that are different from the positivist paradigm. The foremost issue is that of meaning and interpretation.

The grasping of meaning is a conundrum in itself. In order to read, it is necessary to understand in advance what will be said, yet the understanding must come from the reading. A complex dialectical process emerges that is involved in all understanding as it grasps the meaning of a sentence, and in reverse direction supplies the attitude and emphasis which alone can make the written word meaningful. The reader supplies the “expression” in accordance with his “understanding” of the text (Palmer, 1969). The text itself has its own “being” in the words themselves, in their arrangement, in their intentions, and in the intentions of the work as a being of a special kind. The capacity to know and understand others through empathic introspection and reflection entails an empathic identification with the actor or character. It is an act of psychological reenactment. Understanding itself comes to be a universal process. Thus the researcher’s self, that of the participant, and even of the interstitial spaces between them come together to form a nexus of interconnectedness through the dynamics of a shared understanding.

This is the complex ‘Hermeneutic Circle’ as Hernstein Smith and Amrine (1996) elucidate. It recognizes that all starting points are provisional, relative and contextual and then opens itself up to the possibility of arriving precisely at a different
place. The circularity of the process involves understanding in terms of what we already know and thereby expanding ‘knowing’ incrementally. This incremental knowledge expands our self-awareness and thus enhances the self-structure. Understanding develops as we become more engaged and concerned, through repeated experience, interaction with the issue in the real world, and reflection (Kezar 2000).

Klostermaier (2008) elaborates on the Indian ‘circle’ where life is a self-repeating process of ‘becoming and disappearing.’ In this cycle, the core or the centre remains unchanged which is the aim of the deepest human aspiration. The circle connotes different layers of meaning such as the experiential, worldly understanding, to the centre where understanding and being are one and the same. True wisdom is attained when the stillness of the centre is attained. The shared understanding and our own expansion of knowledge of self and identity makes this approach relevant to a study of self and enhancement, and thereby, for subjective well-being.

3.3 Self, well-being, and the Mahābhārata

The self is an organizing principle characterized by unity and coherence and refers to the experience of one’s own being. In the Indian conception self is regarded holistically and well-being too is concerned with the potential for furtherance of one’s physical, mental, and transcendental planes. The integration of the self and its positive perceptions and experiences contribute to the sense of well-being.

The discussion of self and well-being in the Mahābhārata takes a deeply psychological context where one does not know the self through learning or accruing facts but only by ‘being’ it. Overcoming one’s crisis is the objective, which moves one toward gaining knowledge of the self. Knowledge brings about transformation and this transformation, in turn, leads to greater understanding, moving the individual toward wholeness.

The Mahābhārata, a monumental and seminal epic which significantly lives in the psyche of the Indian people is a text without boundaries. The reality of the Mahābhārata is perceived or apprehended by multiple mental constructions which may also be social, cultural, confined to a group or local and specific to the group. These constructions are alterable and so are their “realities.” This is to say, that the
meanings derived are shared reconstructions affording us interpretations which take us to deeper levels of understanding the psychic world of the person(s).

The Mahābhārata as an epic transcends categories; it is, at the same time, literature and myth, sacred and secular. It begs a phenomenological hermeneutic reading by its very multiplicity. The intent of the text is also therapeutic in seeking to prompt the mind to a greater awareness of one’s identity and a fostering of spiritual insight. Its narratives/stories offer many therapeutic possibilities and several horizons of understandings. The characters offer innumerable modes of experience for the self to grasp its beingness. It is these aspects of experiences and possibilities that I wish to mine from the Mahābhārata, for healing as well as self-enhancement.

The eastern perspectives and philosophies emphasize the experiential, reflective, and meditative aspects of understanding hermeneutically in contrast to the discursive modes of interpretation. Again, the position adopted by the hermeneutic method advocated in traditions other than the established Western models focus on the self to accumulate the universal understanding of human nature. We understand the self vested in its many shades and each hue brings to us a new perspective focusing us toward the central core of our being. The attempts to reach this central core of selfhood involve the opening up new vistas, new perspectives to reflect upon the 'beingness' of oneself through the dialectic process, a movement from the circumference to the centre. The “horizon” as Gadamer (2004, p. 301) defines is “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.” And, to have a horizon means “not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it” (2004, p.301). Thus, are afforded many interpretations, and many shades of meaning cloaked in various layers come forth and offer the reconstruction of the reality as it were. Hence, there are many horizons that we can seek. Self and self-reflexivity are both essential aspects to draw forth these meanings.

Indian texts, and according to Adarkar (2008) the Mahābhārata and other Sanskrit literary texts, suggest a hermeneutical paradigm which offers a different interpretation of psychological growth and hence an interpretation and understanding of the nature of human character. The paradigm suggests a diasporic mode where the participant and the researcher invest of themselves and create the space for a third dimensional to emerge, which is the interpretation and understanding. The understanding thus accrued is then recognized and restructured into the individual
self-structures and a reformulated understanding of the dynamics of the self emerge. The increased self-awareness and accretion of self-structures augur increased well-being and ever-progressing self-growth. Shulman and Stroumsa (2002) aver that the individual seems to have a propensity for a transformative experience. The self is seen to be an active agent of its own evolution in some cases while in others, it is a passive recipient. It acts upon as well as is acted upon; it is the shaper and the shaped.

A text is open to multiple interpretations and the intents of the author, text itself and the reader are numerous leading one to discern its varied meanings. The multiple interpretations are capable through hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches where the subjective experiences are primary. These experiences come to the fore with the holistic understanding of the self and projecting forth this coherent unified self. Since the text is accessible in varied ways and constitutes the generated identity one also grasps identities which are also multiple. Identity itself is an expression of understanding, a product of the interaction of factors of the formal structure of the text in terms of the sequence, historicity, and the reader’s meanings.

These multiple identities present several dimensions of the self each perspective enhancing the whole in an integrated manner. Thus, the text as well as the interpreter undergoes transformations affording multi-dimensional and multi-perspectival experiences of 'truth' and ways of knowing. These ways of knowing increment the epistemic base and through the enhanced self one builds a multitude of possibilities.

The Mahābhārata affords multiple and several more shades of interpretations. Valdes (1987) analyses Ricouer, Gadamer, and Heidegger and sagaciously interprets the importance of the identity of text for deriving meaning. The writer, the form, the historicity, and the reader are autonomous units, yet tied to each other to form an integrated whole, and the reader’s interpretation becomes greater than the author’s intent. As a text without boundaries, the Mahābhārata affords innumerable interpretations and therefore several possibilities and potentialities of the text as well as of self.

3.4 Understanding the Mahābhārata characters in context

The characters of the Mahābhārata must not be treated as merely possible-but-
not-actual people because these characters are not merely possible or actual but constitute the continuous description of shared characteristics of humanity. The characters and the various situations have suffused the psyche of the people; the interpretations and reconstructions of different situations are ‘present’ and in the here-and-now. The characters offer manifold possibilities and potentials for coping as well as moving forward toward self-enhancement. Apprehending these characters, their potentialities, contexts, cultural forces and possibilities by the phenomenological hermeneutic approach presents us with various nuances for our own self growth.

We harness this potential to accrue awareness of various states of being and to understand, accept and integrate these states such that we are ever emerging. The emergence of the self is not at variance with the world and others but in harmony with the ‘other’ as one is connected with the macrocosm and the macro is fully present in the micro. Striving for authentic, self-concordant reasons yields greater goal attainment and enhanced well-being.

Self and well-being are also deeply implicated in the field of counselling. An individual who seeks counselling is surmised as being in conflict, desirous of possessions, in sorrow, or otherwise undergoing dilemmas, predicaments, or crises. The core of such situations is thought to be the self, its dis-unified state, inability to gain a holistic view and a general lack of well-being.

Here, I would emphasize that understanding oneself is of great importance; self-understanding paves the way for understanding others. Through oneself, the ‘other’ is grasped. This grasping of meaning of the ‘other’ in turn creates newer understanding of ourselves. And again through this new grasp we apprehend the other and move toward increased understandings. The expansion of self-awareness and other-awareness indicates connectedness and well-being. Ferrara (1995) talks of Edmund Husserl who in his phenomenological writings, tries to merge competing views that respectively demand the reduction of all "others" to "my" ego and the autonomy of other subjects in the world. Husserl’s resolution to these seemingly dislocated views is that one develops self-knowledge of oneself first and through "empathy" and "analogy" comes to understand "other" beings – by understanding myself, I understand other.

An apprehensible milieu is already set that we as readers may actually
experience the entire setting in an empathic attunement. Empathy is emphasized in the phenomenological framework of 'Verstehen.' It refers to the unique human capacity to make sense of the world through affective states placed within a cognitive frame. Thus we make sense of the world by experiencing and then understanding the meaning of this experience. Self-reflexivity plays a great role here because it is through us, the “researcher-as-an-instrument” that we reach to the other.

Badrinath (2007a, p.18) writes that every question concerning the human condition begins with a personal question, of a specific person, who seeks to understand his or her specific situation, in which he or she is located. The human condition can be experienced and felt only in one’s person. In the course of understanding, the inquiry goes beyond the individual and personal and it is in this light that a person’s individual situation is understood. Thus, to understand the individual, the exploration leads outward to the surrounding ground: from the personal to the impersonal, from the personal to the transpersonal, before it merges back with the individual.

The characters in their psychological bearings resemble and reflect themselves in the experiences of contemporary peoples. This commonality of experience allows us to reconstruct the lived experience through empathy and extract the shared meanings, thereby understanding a person and character which were delineated even many centuries ago. The emotional travails, turmoil, angst, desires, conflicts through various situations in the course of the characters' lives can be reconstructed and their meanings shared by the readers and experiencers alike. Such experiences form the lived experiences and shared meanings of many, and constitute a pan-human relevance.

A sense of well-being ensues from this psychological integration and meaningfulness of self and identity. The interpretations and understandings that come forth also serve to strengthen another self and resultantly a shared understanding may emerge, leading to greater awareness of one’s identity and beingness.

The sense of self during these heightened emotional states may be understood through the grasping of the subjective experience. The very core of knowledge and understanding about one's sorrow, the grasping of another's sorrow leads one to examine one's own experience in a different light. These narratives of characters serve
to vivify the researcher's and interpreter's own self-transformation process through the grasping. Re-describing the world in our own experience of self reveals new modes of being and new capacities for knowledge and action.

The shared understanding that occurs between the character/counsellee and reader/researcher/counsellor is assimilated by the counsellor to a point that it becomes one's own 'lived' experience in personal contexts and symbols (Lye 1996). Being and meaning are the same.

A mere grasp of the Mahābhārata is not an end in itself, but forms a gestalt in mediating self-understanding and thus the self is apprehended through meaning and mediation of the text. The narratives are read with a pre-knowledge, reaching a horizon and with each new understanding building and moving to the next horizon. The ever-expanding horizons contribute to one's own self awareness and enhancement. The form of psychological well-being one aspires for is obtained through facing such crises and conflicts, and various cultural, social, familial, personal forces. The emerging resolutions and the subsequent ‘learning’ one integrates into the self structures allows an alleviation of crises and offers a constructive therapeutic condition leading to holistic healing. The hermeneutic and phenomenological method which emphasizes the uncovering of horizons and reflecting upon the beingness, is a transformative process and brings forth the self and reflexivity of the researcher and the participant, each transforming themselves and transforming the other through their reconstructions and reformulations and integrating these new understandings into their person, all the while moving toward a greater integration and psychological well-being.

3.5 Rogerian approach

Rogers focuses on a deep subjective understanding of the person and the presence in the here-and-now. The congruence, unconditional positive regard, genuineness and accurate empathetic position adopted by the counsellor itself works as the instrument and tool to effect change in the individual. This stance and attitude is believed to open up the potentials inherent in the individual such that s/he becomes self-aware. Self-awareness leads to self-acceptance and from there to reduced defensiveness as well as increased openness.
The Rogerian approach is the bulwark to understand self and well-being. It is commensurate with the Mahābhārata approach and serves as a framework with the help of which the different processes and themes may be analyzed. The Rogerian approach is not without its limitations. Rogers plays down the role of consciousness or self-consciousness in the functioning of a healthy individual. He considers awareness to be reflexive rather than as focused attention. Although Rogers considers the person as the experiencing organism, the characteristics of the basic psychological reality are not clearly described. The potentialities that are to be actualized too are not mentioned (for example, theorists name certain features like the life and death instincts, the archetypes, needs and drives or traits among others) only general importance is given to the actualizing tendency. The present researcher tentatively postulates that the Mahābhārata study will, in addition to incrementing Indian Psychology, also provide insights into aspects of the counselling process as presently based in the Rogerian framework.

The thesis aims to study the interrelations of self and well-being, utilizing qualitative approaches of phenomenological-hermeneutics and the method of the Mahābhārata itself mainly to accrue a theoretical base to Indian Psychology through the Mahābhārata and to understand the implications of such understandings in the practice of counselling. Although Indian philosophical and psychological concepts have been used to compare with other Western theories such as those of Erikson, Freud, Piaget and others, the aspects of self in its growth-oriented process and its interrelations with well-being have not been specifically elicited. Using phenomenological approaches as well as the ones postulated by Rogers, the characters and contexts in the Mahābhārata will be “read” and an understanding acquired of the processes of the self and the interrelations with psychological well-being.

3.6 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research study is to present the interrelations between self and well-being from the study of the epic characters and life-situations in the Mahābhārata. The methodology for research will involve Rogers’ Person-Centred theory, the broad framework of phenomenological-hermeneutics, and the method of the Mahābhārata itself which is primarily concerned with the study of the self and the other.
The objectives in this research study are to:

- Understand the self and its relation with well-being, in the Mahābhārata, and to advance the domain of Indian Psychology
- Address the issue of conflict, the transformation of the experiential self and discuss the impact of transformation on psychological well-being
- Study the nature of desire as a motivator and as constitutive of self
- Understand the nature of grief and its transcendence for self and well-being
- Integrate these understandings with present context of a Rogerian frame of counselling

The basic questions that will guide the research objectives are:

- What is the self? What is well-being? What are the interrelations between self and well-being?
- How does well-being relate with the self processes of self-complexity, self-concept, and self-enhancement?
- How do the nature and experiential contexts of desire, conflict, and grief relate to the self and well-being?
- What are the significances and implications of the emergent understandings from the narrative and experiential contexts of the Mahābhārata to the field of counselling?

### 3.7 Data and material

#### 3.7.1 Sample – a target set of characters from the Mahābhārata

The Mahābhārata is a vast psychological resource and contains myriad events and characters and is thus difficult to study in its entirety in a limited time frame. Hence, a target set of characters has been identified for the study: (i) Yudhiṣṭhira, (ii) Arjuna, (iii) Duryodhana, (iv) Gāndhārī, and (v) Draupadī. The rationale behind choosing these characters is entwined in the depiction of characters themselves.

(i) **Yudhiṣṭhira** is considered to have several characteristics and his skill base presents in his personality characteristics such as humility, foresight, ability to stand “steady-in-war.” The different facets of Yudhiṣṭhira come to light in the various situations and complex contexts. While considering self-enhancement especially, Yudhiṣṭhira's quest
hones in on his innate characteristics and presents us with an understanding of self-enhancement, self-concept and psychological well-being.

(ii) Arjuna is known to be extremely versatile and skilled in several facets. Arjuna can be studied in terms of self-complexity and self-enhancement as well as understood within the well-being parameters.

(iii) Duryodhana also presents skill bases such as mace-fighting, and a goal-oriented focussed approach, although the focus deviated for a negative purpose. The responses of Duryodhana to various experiential contexts also offer varying perspectives on the self-enhancement, self-concept, self-complexity, and the relationship with psychological well-being.

(iv) Gândhârî has several qualities and characteristics such as forbearance which show potential toward self-enhancement and well-being, however, in the contexts of desire, conflict, and grief, Gândhârî’s varied responses shed light on the multiperspectival nature of self and well-being.

(v) Draupadî presents diverse aspects of the self and characteristics of learning, wisdom, and strength of character. These and more aspects draw out a number of possibilities for self and well-being.

3.7.2 Self-processes

A limited number of key contexts are identified for each character to permit a comprehensive analysis. The characters will be studied in terms of self-concept, self-complexity, and self-enhancement, and their well-being studied in terms of positivity, engagement, purpose, trust, and satisfaction. The self-processes are described in the next chapter on Analysis and Discussion.

3.7.3 Thematic frameworks

Self and well-being, and an interrelation of self and well-being will be analyzed and interpreted through the thematic frameworks of:

(i) Desire and human action

(ii) Conflict and transformation

(iii) Grief and its transcendence
The crux of the analysis will be geared toward discovery and understanding of these constructs and states of the individual.