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1. Introduction

In the scientific community, and particularly in psychology and health, there has been an active and ongoing debate on the relative merits of adopting either quantitative or qualitative methods, especially when researching into human behaviour (Bowling, 2009; Oakley, 2000; Smith, 1995a, 1995b; Smith, 1998). In part, this debate formed a component of the development in the 1970s of our thinking about science. Andrew Pickering has described this movement as the “sociology of scientific knowledge” (SSK), where our scientific understanding, developing scientific ‘products’ and ‘know-how’, became identified as forming components in a wider engagement with society’s environmental and social context (Pickering, 1992, pp. 1). Since that time, the debate has continued so that today there is an increasing acceptance of the use of qualitative methods in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Morse, 1994; Punch, 2011; Robson, 2011) and health sciences (Bowling, 2009; Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1998; Murphy & Dingwall, 1998). The utility of qualitative methods has also been recognised in psychology. As Nollaig Frost (2011) observes, authors such as Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton Rogers consider qualitative psychology is much more accepted today and that it has moved from “the margins to the mainstream in psychology in the UK.” (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2008, pp. 8). Nevertheless, in psychology, qualitative methodologies are still considered to be relatively ‘new’ (Banister, Bunn, Burman, et al., 2011; Hayes, 1998; Richardson, 1996) despite clear evidence to the contrary (see, for example, the discussion on this point by Rapport et al., 2005). Nicki Hayes observes, scanning the content of some early journals from the 1920s – 1930s that many of these more historical papers “discuss personal experiences as freely as statistical data” (Hayes, 1998, 1). This can be viewed as an early development of the case-study approach, now an accepted methodological approach in psychological, health care and medical research, where our knowledge about people is enhanced by our understanding of the individual ‘case’ (May & Perry, 2011; Radley & Chamberlain, 2001; Ragin, 2011; Smith, 1998).

The discipline of psychology, originating as it did during the late 19th century, in parallel with developments in modern medicine, tended, from the outset, to emphasise the ‘scientific method’ as the way forward for psychological inquiry. This point of view arose out of the previous century’s Enlightenment period which underlay the founding of what is generally agreed to be the first empirical experimental psychology laboratory, established by Wilhelm Wundt, University of Leipzig, in 1879. During this same period, other early psychology
researchers, such as the group of scientific thinkers interested in perception (the Gestaltists: see, for example, Lamiell, 1995) were developing their work. Later, in the 20th century, the introduction of Behaviourism became the predominant school of psychology in America and Britain. Behaviourism emphasised a reductionist approach, and this movement, until its displacement in the 1970-80s by the ‘cognitive revolution’, dominated the discipline of psychology (Hayes, 1998, pp. 2-3). These approaches have served the scientific community well, and have been considerably enhanced by increasingly sophisticated statistical computer programmes for data analysis.

A recent feature of the debate in the future direction for psychology has been a concern for the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline and an appreciation of their importance. In part, this is an intrinsic part of theoretical developments in psychology and the related social sciences, in particular sociological research, such as Grounded Theory, developed by the sociologists Glaser and Strauss during the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Charmaz, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Searle, 2012); modes of social inquiry such as interviewing and content analysis (Gillham, 2000; King & Horrocks, 2010); action research (Hart & Bond, 1999; Sixsmith & Daniels, 2011); discourse and discourse analysis (Tonkiss, 2012; Potter & Wetherell, 1995); narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988; Reissman, 2008); biographical research methods (Roberts, 2002); phenomenological methods (Giorgi, 1995; Langdridge, 2007; Lawthom & Tindall, 2011; Smith et al., 2009); focus groups (Carey, 1994; Vazquez-Lago et al., 2011); visual research methods (Mitchell, 2011); ethnographic methods (Boyles, 1994; Punch, 2011); photo-biographic elicitation methods (Rapport et al., 2008); and, finally, the combining or integrating of methods, the approach often known as ‘mixed methods’ (Frost, 2011; Pope et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2004).

Qualitative methods have much to offer when we need to explore people’s feelings or ask participants to reflect on their experiences. As was noted above, some of the earliest psychological thinkers of the late 19th century and early 20th century may be regarded as proto-qualitative researchers. Examples include the ‘founding father’ of psycho-analysis, Sigmund Freud, who worked in Vienna (late 19th century – to mid 20th century), recorded and published numerous case-studies and then engaged in analysis, postulation and theorising on the basis of his observations, and the pioneering Swiss developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980) who meticulously observed and recorded his children’s developing awareness and engagement with their social world. They were succeeded by many other authors from the 1940s onwards who adopted qualitative methods and may be regarded as contributors to the development of qualitative methodologies through their emphasis of the importance of the idiographic and use of case studies (Allport, 1946; Nicholson, 1997)1. This locates the roots of qualitative thinking in the long-standing debate between empiricist and rationalistic schools of thought, and also in social constructionism (Gergen, 1985; King & Horrocks, pp. 6 – 24)2.

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1 Allport states “[…] among the methods having idiographic intent, and emphasised by me, are the case study, the personal document, interviewing methods, matching, personal structure analysis, and other procedures that contrive to keep together what nature itself has fashioned as an integrated unit – the single personality.” (Allport, 1946, pp. 133).

2 A notable milestone in the development of qualitative methodologies in the UK for example, was the publication, in 1992, of a paper proposing a role for qualitative methods for psychology, by Karen Henwood and Nick Pigeon in the British Journal of Psychology.
More recently, in the UK, the British Psychological Society now has a members’ section for Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMiP) which held a successful inaugural conference, in 2008, at the University of Leeds. The Section now boasts a membership of more than 1000 members, making it one of the largest BPS Sections. The undergraduate psychology curriculum, which confers BPS graduate basis for registration (GBR), now includes qualitative research methods teaching in the core programme for UK universities degrees. Elsewhere, qualitative psychology has taken a little longer to be accepted e.g. by the American Psychological Association (APA). This is somewhat surprising given the large volume of qualitative research papers which originate from the American research community. However, US researchers, alongside their international colleagues, have finally managed to petition successfully for the inclusion of qualitative methodologies to be admitted to Section 5, the methodology section, of the APA, during 2011.

These developments can be tracked by a search for qualitative research across the main electronic databases and exploring the ‘hits’ recovered. A quick scan using the umbrella terms ‘qualitative’ and/or ‘qualitative research’ for example, provides the researcher with a result for a relatively low number of papers from the earlier years of last century. However there is a noticeably sharp increase in the number of papers published from 1990 onwards. A search of the main databases, using the term “qualitative” as a key word (January, 1990 - December, 2011) produced a retrieval rate for qualitative papers of over 51744 hits (CINAHL); 122012 hits (PsycInfo); 12108 for Medline (OVID); and 18431 for Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA). Prior to 1990 the number of papers recorded in these databases is noticeably lower: searching in ASSIA for papers published between 1985 – 1990, for example, results in 13 papers, while a Medline search for the years 1985 – 1990 returns 6 papers. Searching in CINAHL for the same period (1985 – 1990) results in no papers (zero result).

2. What is qualitative psychology?

So, what exactly is qualitative research? A practical definition points to methods that use language, rather than numbers, and an interpretative, naturalistic approach. Qualitative research embraces the concept of intersubjectivity usually understood to refer to how people may agree or construct meaning: perhaps to a shared understanding, emotion, feeling, or perception of a situation, in order to interpret the social world they inhabit (Nerlich, 2004, pp. 18). Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln define qualitative researchers as people who usually work in the ‘real’ world of lived experience, often in a natural setting, rather than a laboratory based experimental approach. The qualitative researcher tries to make sense of social phenomena and the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In qualitative research, it is acknowledged that the researcher is an integral part of the process and who may reflect on her/his own influence and experience in the research (See Henwood, K. & Pidgeon, N. (1992) Qualitative research and psychological theorising. British Journal of Psychology, 83: 97 – 111). For readers interested in more on the history of the philosophy of science and its relationship to developments in psychology, I recommend the following authors: Andrew Pickering (1992); John Richardson (1996); Mark Smith (1998); Clive Seale (2012); and especially Jonathan Smith and colleagues with the publication of Rethinking Methods in Psychology (Smith et al., 1995b).
process. The qualitative researcher accepts that s/he is not ‘neutral’. Instead s/he puts herself in the position of the participant or ‘subject’ and attempts to understand how the world is from that person’s perspective. As this process is re-iterated, hypotheses begin to emerge, which are ‘tested’ against the data of further experiences e.g. people’s narratives. One of the key differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches is apparent here: the quantitative approach states the hypothesis from the outset, (i.e. a ‘top down’ approach), whereas in qualitative research the hypothesis or research question, is refined and developed during the process. This may be thought of as a ‘bottom-up’ or emergent approach, as, for example, in Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 1995). This contrast is part of the epistemological positions that shape our assumptions about the world. King and Horrocks summarise some of these main differences in position as being either realist, contextual or constructionist. They compare these to assumptions about the world, the knowledge produced and the role of the researcher (King & Horrocks, 2010). These authors, along with others, such as Colin Robson, advocate adopting a pragmatic approach to qualitative research. As Robson observes, “Pragmatism is almost an ‘anti-philosophical’ philosophy which advocates getting on with the research rather than philosophizing – hence providing a welcome antidote to a stultifying over-concern with matters such as ontology and epistemology.” (Robson, 2011, pp.30).

It may be helpful to think of qualitative research as situated at one end of a continuum with its data from in-depth interviews, and with quantitative ‘measurable’ data at the other end (see Figure 1). At the centre-point of this continuum may rest such data as content analysis and questionnaire responses transformed from the written or spoken word into numerical ‘codes’ for statistical analysis. Examples include standardised questionnaires, e.g. for depression and anxiety such as Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), or Beck’s Depression Inventory. With limited space given on questionnaires, respondents can only give the briefest answers to pre-formulated questions from the researchers. Respondents’ replies are coded and ‘scored’, but does that mean that we can measure feelings or emotion? How do we ‘calculate’ levels of depression or anxiety? How does the experience of depression affect people’s lives? Have we, as researchers, asked appropriate questions in the first place? Qualitative research methodology looks to answer these types of questions – the exploratory approach. An example of this exploratory approach is Jonathan Smith’s work examining young mothers’ lived-world experiences of the psychological transition to motherhood (see, for example, Smith, 1999; 1998; 1994).

This is in contrast to the positivist, hypothetico-deductive methodology, associated with the philosopher Karl Popper, and enthusiastically adopted by the psychology discipline, of ‘refuting the null hypothesis’, commonly taken to be the ‘gold standard’ of quantitative scientific research methodology i.e. where hypotheses are defined at the start of the research (see, for example, Popper,1935/2002). One of the challenges however of attempting to fit the ‘scientific’ approach into researching human behaviour, is that sometimes this scientific experimental methodology, the design of which originates in the laboratory, may not quite provide what is needed when attempting to investigate psychological and human behaviours. The Medical Research Council (MRC) in the UK also acknowledges this. In 2008 they provided new guidance to their 2000 MRC Framework for the development and evaluation of RCTs for complex interventions to improve health to include non-experimental methods, and complex interventions outside healthcare. See http://www.mrc.ac.uk/Utilities/Documentrecord/index.htm?d=MRC004871

See also Robson, 2011, pp. 30 – 35 for further discussion on this topic.
### Table 1. Epistemological positions that shape our world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemological position</th>
<th>Realist</th>
<th>Contextual</th>
<th>Constructionist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assumptions about the world</strong></td>
<td>There exists unmediated access to a ‘real’ world where process and relationships can be revealed</td>
<td>Contrast is integral to understanding how people experience their lives</td>
<td>Social reality is constructed through language which produces particular versions of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge produced</strong></td>
<td>Seeks to produce objective data which is reliable and likely to be representative of the wider population from which the interview sample is drawn</td>
<td>Data are inclusive of context aiming to add to the ‘completeness’ of the analysis by making visible cultural and historical meaning systems</td>
<td>Does not adhere to traditional conventions. Knowledge brought into being through dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of researcher</strong></td>
<td>Researcher aims to avoid bias. Remains objective and detached</td>
<td>Subjectivity of researcher is integral to process. Researcher active in data generation and analysis</td>
<td>Researcher ‘co-producer’ of knowledge. Therefore needs to be reflexive and critically aware (e.g. of language)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from King & Horrocks, 2010, pp. 20

Today, a growing number of psychologists are re-examining and re-exploring qualitative methods for psychological research, challenging the more traditional ‘scientific’ experimental approach (see, for example, Gergen, 1991; 1985; Smith et al., 1995a, 1995b). There is a move towards a consideration of what these other methods can offer to psychology (Bruner, 1986; Smith et al., 1995a). What we are now seeing is a renewed interest in qualitative methods which has led to many researchers becoming interested in how qualitative methods in psychology can stand alongside, and complement, quantitative methods. This is important, since both qualitative and quantitative methods have value to the researcher and each can complement the other albeit with a different focus (Crossley, 2000; Dixon-Wood & Fitzpatrick, 2001; Elwyn, 1997; Gantley et al., 1999; Rapport et al., 2005). Seminal qualitative-focused works from authors such as Jerome Bruner, Donald Polkinghorne and Jonathan Smith and colleagues’ in the early 1990s highlight the importance of ‘re-discovering’ qualitative methods in the field (Bruner, 1990, 1991, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988; Smith et al., 1995a; 1995b).

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*I thank the book’s editor, Gina Rossi for this helpful comment.*

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Jonathan Smith and his colleagues, for example, announce at the beginning of their Rethinking psychology, that “Psychology is in a state of flux” with an “unprecedented degree of questioning about the nature of the subject, the boundaries of the discipline and what new ways of conducting psychological research are available.” (Smith et al., 1995a, pp. 1). Rom Harré, heralded these new ways of thinking as marking the ‘discursive turn’ (Harré, 1995a, pp. 146), while Ken Gergen, writes about there being a ‘revolution in qualitative research’ (Gergen, 2001, pp. 3).

Additionally, as Karen Henwood suggests, integrating qualitative with quantitative methods in psychology also provides researchers with a tool for the potential “democratisation of the research process”. She observes how among clinical psychologists working in the United Kingdom’s National Health Service (NHS) for instance, the research process can be “opened to include the views of service users” with an increasing emphasis on exploring “people’s personal and cultural understandings and stocks of knowledge” (Henwood, 2004, pp. 43). Henwood suggests that integrating methods may thus also help establish and embed research validity by communicating responsibly and honestly when exploring multiple perspectives.

In a parallel movement, qualitative methods have also come to be increasingly acknowledged across the social sciences more generally (Banister, et al. 2011; Oakley, 2000;
This approach to studying human behaviour uses words, contained in language, as symbols with meaning, where the ‘subject’ i.e. the person, is seen as discursive in order that they may make sense of their environment by signifying “the order of things” (Foucault, quoted by Harré & Gillett, 1994, pp. 26).

The discursive view sees people as active agents within their own lives and, as such, cannot, “be defined in isolation from a context and whose mental processes can be unravelled by objective measurement and description.” (Harré & Gillett, 1994, pp. 26).

However, when considering the selection of a qualitative method, and thinking about using discourse analysis, we need to be clear about what our research aims and objectives are. Participants’ narratives frequently include elements relating to feelings and emotions rather than how reality is manufactured and portrayed in conversation. Willig suggests that discourse analysis can be used to explore “the internal organisation of the discourse itself and ask ‘what is this discourse doing?’” (Willig, 2008, pp. 99). Here is a prime distinction between DA and other psychological qualitative methods such as IPA, in that DA explores the role of language in participants’ descriptions of events and conversations while the phenomenological approach examines how people ascribe meaning to their experiences in their interactions with their environment (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Pringle et al., 2011; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Smith et al., 1999).

5.5 Narrative analysis

Linked to discourse, we now turn to consider briefly narrative in psychology and the rise of narrative analysis. Narrative in both psychology and medicine has much in common with studying narrative as a more general linguistic form (Bruner, 2002; Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1988; Webster, 1996). Indeed, some of the earliest thinkers in the field of psychology used methods we more usually associate with narrative to describe our experiences of encountering and engaging with the world. One of the foremost psychological thinkers of the late nineteenth century, Brentano, in his foreword to his 1874 text, Psychology from an empirical standpoint, states, “My psychological standpoint is empirical: experience alone is my teacher.” (Brentano, cited in Moran & Mooney, 2002, pp. 32).

A narrative approach entails examining people’s use of stories, accounts of events etc. and also of listening to these stories (Sarbin, 1986). The related discipline of ‘narratology’ has developed from the disciplines of linguistics and literary criticism where narratives are treated as a search for meaning in the lived experience of people (Bruner, 2002; Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). This search for meaning has much in common with phenomenological methods of enquiry and the search for meaning or significance as we strive to make sense of our lives and our ‘being in the world’ (Brockmeier, 2009). He observes,

“[…]the quest for meaning: the meaning, or significance, that we give to our lives, to our being in the world. This question arises again and again in the life of each individual in a particular, in fact, unique, way, and it hence requires a patient and ongoing examination of the multifarious forms and practices in which individuals make sense of their lives. One might think of the river in which you never step twice.”

(Brockmeier, 2009, pp. 217).
Using psychology of narrative, for example, the researcher may examine people’s life stories or their accounts of such experiences (Esin, 2011). It explores the biographical lives of participants’ lives or social and cultural stories (Goodley, 2011). Psychology of narrative can be helpful to explore and interpret findings from such research, since this type of enquiry helps the researcher to enter more fully into understanding people’s lives and their experiences (Crossley, 2000; Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1999 & 1998; Murray, 2008 & 1995). Esin defines essential features of narrative as connections between events that help make these events meaningful for the audience, stating that “Sequence is necessary for narrative. A narrative always responds to the question ‘And then what happened?’” (Esin, 2011, pp. 93).

Narrative in psychology can provide an important method for exploring psychological development, self-understanding and people’s inter-relationship with their world (Gergen, 2001b). Examining human experiences and ‘making sense’ of our environment offers a core method of enquiry across many disciplines and cultures (Brockmeier, 2009; Brown et al., 1996; Bruner, 1999; Bruner, 2002; Charon, 2005; Harré, 2003; Murray, 2008; Riessman, 2008).

The use of narrative methods in both psychology and medicine, assumes a narrator and a listener. Narrative is an interactive transaction with the potential for narrator and listener to assign their own meanings to their experiences as the topic under discussion unfolds (Bruner, 1991; 1990). Bruner for example, proposes that the interpretation of people’s actions and their narratives about what happens to them provides us with explanations of those experiences. Such interpretation “is concerned with ‘reasons’ for things happening, rather than strictly with their ‘causes’ ” (Bruner, 1991).

5.6 Phenomenological psychology

When we want to learn how we can best explore participants’ lived experiences, a different approach can be helpful, that of phenomenology. The aim of the phenomenological psychologist is to help make implicit ‘taken-for-granted’ elements of our lives explicit (Giorgi, 1995, pp. 33). Phenomenological research has developed from the philosophy of the European phenomenological ‘school’ of philosophy, the most prominent proponents of which are Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. More recently, some phenomenological researchers have been influenced by what has become known as the Duquesne school, which includes Giorgi, Van Kaam and others. The group acquired this title because some of the founders to this approach either worked in, or had links with, Duquesne University in the United States. The Dutch school of phenomenology, which includes authors such as Langeveld, is known as the ‘Utrecht school’ (see Cohen & Omery, 1994, pp.138 onward, for further discussion regarding different phenomenological schools). This is by no means a complete list: there are many other phenomenological researchers in psychology such as Scott Churchill (USA), Karin Dahlberg (Sweden), and Les Todres (UK). Over the past decade in the UK, Jonathan Smith has led the development of a phenomenological method specific to psychology, that of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Smith developed this method from his work exploring people’s lived experiences based on European phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl. His original development of the IPA method was based on the detailed interpretive analysis of in-depth interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 1999). When we wish to explore the ‘being-in-the-world’ psychology of

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7 The IPA website and research forum may be found at: www.ipa.bbk.ac.uk
experience, the idiographic case-study approach proposed by methods such as IPA can be especially helpful (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was specifically developed by Jonathan Smith (Smith et al., 1995) to rigorously explore idiographic, subjective experiences and, specifically, social cognitions. It is now widely used within British psychology (e.g. Clare, 2003; Duncan et al., 2001; French et al., 2005; Smith, 2011; Thompson et al. 2002).

Phenomenology in psychology places the experience of the self at the centre of the current psychological dialogue about people’s lived experiences and their meanings (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Giorgi, 1995; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Langdrige, 2007; Smith et al., 1995; Spinelli, 2005). The qualitative psychologist is aiming to see and understand what surrounds us (Cohen & Omery, 1994). When exploring the ‘taken for granted’ - the everyday lives of participants, especially those aspects relating to the psychology of how people feel about an issue, event, or experience for example - the use of a phenomenological approach highlights such issues and brings them to the fore. This might be useful for example, when considering the background of health service delivery (Oakley, 1993, pp. 235).

IPA’s theoretical basis stems from the phenomenology originating with Husserl’s attempts to construct a philosophical science of consciousness, with hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation), and symbolic interactionism. This last proposes that meanings an individual may ascribe to an event are of central concern, but that access to such meaning can only be obtained through an interpretative process. IPA acknowledges that the researcher’s engagement with the participant’s ‘text’ has an interpretative element, in contrast to some other methods (e.g., discourse analysis, DA; see Potter, 1996). IPA assumes an epistemological stance whereby, through its careful and explicit interpretative methodology, it becomes possible to access the meanings an individual gives to their feelings and their cognitive inner world. IPA also draws on Gadamer’s philosophy of hermeneutics and the study of the understanding of the text (Smith, 2007).

Attention is drawn however to one of the main differences between IPA and Discourse Analysis (DA): DA aims to examine the role of language in describing a person’s experience, whereas IPA intends to explore how people may ascribe meaning to their experiences when interacting with their environment (Smith et al., 1999). It is thus especially suited to behavioural and psychological studies that relate findings to the bio-psycho-social theories informing discourse among healthcare professions (Smith, 1996; Smith, 2004; Willig, 2008). IPA is a qualitative methodology with a clearly set out methodology that is both rigorous and yet sufficiently flexible for a wide range of types of study (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Willig, 2008). It is important to note that IPA is only one version of phenomenological research methodologies (Willig, 2008) and other phenomenological approaches are also useful to the qualitative researcher (Giorgi, 1995). As van Manen observes

“the simple phenomenological precept (is) to always try to understand someone from his or her situation. […]

The phenomenological approach asks of us that we constantly measure our understandings and insights against the lived reality of our concrete experiences, which, of course, are always more complex than any particular interpretation can portray”

(van Manen, 1998, pp. 8, pp. 10)
Phenomenological methods have some elements in common with Grounded Theory, discussed above, in that the theoretical framework may be uncovered during the research analysis - i.e. theory emerges and informs the data analysis in a cyclical, or iterative, fashion (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As with GT, the aim of the IPA researcher is to uncover, develop and verify data as it emerges. This is achieved by a careful and systematic process which uncovers themes and connections in an orderly sequence. The overall aim of adopting a phenomenological approach is to explore the world of ‘lived experience.’ The difference in IPA and Grounded Theory may be summarised by suggesting that IPA reflects the diversity of experience rather than a more condensed single theoretical viewpoint, or core category, an approach usually arrived at through the use of Grounded Theory (Chamberlain, 1999).

IPA is still evolving as researchers use and debate the method. It does, however, have the advantage of being especially developed by practising psychologists and is therefore an obvious candidate in current psychological qualitative analytical methodology. It is increasingly found to be an accessible approach and a method which is idiographic, inductive and interrogative (Smith, 2004) and aims to provide insight into the heart of participants’ lived experiences (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Pringle et al., 2010).

6. Emergent qualitative methods

The rise of technology and digital photography and use of the internet and video editing tools, have enabled researchers to consider the potential of these newer, and potentially rich, resources of data from film, video and DVD. Newer, emergent, qualitative methodologies especially in technology and visual research methods, can prove attractive and useful to researchers. Accessing information resources online can provide today’s psychology researcher with rich data and fruitful new areas to explore. Examining resources such as diaries or personal eye-witness accounts can also provide the researcher with data. Again, these become easier to access if they have been uploaded as a research resource online, although with any such repository it is advisable to seek permission to use before beginning a research project since such data may raise copyright issues.

Using qualitative data analysis of video interviews recording people’s experiences of health and illness, in the UK, for example, has led to a unique website resource for health research ‘DIPex’ (Ziebland & McPherson, 2006). Increasingly, psychologists are looking to use the internet and online platforms for their research. The internet offers the possibilities of online interviews, discussion forum analysis, or what people may have written online e.g. in blogs. The Healthtalk online project (www.healthtalkonline.org) arising from the DIPex project, is a rich resource for people who can view video clips and transcript excerpts from patients discussing their experiences and feelings about their illnesses, how they cope with their condition, their fears and anxieties, how they fought back and similar narratives. Commentaries from clinicians providing information about the illnesses being discussed are also available on the website. Additional sources of advice and resources are offered providing a solid platform supporting patients, their families and loved ones during their illnesses.

8 From the concept of the Life-world or Lebenswelt, from Husserl’s unpublished works after his death (see for example Ashworth, 2008: 10 - 12; Philipse, 1995: 277; Cohen and Omery, 1994: 139, for further discussion).
7. Ethics of researching online

When researching into online discussion forums and chat rooms etc., the researcher needs to remain mindful of possible ethical issues. The majority of comments posted by people online, for instance, may originally have been written and uploaded to a website for a different purpose. Contributors may have intended their internet ‘posts’ to be private, or at least their personal views and opinions were written to share with like-minded people, perhaps going through similar experiences or coping with similar situations. People may not be happy to agree to their original postings on a website being analysed by researchers and used for a different purpose. Such concerns should be considered on a case by case basis.

New ways of researching are being developed as research teams debate these issues and explore these resources (Willig, 2008). Standard ethical practices may need adapting to account for the internet age. However, where material is in the open domain, it may be easier for researchers to make a case justifying its use as source material. This would still need to be checked out with your university or health services research ethics committee (e.g. NHS National Research Ethics Service NRES in UK) and appropriate professional codes of practice. For UK psychologist researchers and students, for example, this would be research governance codes of the relevant university or institution and the British Psychological Society, possibly in conjunction with the NHS, if patients were involved. This is especially pertinent since it is not usually possible to contact patients to obtain informed consent from such resources later (and any such consent would be retrospective and difficult to obtain). Such ethical issues are being addressed today by research bodies. The Association of Internet Researchers, for example, has developed ethics guidelines for researchers. The British Psychological Society provides an ethical code of conduct and research guidance to working online. This emphasises the need for qualitative psychology researchers to be able to assess both the context and aims of their proposed research when selecting their methodology and to be aware of the need for vigilance in keeping abreast for new guidance on these issues as it is released.

Similar criteria may be used for both selecting an appropriate qualitative method and in the critical appraisal of published qualitative research in order to establish a systematic and thorough approach to appraising the evidence from qualitative research papers.

8. Evaluating qualitative psychology research: Some suggested criteria

In this final section of the chapter I set out some suggestions to help readers evaluate qualitative research. I have drawn from several sources but particularly acknowledge the contribution of Mays and Pope (2000), Mays et al., (2007), who have written extensively on this issue in health research and Uwe Flick, Lucy Yardley and Jonathan Smith who consider the importance of quality and validity when evaluating qualitative research in psychology (Flick, 2007; Smith, 2011; Yardley, 2008).

8.1 General features

In general, as with reviewing a quantitative research paper, we need to ask what the paper contributes to knowledge of the research area. Does the study have something new to say

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9 Association of Internet Researchers http://aoir.org/documents/ethics-guide /
10 See British Psychological Society www.bps.org.uk/webethic
about the topic for instance? Alternatively, perhaps the researchers have explored the chosen topic from a different angle, or incorporated different viewpoints from their participant sample. As identified earlier in this chapter, people are seen as an important resource for collaboration, thus highlighting the need for qualitative research to acknowledge reflexivity and subjectivity (Sixsmith & Daniels, 2011, pp. 26 – 7). An example of this type of approach might be where the research examines the views of a minority whose opinions have not previously been sought. In turn, such a paper would then pave the way for further research.

Next we need to think about the method(s) the researchers have used for their study. Does it seem appropriate? Does the study design lend itself to using a qualitative approach? In examining the reasons for conducting any such study, we need to bear in mind questions such as: does the research team situate their reasons for carrying out their work within an appropriate body of research literature?

Alternatively, the approach used may incorporate theoretical interest. Perhaps the research topic is approached in a different way, or from a different and newer theoretical context? Again, this needs to be clear to the reader with appropriate support from the theoretical literature. Does the research reported contribute to the development of knowledge in the direction of theory?

8.2 Outline of methods used

As with quantitative research appraisal, we need to evaluate researchers’ sampling methods. A clear rationale for how participants were approached and selected for inclusion in the study should be clearly set out and a clear rationale should be stated for this sample. Do the researchers use a purposive sample? Have they used ‘snowballing’, that is following up introductions to potential other participants from volunteers in the study? This is a useful approach for accessing ‘hard-to-reach’ groups of people in society. Have the researchers continued interviewing participants until data saturation is reached (i.e. when no new themes emerge from their analysis)? What do they decide to do about disconfirmatory cases, (i.e. where a participant’s viewpoint and emergent themes may differ from other participants)? This is acceptable in qualitative research, indeed understandable, since sample sizes are usually smaller than in a quantitative study.

Whatever the research team have done, their approach needs to be set out clearly. As in quantitative research, the research method and approach must be capable of replication by other researchers so detail is important. Demographics such as numbers of participants, gender, age group, descriptive vignettes with pseudonyms, if used, etc. should also be clearly stated.

The ethical principles of informed consent should be set out clearly. For example, how was consent obtained and was it recorded on paper? A clear explanation for the choice of data collection and method used is needed. It is important that the research team provide reflexive discussion about how they handled the researcher – situation interface: for example, issues encountered during data collection, what they decided to do about any group dynamics, such as may occur during focus group research for example (Ali & Kelly, 2012; Burman & Whelan, 2011).
10. Use of the internet and computer software in qualitative analysis

Computer software (e.g. NUD*ST, NVIVO, Atlas-ti, and information technology such as the behavioural coding and analysis software programmes provided by Noldus) has been available for qualitative analysis, in one form or another, for some time now. Programmes are now very sophisticated. Today software programmes can store transcripts of interviews, upload video files and act as thematic notebooks for researchers to store and share work with colleagues. As with any statistical software, it takes time for researchers to learn the programme in addition to learning how to conduct a qualitative analysis. Where a computer programme has been used, look for evidence that shows how the researchers conducted the analysis and how they used the computer programme to arrive at their results (but remember the adage GIGO: garbage in, garbage out). Computer programmes can be useful to help researchers store, share and sort their data. While they may not yet be a substitute for rigorous analysis, they can be a helpful tool for the qualitative researcher to think about, categorise and sift through the large volume of data generated by qualitative research methods.

Additionally, today there are many rich e-resources available to qualitative researchers via the internet such as the Vision 2 Lead (V2L) website for “e-learning, e-community and e-leadership” with its “12 questions for qualitative e-researchers for 2012” (see http://blog.vision2lead.com/e-interviews-2/12-e-research-ideas-for-2012/) and international e-journals for qualitative research such as The Weekly Qualitative Report and The Qualitative Report, a peer-reviewed open access journal for qualitative researchers originating from Nova South eastern University, Florida, US. E-communities such as these and the Sage publishing house’s online community Methodspace across the UK, US and Europe, help develop a truly international research community of qualitative researchers, thus enhancing debate and encouraging new research networks for developing qualitative methods.

11. Summary and conclusions

Qualitative research methods have much to offer psychological research. As with any research approach, there are strengths and weaknesses. These should be carefully and systematically weighed up and assessed by the researcher before any firm decision is made. The methodology selected needs to be fitted to the aims and objectives of the research proposed.

The exploration, interpretation and our understanding of data is a skill that the qualitative researcher can develop to uncover new ways of viewing the world. A qualitative approach can provide a rich source of data. It is frequently an in-depth process, therefore sample sizes tend to be smaller than numbers usually seen in quantitative research. As Carla Willig observes, the exploration of qualitative research methods is an exciting ‘adventure’ of discovery (Willig, 2008). It is an approach I recommend to any reader thinking about embarking on their own research voyage. Qualitative psychology research helps uncover aspects of life which may not have been explored in much detail. This in-depth approach can help us understand experiences of the lived-world, and participants’ behaviours, feelings and emotions.

The Qualitative Report and Weekly Qualitative Report http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/index.html

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In conclusion, therefore, rigorous methodologies in qualitative psychology are now recognised as being an essential component for evidence-based research whether for quantitative or qualitative research (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). This is especially important when exploring people’s behaviours, their experiences of their interactions with, and engagement in, their world and organisations. Many areas of psychology, in particular social, organisational, and health psychology have embraced qualitative psychology methods in order to gain a better understanding of how behaviours relate to people’s experiences, e.g. their response to treatment (see, for example, Mays & Pope, 2000, 1995; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Murphy et al., 1998).

In the past, there has been a great deal of debate in the discipline of psychology, as in other areas of social sciences, surrounding the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative approaches with much discussion on issues such as ‘quality’ and ensuring ‘rigour’ in qualitative research. However, there is now a growing acceptance and recognition that we gain greater understanding of participants’ psychological experiences of their lived-experiences by including qualitative methods, and the issue of validity has become recognised (Yardley, 2008). These have challenged quantitative exclusivity in the field of psychology. Qualitative psychology has established itself in research methods for psychology postgraduate training and UK undergraduate psychology degree courses now include it as a core element in the curriculum. Today, to ignore qualitative research in examining psychological experiences would be akin to ‘throwing the baby out with the bath water’. As we have seen in this chapter, searching the main research databases produced a large volume of qualitative research literature and qualitative methodologies can help provide rich answers to our questions. As ever, the skill lies in asking the right questions and selecting the most appropriate methods to answer our inquiry.

12. References


www.intechopen.com


Thomas, J., Harden, A., Oakley, A., et al. (2004) Integrating qualitative research with trials in systematic reviews. British Medical Journal, 328: 1010 – 1012


This book represents a selection of chapters that address several topics from the broad domains of psychology: alcoholism, clinical interventions, treatment of depression, personality psychology, qualitative research methods in psychology, and social psychology. As such we have interesting blend of studies from experts from a diverse array of psychology fields. The selected chapters will take the reader on an exciting journey in the domains of psychology. We are sure the content will appeal to a great audience.

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