

Making methodological choice in qualitative counselling research

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Content and Focus: *In this paper I explore the vexed question of how we choose a suitable methodology when undertaking qualitative research in counselling psychology. Drawing on computing I put forward an algorithm in the form of a set of questions to help make the decision. These include the volume, quality and analysis of the expected data, and the role of the researcher and researcher's own data within some of the commonly used methodologies. Finally I suggest that it is well worth slowly repeating these decision making processes, (iteration) until the outcome is clear.*

Keywords: *Methodological choice; qualitative data; role of researcher.*

The challenge

I SPEND quite a bit of my working life helping new researchers struggle with the challenges of making qualitative methodological choices for their research projects. Many new researchers come to research with fixed ideas about what they want to research and how. These ideas are often overly ambitious and the research methodologies chosen do not always effectively answer the questions posed by the research (Hanley, Lennie & West, 2013).

The advice offered in relevant research literature (for example, Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; McLeod, 2011), whilst potentially very confusing, tends to support three possible approaches to qualitative methodological choice:

1. Begin with a careful consideration of epistemology and ontology. Choose the ontology and epistemology that suits you best and allow this to guide your methodological choices.
2. Or start with you research question or topic, and figure the methodology that best answers your question/explores your topic.
3. Move creatively between (1) and (2) which is my preferred and pragmatic approach. I am interested in 'what gets

the job done' efficiently, effectively and elegantly (West, 2011).

Of course, this is all very well but inviting would-be researchers, without much of a background in philosophy, to carefully consider ontology and epistemology would seem a daunting task, although McLeod rightly states in relation to qualitative methodological choice: 'Being able to make sense of these differences in terms of underlying philosophical principles allows researchers to choose and/or adapt methodologies to reflect their personal research objectives and values (2011, p.19).

Algorithm?

A process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer. Accessed 1 November 2012, from: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>

In thinking about how to make qualitative methodological choice for new researchers I began to wonder whether I could devise a few simple questions that would steer researchers in the making of methodological choices. This might even have a useful side affect of improving the writing of the methodology sections in research reports.

In the algorithm that follows I will pose a series of questions and then consider

possible answers in the light of range of relevant methodologies currently used in qualitative counselling research. I will relate some of answers to what I think are the most commonly used qualitative methods used to research counselling psychology. These are: grounded theory; interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA); heuristics; autoethnography, narrative and thematic analysis. A careful consideration of each of these approaches would take at least another paper, or better still a whole book (see McLeod, 2011), so I will not seek to describe or define each of these approaches. I will merely comment on them in the context of the algorithm questions.

These questions do have some overlaps especially (5), (6) and (7) but this does not have to be a problem. Coming to an understanding of an issue from a variety of perspectives should give us more confidence in our eventual choices. Indeed, I end up suggesting that we repeatedly consider these questions until we reach some closure.

The questions

1. *Can you handle a large volume of qualitative data that will typically be the size of a book?*

Most people undertaking qualitative counselling research will typically do individual interviews or a group interview/focus group. Qualitative interviews produce a lot of data. Typically one hour of interview gives around 10,000 words. So a small research project which typically consists of six interviews gives a dataset of 60,000 words – about the length of a small book! Some qualitative methodologies, such as IPA, may work with a smaller data set (maybe three or four interviews) but typically they then ask for more engagement in the data analysis process.

2. *Does the data obtained justify the data analysis method chosen?*

There is nothing worse than rather thin data being subject to an over elaborate analysis. This is especially likely with online generated qualitative data and/or qualitative questions in surveys. One great way to check out that

your research is doable, bearable and will yields some interesting results using your preferred form of data analysis, is to pilot your research. This is a relatively easy way of avoiding more pain later and does enable you to fine tune your project or even start all over again.

3. *How deeply are you willing to immerse yourself in your data and its analysis?*

Heuristics (Moustakas, 1990, 1994), which deeply draws on the researcher for data as well as maybe six others, is probably the most demanding approach. However, *Autoethnography* (e.g. Etherington, 2004) is arguably equally demanding since with this approach the data comes almost wholly from the researcher. Of the more ‘acceptable’ forms of qualitative research methodology *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* is also very demanding. So for a small Masters’ level study it might involve only three or four interviews (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). These are, in effect, individual case studies, each demanding days of analysis, 40 hours per one interview has been suggested. Such immersion is only worth doing if you have rich enough data and have carefully selected suitable participants. A *Narrative* approach (Reisman, 2008) can be somewhat similarly challenging and may involve more than one interview with each participant. *Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2005) is perhaps a bit easier but then again it typically asks for more participants, eight to 20, and still demands days spent on data analysis. *Thematic Analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006) seems easier and maybe less rich/intense, so again greater numbers of participants are expected.

Again a good pilot research interview will show how deep your data is likely to be and how engaging your research topic and its data will actually be for you. Of course a change of methodology and probably change in the number of research participants will likely lead to a modification of your research proposal and require a fresh consideration of ethics and ethical approval.

4. *How do I actually analyse my qualitative data?*

Each approach does have one or two recommended guidelines on how to analyse the data but it needs to be said that these are not objective and so cannot be automated/computerised. So you have to apply your own *subjective* judgement, even if you do use a software package like Nvivo to help your data analysis. So you have to decide which data is important, which data represents a key theme or category and so on. This might seem too much to bear unless you remember this is what you do in your work as a counselling psychologist! You choose what interventions you use when, with which clients and you can hopefully justify your choices in supervision. Your *reflexivity* section in your research report and your methodology chapter should give your readers confidence in your analysis, along with some examples of bits of data analysis in your Appendices.

5. *How important is your contribution to the data, that is, do you analyse your part in the (co-creation of the) data produced?*

This is a key question that you need to consider. How you answer it has profound philosophical meaning and it is an important part of methodological choice and choosing an approach that sits well with you the researcher. Traditionally qualitative researchers aped quantitative researchers and sought to minimise their impact on their participants and on the data gathered. This was often referred to as 'bracketing' and is still practiced in descriptive phenomenological research (Langridge, 2007) and some forms of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005). However, many research approaches now regard data as co-created by researcher and participant and increasingly qualitative research studies reflect this. Note that qualitative researchers these days are expected to make some kind of reflexive statement somewhere within their research report, indeed it is seen as part of the trustworthiness of your research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In *Thematic Analysis*, it varies but – often the researcher's words are not included in

the analysis. For *Grounded Theory* – especially in its original version very little is directly made of the researcher's contributions to the data, but note Charmaz's (2005) constructionist version of grounded theory which does draw more on the researcher's involvement. For *Narrative* – again it varies, but clearly a story is being told by the participant to the listening researcher. In *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* in the second cycle of the data analysis, in which the researcher makes sense of their participants making sense, then the researcher is more engaged, expressing her/his understandings. In *Heuristics* and *Autoethnography* the researcher's own data is very important, indeed these are impossible to do without the researcher's own data being heavily used.

This use of the researcher's own data raises a crucial question in its own right:

6. *How far are you prepared to reveal yourself?*

For there is a cost involved to you the researcher and potentially to your family, friends and colleagues when you actively include yourself in a research project, in a research report, in publications and presentations based on the research. In these days of the internet, the web and powerful search engines, it is a lot harder to limit or control access to research reports, etc. Consequently our decision making about data collection, analysis and presentation of our findings is more crucial than ever. Arguably the ethical understandings of the impact of electronic media on our research processes are lagging behind practice. So as researchers we need to make very careful judgements around using ourselves and others in our research studies. The key questions of how do we take care of ourselves and our participants and informed consent are crucial here (West, 2002).

7. *And linked to (5) So how do I locate myself as a researcher in qualitative research?*

This is a complex question (see further discussions such as, West, 2001, 2006, 2007,

2009). For a variety of reasons choosing how to undertake the role of researcher in qualitative research in counselling psychology is problematic. For those new to qualitative research whose point of departure is quantitative methods then questions about how to avoid researcher bias will likely arise. These mirror the role of the practitioner in classic Cognitive Behaviour Therapy practice or the 'blank sheet' of the analyst in psychoanalysis. So in this case your choice will likely be about how to minimise your impact on the research in a way that probably mirrors the care taken in quantitative studies. At the other of the spectrum from this choice is where the researcher becomes embedded in their research and identifies totally with their research topic.

It seems very difficult to put the researcher's participation and possible data into the research process in an equal footing to the (other) research participants. This does occur within a human inquiry approach to research (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2007; West, 1996) in which the researcher meets with a group of interested participants and negotiates the whole research process. This, however, means giving over control of the research to the group which may feel risky or which may fall flat on its face if the group still expects the researcher to lead and guide the research. It also means that the researcher may turn out to be the only one with any desire to gather and analyse data or write up the research.

Although some qualitative researchers may not recognise it, but actually doing research puts them into a power relationship with their participants. Attempts to level this relationship whilst highly desirable can prove problematic, as can introducing the researcher's own data into the research process. (Although all research, especially with our fellow humans, is arguably problematic in some way or other.)

There is a useful analogy here with the experience of being a counselling psychologist with individuals or groups of clients. One's reactions to the clients and their

material can be seen as part of the therapeutic process but it is an unequal relationship none the less. As a group facilitator one is both part of the group and also observing the group at the same time. So a qualitative researcher can likewise be simultaneously in an engaging dialogue with a participant about the research topic whilst also processing aspects of the interaction itself (West, 2007) and, of course, the research participant(s) will probably be doing likewise.

Many, probably most researchers, would instinctively, I suspect, prefer to keep their 'data' separate perhaps within a researcher diary rather than mixed in with the data from their participants. This leads to problems when presenting data or certainly problems when decided if, when and where, to include such researcher data within the research report.

Of course, there are apparently easy solutions to this dilemma if one chooses a methodology 'off the shelf' which will come with its own view on the researcher's role and one's research supervisor may well also have some sensible guidance on methodological choice and researcher's role. The neatness of 'off the shelf' choices is that the epistemological and ontological issues are already mostly answered, leaving the researcher with only the challenge of putting in practice seemingly easy instructions for analysis of data!

Many practitioners will likely feel drawn to researcher methodologies that suit their practitioner stance and if there should be research money involved or an agency to satisfy in some ways then this may well affect choices made. Likewise, researchers keen for publication should be savvy about the consequences of their methodological choices.

In Table 1, I am exploring a number of commonly used qualitative methodologies, already mentioned, used for counselling psychology research. The further down the table the methodology is the more engaged the researcher and their data is in the research process. I have tried to tease out some of the truth understandings and claims

Table 1: Spectrum of qualitative researcher's engagement or detachment with their research.

Methodology	Role of researcher	Understanding of truth	Notes
Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008)	In its classic form shows its 1960s sociological origins and makes a huge claim to an objectivity.	Varies from there is a truth that any researcher can discover via analysis of the same data to a more post modern take.	Since its inception in 1967 has become most popular method for therapy researchers especially though the efforts of David Rennie (Rennie & Fergus, 2006), however, a variety of versions now exist.
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009)	Treats each interview as a case study to be exhaustively worked on as researcher does a double hermeneutic, that is, make sense of participant's making sense.	The truth is the that revealed on the day of the interview in the dialogue between the researcher and participant.	'New kid on the block' although over 10 years old. Member checking is discouraged. Due to its indepth analysis only uses small number of participants.
Human Inquiry (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2007)	To initiate a group based research process and then invite participants to share in and design the research.	Truth is co-created within the group and by the group and it is holistic not just cerebral.	Also called co-operative or participatory inquiry. Researcher has to be flexible and able to give up control of the research process.
Narrative (Riessman, 2008)	To treat the research interview as a story as told to the researcher.	Truth is found in the stories that people tell about their experiences.	Narrative therapy has become popularised through the work of White and Epston (1990).
Heuristics (Moustakas, 1990, 1994)	Starts and ends with the researcher's understandings of the phenomenon being researched including tacit dimension and dreams.	The researcher starts with plumbing the depth of their own truth knowing and then takes in participants' truth.	Can use accidental encounters with people. Often done in a very dilute form but when well done uses creative methods of presenting findings.
Auto-ethnography (Richardson & St Pierre, 2008)	N=1 which is the researcher. A systematic exploration of the researcher's own knowings.	Is innately contextualised in a clear exposition of researcher's cultural background.	A radical approach that uses methods drawn from ethnography.

involved as well as passing some general comments on the methodology.

This summary table is not meant to be exhaustive merely a way of thinking about the role of the researcher. I have only plotted those methods discussed above, it should be relatively easy for the readers of this journal to locate their own chosen methodologies on this spectrum. You might wonder why thematic analysis is not included in this table since I accept to some extent Braun and Clarke's (2006) argument that we can consider thematic analysis as a methodology in its own right, something I have done above. Nonetheless the variety of uses that thematic analysis has been put to suggest that it arguably belongs across most/all of the spectrum. As Braun and Clarke themselves state thematic analysis is 'essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches' (2006, p.78). I am also aware that there are a range of differing viewpoints as to how to do grounded theory and what it therefore seeks to do. For example, contrast the views of Charmaz (2005), Rennie and Fergus (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (2008).

Iteration

The repetition of a process or utterance. Repetition of a mathematical or computational procedure applied to the result of a previous application, typically as a means of obtaining successively closer approximations to the solution of a problem. Accessed 1 November 2012, from: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>

It is usually not helpful to rush the final design of a research project including the choice of an appropriate methodology. Care taken at this point will save time and probable heartache later. I am drawn to using the mathematical notion of iteration here. By repeatedly or iteratively moving between research question or topic and research design – including methodological choice – perhaps following the algorithm suggested above a better, more useful design should result.

Indeed in an ideal world the best methodology to fit the research question would be selected irrespective of any other considerations. In the real world one can still hope for a good fit between researcher, research question and methodology. At best an elegance (West, 2011) can be achieved when rich and useful data arises in response to an appropriate and relevant research question leading to impactful findings and discussion.

Conclusion

Many descriptions of how to do qualitative research seem deceptively simple – although usually with a dense amount of epistemology and ontology attached explicitly or implicitly. This simplicity hides the messiness of most, if not all, qualitative research which often results in more questions than originally posed. Part of this messiness involves how the researcher works their relationship with the research process and part of the messiness is inevitable when people are involved. Be cautious of any research that seems too tidy for someone will have done some 'smoothing' whether narrative or statistical.

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