

# The Future of Qualitative Research in Psychology: Accentuating the Positive

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**Abstract** In this paper we reflect on current trends and anticipate future prospects regarding qualitative research in Psychology. We highlight various institutional and disciplinary obstacles to qualitative research diversity, complexity and quality. At the same time, we note some causes for optimism, including publication breakthroughs and vitality within the field. The paper is structured into three main sections which consider: 1) the positioning of qualitative research within Psychology; 2) celebrating the different kinds of knowledge produced by qualitative research; and 3) implementing high quality qualitative research. In general we accentuate the positive, recognising and illustrating innovative qualitative research practices which generate new insights and propel the field forward. We conclude by emphasising the importance of research training: for qualitative research to flourish within Psychology (and beyond), students and early career researchers require more sophisticated, in-depth instruction than is currently offered.

**Keywords** Qualitative · Future · Psychology · Diversity · Quality

The future, notoriously, is difficult to predict. The field of qualitative research in psychology, a thriving, rich and diverse field, is difficult to describe in the present let alone anticipate future trends. But we can certainly begin with the present, attempt an overview of the current state of play, which will help us to look to the future and consider how to shape it for the next generation of researchers in psychology.

Firstly, though, it is important to point out that qualitative research has been conducted since the inception of Psychology as a discrete discipline, including by some important figures, such as Wundt, James, Bartlett, Freud, and Piaget. While the

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term ‘qualitative research’ may not have been current when these disciplinary giants were doing research (in fact, as Brinkmann 2015 points out, the term only arose as recently as the 1980s), methods such as introspection, clinical interviews and close observation all encompassed features which we now associate with qualitative research, including a focus on meaning and interpretation. With the exception of Freud, these (and other) founding fathers are generally regarded as scientific (quantitative/ experimental) psychologists, when in fact their methods were much more eclectic and integrative. We must be careful then not to proffer simplistic distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research, and indeed we have written elsewhere of different paradigms which provide frameworks for unifying (and/or destabilising) diverse methods (Madill and Gough 2008) and of the central role of subjectivity across all psychological science (Gough and Madill 2012). With this in mind, it becomes difficult to offer a neat or coherent definition of qualitative research since it can encompass so many different methodological practices – including those performed by so-called experimental psychologists (see Harre 2004)! So, although certain methods of data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups) and analysis (e.g., grounded theory, discourse analysis) tend to feature in textbooks about qualitative research in Psychology, we should be cautious about reducing qualitative research to particular methods and instead think about qualitative research as a sensibility and a set of practices oriented towards eliciting psychological meaning and which are fundamental to psychological science.

Despite the contributions of qualitative research throughout the history of Psychology, it is only in recent years that it has become defined as a relatively discrete field which has become increasingly popular, at least in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> As Demuth (2015) notes, the number of textbooks focusing on qualitative research has greatly increased since the 1990s, with some excellent edited collections (e.g., Camic et al. 2003), [co-]authored texts (e.g., Banister et al. 1997; Braun and Clarke 2013; Willig 2001) a handbook of qualitative methods in psychology (Willig and Stainton-Rogers 2008) and a five volume major work bringing together seminal papers (Gough 2014). In addition, there are various books which focus on a particular methodology authored and/or used by psychologists, ranging from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith et al. 2009) to narrative analysis (Crossley 2000), psychosocial approaches (e.g., Hollway and Jefferson 2000) to discourse analysis (Potter 2007). As well, there are qualitative texts which apply to particular branches of (applied) psychology, including health and clinical psychology (Rohleder and Lyons 2015) and sport and exercise psychology (Sparkes and Smith 2013). Apart from books, there are now a number of journals which specialise in qualitative research, including ones dedicated to qualitative research in psychology: *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2003-, Taylor & Francis) and *Qualitative Psychology* (2013-, American Psychological Association [APA]). Psychologists also publish in more interdisciplinary journals such as *Qualitative Research* (Sage) and *Qualitative Inquiry* (Sage). It is also noteworthy that qualitative methods now feature in some general methods texts for

<sup>1</sup> Our focus is on qualitative research in these countries, although qualitative research is conducted in many other locations where it has distinctive histories, politics and practices. For example, see Mey and Mruck (2007) for a history of qualitative research in Germany; Montero (1998) has written about the vitality of community-based action research in Latin America; Painter et al. (2006) have reflected on critical qualitative research in South Africa.

psychologists and that some general psychology textbooks do incorporate qualitative research (e.g., Schacter et al. 2011). Some mainstream psychology journals, such as those published by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the APA, are now more open to qualitative research submissions (e.g., the APA journal the *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* recruited Brendan Gough as an Associate Editor in 2014 to attract more qualitative research papers). Beyond publications, the establishment of national society-sponsored qualitative research/methods sections is significant, with the APA Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology being a recent and salient development. Such specialist qualitative research sections often host regular conferences and events, and there are also conferences, workshops and meetings which revolve around specific methodologies (e.g., IPA; Conversation Analysis). Qualitative research approaches and specific methods have also made their way on to national society-prescribed psychology curricula, and there are now various teaching and training programmes offered to graduate students and psychology staff which have proved popular (e.g., Braun & Clarke ran a popular week-long summer school at the University of Western England, 2014). Qualitative methods are also increasingly recognised and promoted by research funding organisations, particularly since user involvement and benefit is now prioritised (e.g., the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK): the experiences and perspectives of patients, clients, service users, community groups etc. can obviously be accessed via qualitative modes of data collection such as individual interviews and focus group discussions.

Terkildsen and Petersen (2015) point out that today's psychology students are tomorrow's researchers. They highlight the importance of teaching qualitative research in a way that avoids producing and reinforcing misconceptions, dichotomies and its over-homogenization. Demuth (2015) notes that most psychology programmes do not provide adequate training in qualitative research. In educating our new researchers (and as we argue, current scholars) about qualitative research in Psychology, we would argue that three major considerations are important for the future: 1) positioning qualitative research within Psychology; 2) celebrating the different kinds of knowledge produced by qualitative research; and 3) doing high quality qualitative research.

## Positioning Qualitative Research Within Psychology

As many commentators have noted, a hegemony of positivism exists in psychology where experimental, quantitative methods are privileged over other epistemologies and methodologies (Breen and Darlston-Jones 2010). This is sustained by accreditation requirements throughout Western countries, competitive research funding processes as well as publishing practices. For example, in order to be published in highly rated psychological journals, qualitative research has to align with the traditional principles and practices of conventional psychological science, including positivist notions of validity, reliability and objectivity. Qualitative analysis, for example, must be seen to be unbiased, demonstrate reliability between coders, and follow an established menu of methodological procedures. In this mindset, where matters of procedure are paramount, there is little or no scope for creativity, flexibility or novelty – a state of affairs neatly dubbed 'methodolatry' and described by Chamberlain (2000). This preoccupation with the 'correct' way of conducting qualitative research means that alternative

methodological practices developed by qualitative researchers, such as reflexivity, are not widely recognised, understood or enacted within mainstream psychological science (see Gough and Madill 2012). Subjectivity remains stigmatised, a problem to be policed lest it leak out and spoil the research. Similarly, there is no scope for the evolution of quality criteria to suit the particular research project; to some extent every research project is unique and the application of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to quality control is misguided (see Parker 2004a).

The persistence of traditional, positivist criteria and practices means that methods employed in qualitative research become subsumed as (just) another set of (technical, rational) tools in the psychologist’s toolbox. The qualitative research which gets published in psychological journals often reinforces the hegemony of positivism, used in the service of mainstream psychological theories, to complement quantitative research by providing extracts and themes which amplify pre-existing psychological concepts. Inductive qualitative research is largely eschewed, and even when a ‘bottom-up’ theory generation framework is advertised (in mainstream and other journals), in practice the analysis may be ‘flooded’ with categories which the analyst had already invested in (see Potter and Hepburn 2005). The actual methods of qualitative data collection and analysis deployed are less important than the overarching and rigid methodological prescriptions that must be adhered to, although in practice there is a marked preference for qualitative interviews and some form of thematic analysis. And as with quantitative research in psychology, there is an (implicit) orientation to a realist epistemology i.e., the interview accounts provided by participants are presumed to reflect personal experience (as long as the appropriate steps have been taken to minimise participant ‘reactivity’). In sum, only sanitised, realist forms of qualitative research which complement rather than undermine existing psychological theory tend to be included in mainstream psychology journals, leaving other specialist and interdisciplinary journals to consider constructionist and critical forms of qualitative research which open up avenues of possibilities and inquiry through deconstructing the psychological.

With these observations in mind, the positioning of qualitative research in psychology (and therefore its future) seems rather bleak: if not marginalised, then condemned to suppress any critical, creative or novel elements in order to embody the dominant paradigm. Because many psychologists find themselves under pressure to publish in high status psychology journals for career progression, then the sacrifice of innovation to narrowly defined methodological conventions seems set to continue. In some respects it is as if the constructionist turn in social science did not happen; the armoury of psychological science remains to be pierced. Yet, chinks in the armour have begun to appear, with qualitative research papers being published in dominant mainstream psychological methods journals. For example, Gough and Madill (2012) published a paper in the APA journal *Psychological Methods* alerting the psychological community to diverse modes of qualitative research and concepts of paradigm – this in a journal which only ever published papers to do with the theory and practice of quantitative methods and statistics. This paper was then followed up with a piece highlighting the virtues of subjectivity and reflexivity in psychological science in the same journal (Gough and Madill 2012). In another APA journal with a history of publishing mainly quantitative research – *Health Psychology* – a special issue on *Qualitative Research in Health Psychology* has recently been published (Gough and Deatrck 2015) featuring a

range of qualitative methodologies, including discourse, narrative and phenomenological forms of analysis. Other examples of critical and constructionist qualitative research are appearing in other APA journals. So, while the number of qualitative research papers published in mainstream psychology journals remains low, and the nature of the qualitative research published therein is largely constricted, opportunities for the publication of diverse modes of research are increasing, and there are some grounds for optimism. Outside mainstream psychology, qualitative psychologists can and do publish their work in outlets which are more welcoming of diversity.

These changes are important to herald as we educate future psychology researchers. Non-traditional epistemologies and methodologies are important because they generate knowledge that is highly valuable to understanding human and social phenomena – both within and beyond the mainstream. As Breen and Darlaston-Jones (2010) have noted, psychology students ‘tend to be ignorant of the epistemological foundations of their discipline’ (p.73), so educating them about the existence of alternative approaches is essential. This could be achieved by replacing the current focus on methods with an emphasis on the entire research framework (from epistemology, to theoretical position, to methodology, to method (Breen and Darlaston-Jones 2010; Crotty 1998). Positioning qualitative research as highly relevant, and one of many ways to undertake research and generate knowledge, is critical for contemporary psychology education.

### **Celebrating the Knowledge that Can Be Produced by Innovative Qualitative Research**

Innovative qualitative research designs and approaches are able to provide different kinds of psychological knowledge. Qualitative research methodologies can more fully (and validly) investigate the complexity of human phenomena, including issues such as ethnicity, culture, gender, and sexuality. Increased diversity in the knowledge that psychology produces also provides understandings that may help to address complex social issues, and provide relevant knowledge that has the potential to lead to meaningful social change (Breen and Darlaston-Jones 2010). As Zittoun et al. (2009) point out ‘social issues often require a plurality of knowledge and expertise’ (p.106), from understanding what happens at the level of the brain, to psychological experience, to social interactions, to communities and institutions.

Contemporary issues such as racism, climate change, poverty, immigration, ageing and longer life expectancy require a range of perspectives - and dialogue to ensure knowledge from different perspectives is not fragmented but communicated and shared (Zittoun et al. 2009). This dialogue also requires scholars to have an understanding of research produced from different epistemologies, so that the legitimacy of the knowledge produced by alternative epistemologies and qualitative research is not questioned. This must be an essential part of any research teaching, alongside ways to enable such dialogue. This may be through collaboration, as Zittoun et al. (2009) advocate, or it may be through teaching a range of epistemologies and methodologies in all psychology programmes. In this way future researchers will understand different modes of inquiry and that they produce different – yet legitimate - kinds of knowledge. A recent survey of psychology students and academic staff within an Australian university found that respondents viewed qualitative research as lacking in respect and legitimacy

compared to quantitative methods (Povee and Roberts 2014). As Brinkmann (2015) argues, this perception has become increasingly important as the evidence-based movement questions the legitimacy of qualitative research, and marginalises any form of knowledge produced outside a ‘neo-positivist’ framework. He also points out that the need to develop integrative approaches in psychology is increasingly apparent, to enable researchers to ‘understand the human being as a cerebral, embodied, symbolic, social and technology-using creature *at the same time*’, as he puts it.

Methodologies that employ qualitative research are highly valuable within fields of psychology that are driven by values of social justice. Critical community psychology is ‘praxis-oriented, emphasizing solidarity with oppressed people to create transformative social change’ (Nelson and Evans 2014, p.158). Here it is argued that qualitative research, on its own or in combination with quantitative mixed methods, can provide particular kinds of knowledge that enable action and social change (Nelson and Evans 2014). Other forms of critical psychology similarly employ qualitative research to promote social justice and challenge the status quo. This challenges the epistemological dominance of positivism, especially when it is applied uncritically to marginalised groups and indigenous communities (Breen and Darlaston-Jones 2010), and can also open up opportunities to develop and adopt creative, critical and de-colonizing methodologies (Gemignani et al. 2014). Parker (2004b) has eloquently argued for a critical psychology that employs qualitative research as a form of social action; he views qualitative research as being able to open a space “to do something radically different to link human experience with social action” (p.1). Qualitative researchers are often aware of the power and political aspects of knowledge and science, and use this awareness to question particular cultural and scientific (positivist) hegemonies and think creatively about ways to develop socially responsible knowledge (Gemignani et al. 2014).

## Doing High Quality Qualitative Research

Brinkmann (2015) argues for high quality research that involves pluralism and diversity, and for a *craft* of qualitative inquiry that avoids the current emphasis on methods within qualitative psychology. Demuth (2015) points out the risks associated with the increasing standardization of qualitative methods. Tanggaard (2013) has argued that the obsession around methods is at the expense of theoretical work, and ‘methods are increasingly seen as more or less content-independent tools with which to handle almost everything’ (p.410). The step-by-step rules around how to do particular qualitative methods, the fast food approach that Brinkmann (2015) refers to as the McDonaldization of qualitative research, sits in opposition to the (slow) craft of doing high quality research. Creative thinking, theorising, imagination, patience are all essential to high quality research and thus to the production of new and different knowledge – as research by seminal psychologists have demonstrated over the years, from Wundt to Piaget and Kvale. Brinkmann (2015) links the (over) use of interviews in qualitative research in part to its less time consuming nature, contributing to the speed of research at the expense of high quality, thoughtful and imaginative inquiry. However, we are beginning to see a wider variety of methodological approaches within qualitative research in psychology, a revival of truly ‘experimental’ psychological research which refuses strict boundaries between qualitative and quantitative (see

Gough and Madill 2012) and allows greater opportunities for psychological understanding.

Specialist research journals and books within and beyond psychology showcase a wide variety of qualitative methods, methodological innovations and debates. Indeed, a commitment to methodological development is often explicitly stated within journal aims and scope: for example, ‘dedicated to exploring and expanding the territory of qualitative research’ (Qualitative Research in Psychology); ‘a forum for innovative methodological, theoretical and empirical work that advances qualitative inquiry in psychology’ (Qualitative Psychology). Methodological novelty is signalled in the titles of journal special issues and books, ranging from visual methods (e.g., Reavey 2011) to online methods (Morison et al. 2015) and participatory action research (Cammarota and Fine 2008). In this sense the ways in which researchers are developing qualitative forms of inquiry to advance psychology knowledge can be seen to be flourishing and growing in confidence and sophistication.

The example of qualitative interviews is instructive here. By far the most popular and privileged mode of qualitative data collection, and notwithstanding the preponderance of bland semi-structured-interview-based reports published in the literature, qualitative interviews are sometimes undertaken in different and innovative ways. Participant-generated photographs, for example, add another dimension to interview research, whereby interviewees are invited to discuss their photographs of relevance to the research topic. For example, Phoenix (2010) invited older bodybuilders to take two sets of photographs: ‘this is me’ and ‘this is not me’, which were then discussed at interview. This approach works to engage research participants and often makes for rich accounts being generated, aspects of which may otherwise have remained hidden. Alternatively, research participants may be asked to draw or paint something in relation to a particular experience or phenomenon; in a study by Guillemin (2004) for example, women going through the menopause were encouraged to visualise their condition by means of drawing. Other materials may be used to facilitate the interview, including objects and artefacts which hold personal significance for the interviewee, such as items of clothing, personal journals, treasured possessions (Sheridan and Chamberlain 2011). This focus on photographs, drawings and objects taps into a wider trend in qualitative research towards visual (Reavey 2011) and material methodologies, perhaps signifying the elevated status of the visual in contemporary digital consumer societies and a greater consideration of materiality and the material world by researchers.

Technology has also played a role in the evolution of qualitative interviews, which these days may be conducted via email, text, messenger programmes and various social media platforms. Given the widespread use of such media for communication, and the disappearance of geographical constraints, such mediated interviews are becoming more popular and can prove to be effective in engaging research participants (see e.g., Jowett et al. 2011). Apart from online interviews, personal accounts posted online such as blogs can prove fruitful sources of qualitative data, akin to personal diaries (see Hookway 2008). Beyond individual interviews and blogs, the internet can provide other sources of data which can be regarded as ‘naturalistic’ i.e., without a researcher facilitating or being present. For example, online discussion forums can provide rich insights into all manner of topics, including how suicidality is managed (Horne and Wiggins 2009) or how straight men account for wearing make-up (Hall et al. 2012).

Because it may be difficult to recruit suicidal or metrosexual participants for face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions, the existence of online social interactions offers interesting possibilities.

Still other opportunities are provided by analysing social media content. In a study on young adults' drinking cultures and social networking in Aotearoa New Zealand, Lyons et al. (2015) used a range of qualitative research approaches and forms of data collection to provide different yet complementary data. These methods included discussions with groups of friends across three specific ethnicity groups, as well as subsequent face-to-face individual interviews with a subset of participants using a laptop computer to enable participants to show and discuss their Facebook pages. Screen-capture software recorded all screen activity and specific software (Transana) time-synchronised the laptop screen captures with video data and the transcribed text of the interview conversation. Relevant web-based material regarding drinking and alcohol consumption were also collected over a 12-month period providing a database of online materials. These various forms of data collection provided in-depth but different insights into drinking cultures. Analysing and juxtaposing results across all datasets demonstrated how alcohol corporations employ social media to promote their products in sophisticated ways that were rarely seen as marketing, contributing to a 'culture of intoxication'. Through a diverse mix of methodological approaches, this study provided insight into complex social issues around the social world of alcohol consumption as well as the strong commercial penetration into this world through social media.

## Conclusion

We agree with other authors that it is important to teach qualitative research approaches to a new generation of students, and to teach them ways that are effective. This must go beyond a tokenistic nod to particular qualitative methods, and provide in-depth exposure to the entire research framework, as well as 'integrating studies on epistemological, ontological and ethical diversity' (Gemignani et al. 2014, p.116). We must also raise awareness of the significance of qualitative research in the history of Psychology, point to diverse methodological traditions in different countries and cultures, and explain how qualitative research has been conducted in other social science disciplines and in interdisciplinary fields. We must move beyond a quantitative/qualitative dichotomy and instead emphasise the craft of research inquiry within different epistemologies and methodologies. As Povee and Roberts (2014) have concluded, the goal should be to equip students with understanding about a wide range of qualitative methodologies that can usefully be used to develop psychological knowledge. Moreover, it is important that academic psychologists also develop their skills and knowledge around qualitative methodologies so that they do not feel ignorant, intimidated or confused (see Povee and Roberts 2014). Thus it is important to provide professional development opportunities to enable scholars to embrace methodological pluralism and grasp the heterogeneous nature of the field. It is also important for qualitative methodologies to be acknowledged as a legitimate form of inquiry within our disciplinary structures, processes and dissemination outlets. Nevertheless, we feel that the situation is bright and we have optimism for



the future, where qualitative research in psychology will be at the forefront of developing socially relevant knowledge which is able to contribute to real-world, complex social issues.

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**Antonia Lyons** professor Lyons' research publications focus on gender, health and identity, particularly the social contexts (and media representations) of behaviours related to health and illness and their implications for individual subjectivities and embodied experiences. She is a co-editor of the recent text *Qualitative Research in Clinical and Health Psychology* (Palgrave; 2015) with Dr Poul Rohleder. Her co-authored textbook (*Health Psychology: A Critical Introduction*) with Professor Kerry Chamberlain was published in 2006 by Cambridge University Press. Antonia is currently a co-editor for *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, an Associate Editor for *Health Psychology Review*, is on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Health Psychology and Psychology and Health*, and is a co-editor of the book series *Critical Approaches to Health* (Routledge).