City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Willig, C. (2019). What can qualitative research contribute to psychological knowledge?. Psychological Methods, 24(6), pp. 796-804. doi: 10.1037/met0000218

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/21899/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1037/met0000218

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to City Research Online policy.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@citystgeorges.ac.uk

What can qualitative research contribute to psychological knowledge ?

Abstract

This paper reflects on what qualitative research in psychology can contribute to the accumulation of psychological knowledge. It provides an overview of qualitative research in psychology and discusses its potential value to quantitative researchers. It reviews the differences and similarities between qualitative and quantitative research and explains how qualitative research can be differentiated from other forms of knowing that are concerned with human experience. This paper explains what makes qualitative research 'research', and how to determine if something is qualitative research or another kind of meaning-making activity. The paper starts by defining and characterising qualitative psychology and by identifying qualitative psychology's aims and objectives. The paper goes on to examine qualitative psychology's relationship with the pursuit of knowledge and to position it within the wider field of psychological inquiry. The paper identifies ways in which qualitative research contributes to psychological knowledge (including *thick description*, *critique*, *theory development*) and concludes by affirming its place in a psychological research community that seeks to improve our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

Key words: qualitative research; knowledge claims; psychological inquiry; meaning-making v research; types of psychological research

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the value of qualitative research by identifying the ways in which it can contribute to the discipline of psychology and the accumulation of psychological knowledge. Qualitative researchers approach knowledge production in ways that differ from those adopted by their quantitative colleagues, and this paper seeks to elucidate the processes by which qualitative research generates insights and understanding. It also discusses how the qualitative research process differs from other ways of gaining knowledge. The discussion presented here also aims to identify criteria that differentiate qualitative research from other meaning-making pursuits that seek to shed light on human experience and its diverse meanings. In what is increasingly being referred to as a 'post-truth' era (Ball, 2017; d'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017), it seems particularly important to protect the notion of 'psychological research' in general (and qualitative psychology in particular) from becoming indistinguishable from other forms of meaning-making, such as journalism, philosophy, or the arts, although these approaches have significance and value in their own right.

In order to develop its argument, this paper starts by defining and characterising research in general and qualitative research in particular. It identifies the latter's aims and objectives and differentiates between the major types of qualitative research. The paper goes on to reflect on the contribution qualitative research can make to psychology by examining qualitative psychology's relationship with the pursuit of knowledge and its position within the wider field of psychological inquiry. This includes an examination of the similarities and differences between qualitative and quantitative research. The paper then addresses the question of what makes qualitative research 'research', and it reflects on what qualifies an investigative activity as

qualitative research rather than something else such as art, journalism or philosophy. As such, the paper seeks to identify and map the boundaries that contain (and, therefore, define) qualitative research and that differentiate it from both other types of research and other types of meaning-making pursuits. The paper ends by drawing conclusions about what qualitative research can contribute to psychological knowledge.

What is research and what is qualitative research ?

Although there are many definitions of research (eg. Oxford Dictionary of Current English; Langdridge, 2004; Weathington, Cunningham & Pittenger, 2010; Stangor, 2015), all suggest that research involves a methodical process of investigation which seeks to arrive at new insights and understandings that constitute knowledge about the world. In the case of psychological research, we are concerned with gaining knowledge in relation to human behaviour and experience. Some definitions of research specifically refer to the discovery of facts and laws that inform new theories or the revision of existing theories (Merriam Webster online dictionary). Qualitative research fits this definition given its aim to arrive at new insights and understandings and its commitment to using a systematic series of steps to arrive at its conclusions. Specifically, qualitative research seeks to provide an understanding of people's experiences and the meanings that they give to their experiences.

The Encyclopedia of Theory in Psychology (Miller, 2016, p. 777) offers a general definition of qualitative research as "an approach to research that is primarily concerned with studying the nature, quality, and meaning of human experience" whereby "qualitative data take the form of accounts or observations, and its findings

are presented in the form of a discussion of the themes that emerged from the analysis". Qualitative researchers in psychology are usually concerned with accessing the subjective dimension of human experience in order to better understand what motivates people and to make sense of their actions[1]. Qualitative research methods are used in order to access the meanings given to experiences by the people who have those experiences. This means that qualitative research does not typically work with theoretically derived, pre-existing categories but instead constructs categories of meaning (often referred to as 'themes') that reflect the meanings contained in research participants' words and actions. As such, qualitative research is not normally concerned with establishing cause-effect relationships, the identification of significant differences between groups, hypothesis-testing, or the development of predictive models. Nevertheless, qualitative research does seek to generate a better understanding of social and psychological processes; however, it does this on the basis of induction rather than deduction. The findings from qualitative research can inform theory development, both through the generation of new theoretical formulations as well as by providing an opportunity to revise existing theories in the light of new data. Whilst the results of qualitative data analysis are not generalisable in a statistical sense (whereby statistical calculations are used to justify generalisations of the findings to the wider population), transferability of qualitative findings (ie. the extent to which the results from a particular study have applicability beyond the specific context within which the data were generated) is an important consideration for qualitative researchers (eg. Henwood and Pigeon, 1992). Transferability can involve extrapolation from the original material to wider contexts

[1] This paper is concerned with the use of qualitative methods in psychology, and although most of the issues discussed here do have relevance to qualitative research in general, the focus here is upon the use of qualitative methods in the study of human behaviour and experience in the widest sense. The term 'qualitative psychology' will be used to refer to the field of qualitative research in psychology.

and related phenomena (Alasuutari, 1995), forms of analytic generalisation (whereby insights gained from the study of one setting may help us to better understand the processes occurring in another, related setting) (Yin, 1994), or a focus on the availability and/or accessibility of resources such as discourses or behavioural practices across different contexts, helping to shed light on the possibilities for action that are available to people in certain situations [2].

Types of Qualitative Research

There are variations in the qualitative approaches to research in psychology. Whilst all of them share a concern with human subjectivity and meaning-making, they differ in terms of their specific aims, the types of research questions they address, the procedures they deploy for data collection and analysis, the types of insights they can generate on the basis of their analyses, and their epistemological orientations.

Willig (2012a) examines these differences by identifying four points of tension around which the field of qualitative research can be organised (the role of theory; description versus interpretation; realism versus relativism; and politics), and proposes three approaches to knowledge generation for qualitative research: i) a realist approach, ii) a phenomenological approach, and iii) a social constructionist approach.

As the present paper is concerned with identifying the contribution qualitative research can make to psychology, each of these three approaches to knowledge

[2] For example, within the context of memory work methodology Haug (1987: 44) proposes that if "a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalisation", and Kippax et al. (1988: 25) suggest that "each individual mode of appropriation of the social… is potentially generalisable".

generation will be introduced in some detail before drawing conclusions about qualitative psychology's relationship with claims to knowledge in more general terms.

A realist approach to qualitative research is concerned with obtaining a better understanding of the social and psychological processes that shape the phenomena we encounter. Such an approach to qualitative research aspires to explain why and how such phenomena occur. As such, this approach presupposes the existence of structures and processes that are potentially knowable and that have observable effects. This type of qualitative research is committed to a discovery mode of investigation (see Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000), whereby the researcher gathers information in order to better understand what is going on in a particular situation. In this mode the researcher is concerned with identifying events and processes that have an objective existence in that they exist regardless of whether or not anyone is aware of them. Qualitative methods that are compatible with a realist orientation include thematic analysis and some forms of grounded theory methodology; such methods extract themes from the data and use these to develop models or theoretical formulations that explain the phenomenon under investigation. For example, a realist research question might be concerned with the ways in which people make decisions (eg. 'How do parents decide to send their child to boarding school ?' or 'What is the process by which a couple comes to the decision to get married ?") or with what happens when established social practices are disrupted or challenged in some way (eg. 'What happens when a new member joins an established reading group ?' or 'How do employees of a large company manage organisational change ?").

To illustrate the procedures involved in conducting realist qualitative research, consider a thematic analysis study of schooling decisions made by parents. Such a

study might use semi-structured interviews and/or focus group discussions with parents who have decided to send their children to boarding school. Transcripts would be made of discussions that would be subjected to line-by-line coding to capture the meaning contained in each segment of text. These descriptive codes would then be integrated into higher-order labels that capture wider meaning. The researcher then clusters higher-order labels into themes that reflect patterns in the data that have relevance to the research question. In this way, the accounts of parents would be broken down into a number of recognizable configurations of meaning reflecting the parents' reasons and motivations. The researcher would use these to construct an explanatory framework to help understand the decision-making process of parents who have decided to send their children to boarding school.

There are differences among realist researchers in terms of their conceptualisation of the relationship between their data and the (experiential, social and/or psychological) realities they want to access. What is sometimes referred to as 'naïve' realism (but perhaps more respectfully described as 'direct' realism, see Willig, 2012a) takes data at face-value, assuming that the data provide straightforward information about the phenomenon under investigation. From such a perspective, accounts of experience supplied by research participants are taken as a direct reflection of their actual thoughts and experiences. Critical realism, by contrast, takes the view that the data we collect can provide us with information about the underlying structures that generate the phenomena we are interested in, but that the data never simply and directly reflects what is going on at a deeper level. Critical realism differentiates between observable (eg. words, behaviour, social practices) and unobservable (ie. underlying social and psychological structures which generate observable phenomena) aspects of

reality, proposing that it is the researcher's task to investigate the complex relationship between the two. For example, a direct realist researcher would take parents' accounts of why they have decided to send their child to boarding school at face value and extract themes representing the reasons given by the parents for their decision from the accounts. By contrast, a critical realist researcher would dig deeper and try to identify the underlying structures that underpin the parents' decision, and would attempt to explain why the parents justified their decision in just the way that they did.

A phenomenological approach to qualitative research is concerned with gaining access to research participants' subjective experiences and seeing the world through their eyes. Such an approach is not interested in establishing an objective, 'bird's eye' view of a situation but instead seeks to 'step into the shoes' of research participants to better understand the meaning they give to their experiences. It focuses on the experiential worlds of individuals rather than a shared, external 'real' world. Phenomenological research methods such as descriptive phenomenology or interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) can be used to capture subjective experiencing. Research questions asked by phenomenological researchers focus on experience (eg. "What is it like to be living with a visual impairment ?" or "What does it feel like to win the lottery ?") and meaning (eg. "What does it mean to be widowed ?" or "How do people make sense of discovering that they have been adopted ?").

To illustrate the procedures involved in conducting phenomenological research, consider an interpretative phenomenological study of the experience of living with a visual impairment. Such a study would require the researcher to conduct, record and

transcribe phenomenological interviews with partially sighted individuals. Such interviews would focus on participants' subjective experience of living with a visual impairment and the meanings they give to their experience. Analysis of the transcribed interviews begins with line-by-line coding. Here, the researcher pays attention to the emotional tone as well as the content of what is said. Initial codes are combined into emergent themes that capture the experiential meaning contained within them. Emergent themes are then clustered into super-ordinate themes with their own sub-themes. A table of super-ordinate themes is compiled for each participant, which are then integrated into a master table of themes for all participants. The master table reflects the dimensions of the experience of living with a visual impairment that are shared across participants.

There are differences, however, among phenomenological researchers in the extent to which they embrace interpretation as a part of phenomenological research. Descriptive phenomenologists seek to present research participants' subjective experience as accurately as possible, whilst interpretative (or hermeneutic) phenomenologists contextualise, reflect upon, or even develop explanatory interpretations that account for the experiences which their participants describe. In other words, whilst descriptive phenomenologists are concerned with getting as close as possible to the actual experience by describing its quality and texture in detail, interpretative phenomenologists aspire to make sense of the experience and to give it wider meaning.

A social-constructionist approach to qualitative research is concerned with the social construction of meaning and the mechanisms involved in this process. Here, the

researcher is interested in the ways in which people talk about the world (including themselves and their experiences) and how these ways of talking construct particular versions of social reality. People are conceptualised as actors who inhabit a social world that is made up of discourses (ie. ways of talking about things) and social practices (ie. ways of doing things) that inform and shape how people experience themselves and others. Social constructionist researchers use varieties of discourse analysis to examine how prevailing ways of talking about something set up ways of seeing a situation and facilitate ways of relating to a situation. To illustrate, consider the difference between the terms 'patient' and 'health care consumer' and the rights and responsibilities that are associated with each within the context of health care provision. Discourse analysis works with talk and text to study the relationship between language (the words used), meaning (the sense that is made through using those words) and practice (the actions and behaviours afforded by the words used). For example, a social constructionist research question might be "How do male University students talk about romantic relationships and how do they position themselves discursively within their own romantic relationships ?" or "How do doctors and patients talk about chronic fatigue syndrome and what may be the implications of this for patients' experience of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)?"

To illustrate the procedures involved in conducting social constructionist research, consider a discourse analytic study of male University students' talk about romantic relationship. Such a study might work with transcripts of focus group discussions around the topic of dating and relationships. Analysis of the transcripts would initially focus on the way in which participants use language to construct meaning around the notion of romantic relationships. For example, the person they are romantically involved with might be referred to as 'my girlfriend', 'my partner', 'my

lover' or 'my girl' all of which invoke different shades of meaning. The analysis would then examine the conversational contexts in which such different constructions are deployed to understand their action orientation. For example, references to 'my partner' may be used to establish one's reputation as mature and responsible whilst 'my girl' might be used to play down the significance of the relationship. In this way, the analysis would map out the discursive resources available to the participants to talk about their romantic relationships to provide insights about the social context within which young men negotiate their relationship status.

Like phenomenological researchers, social constructionist researchers take a relativist approach to knowledge in that they are interested in the ways people construct meaning to make sense of the world (rather than in the nature of 'the world' itself). However, there are differences among social constructionist researchers regarding their research aims. Some social constructionists do take a 'real' world as their reference point whilst others conceptualise 'reality' as something that is always fluid, always contextual, and always discursively constructed for a purpose. The former, more moderate form of social constructionist research is concerned with how and why particular discourses have emerged and what the necessary conditions for their emergence might be, making it compatible with a critical realist perspective.

Qualitative psychology's relationship with claims to knowledge

We have seen that qualitative researchers adopt a variety of approaches to research and that the knowledge they create varies as a result. We have seen that some types of qualitative research seek to describe participants' subjective experience and meaning-

making practices whilst others aspire to understand the mechanisms that underpin such experiences and practices. However, despite these differences, qualitative research as a whole remains committed to knowledge generation. Although qualitative psychologists acknowledge that different research methodologies produce different kinds of insights (and that it is important to acknowledge this as part of the practice of researcher reflexivity, eg. Gough & Madill, 2012), they still engage in the pursuit of knowledge as their overarching objective (see Willig, 2016). All qualitative research (even that with a relativist orientation) makes claims about how something happens or what something is (be that people's thoughts and feelings, their actions and practices, the way they make sense of the world, the discursive resources they deploy and how the deploy them, and so on). These claims are based upon the application of systematic, transparent procedures that extract meaning from data to provide answers to questions. Whilst the research questions that inform qualitative psychological research may differ from those typically examined by quantitative psychologists, there is always a specific research question the researcher seeks to answer, and it is the answer to the research question that makes a contribution to knowledge.

So how does this differ from a quantitative approach to psychological research ? We have seen that qualitative research works with data that can be mined for relevant categories of meaning to shed light on the phenomenon of interest. Qualitative research tends to work inductively from the bottom up. Qualitative research is driven by an interest in the ways in which human actors contribute to the processes by which categories of meaning come into being, and in how these change within an evolving social context. By contrast, quantitative research is often reductive in that it seeks to

explain complex phenomena (eg. human behaviour) with reference to a specific set of factors (such as personality type, social identity or hormonal balances) and their interactions. In addition, quantitative research employs strategies for sampling and statistical analysis that allow its findings to be generalised to wider populations, whilst qualitative research does not provide a basis for generalisability (although transferability can be aspired to). Hypothesis-testing in its formal, Popperian sense plays a role in many quantitative research designs but is not compatible with qualitative research. There are elements of informal hypothesis-testing in grounded theory methodology and case study designs such as negative case analysis (where the researcher looks for instances that do not fit with an emerging theoretical formulations); however, these never constitute the starting point of the research and they are only applied after theoretical propositions have emerged from an initial inductive research phase.

Finally, unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not aim for replicability of its findings. Qualitative researchers accept that qualitative analysis is inevitably informed by the researcher's stance and their approach to interpretation. Whilst the methodological procedures of a qualitative study can be understood and re-enacted by another researcher, their interpretations of the data are not expected to be the same.

There are, therefore, important differences between the aspirations of qualitative and quantitative psychological research[3]. However, the argument developed in this paper is that despite the differences in their approach to knowledge generation, all forms of psychological research seek to further our understanding of

[3] The extent to which qualitative and quantitative research are rooted in distinct philosophical paradigms and the implications of this for combining the two approaches in one study are subject to debate (see for example Jackson, 2015, and Lundrum and Garza, 2015)

the human condition and contribute to a body of knowledge about it. Despite their differences in approach, all forms of psychological research seek to ground their knowledge claims in methodical, systematic, and transparent analyses of data and can, therefore, be described as empirical research.

Qualitative psychology's relationship with the pursuit of knowledge

There are, of course, forms of knowing that are not the outcome of a formal research process. In fact, most of what we know about being human comes to us through routes that have nothing to do with research. So how do we differentiate qualitative research and the insights it generates from other meaning-making activities, and where might we draw the boundary between qualitative research and other forms of knowing ?

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that qualitative psychology incorporates much critical reflection on the processes by which claims acquire the status of 'knowledge', 'fact' or 'common sense'. Discursive psychology, for example, has contributed much to our understanding of how speakers use rhetorical devices to externalise and legitimise their accounts of events and thus construct 'facts' in the service of 'stake management' (eg. Potter, 1996; Edwards and Potter, 1992) designed to achieve objectives such as to avoid blame, disclaim responsibility or silence potential challenges to one's views. Scientific discourse itself has been critically examined as a social practice with a focus on its consequences for those who are positioned within it (eg. Parker, 1992). For qualitative psychologists, the process by which claims to knowledge are negotiated within social contexts is a delicate matter that is not simple or straightforward.

Qualitative psychologists frequently invoke a critique of 'positivism' defined as the view that "the external world determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing" (Kirk & Miller, 1986: 14)[4]. Most qualitative psychologists subscribe to a constructivist perspective, acknowledging that every attempt to describe something always involves choices about what to focus on and how to represent it (eg. Ponterotto, 2005). In other words, as soon as we attempt to capture reality, we are also constructing a particular version of it. Most qualitative psychologists accept that there is no unproblematic, direct access to the phenomena they are interested in (be that people's thoughts and feelings, the meanings of their actions, or the processes by which social and psychological events unfold), and that the data never speaks for itself but needs to be interpreted. Interpretation inevitably means that a transformation of the data through the researcher necessarily takes place during the research process (see Willig, 2012b, for a discussion of the role of interpretation in qualitative psychology). Qualitative researchers must possess "reflexivity", meaning that they monitor their own contribution to meaning-making during the research process, taking this into account when drawing conclusions from their research findings (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Qualitative psychology, therefore, recognises the complexity of knowledge generation and acknowledges the contribution of the researcher's choices and preferences to the resultant knowledge. However, this does not mean that qualitative research does not aspire to arrive at new insights and understandings about social and psychological processes. Qualitative researchers are not content to simply share their thoughts in order to stimulate readers to think about something in new and different ways. If the

[4] Qualitative researchers sometimes suggest that quantitative psychology subscribes to a positivist epistemology. However, see Robinson (2014) for a persuasive challenge to this claim.

sole objective is to evoke a response that widens the audience's experiential field/repertoire, then a researcher has moved from the realm of research into the realm of the arts.

So what makes qualitative research 'research' ?

We have seen that most definitions of 'research' include a systematic approach to gathering and scrutinising information in the search for new knowledge. This suggests that for an activity to be described as 'research', it needs to employ an identifiable methodology, it needs to work with some form of data, and it needs to focus on increasing our understanding of ourselves and/or the world we live in. Qualitative research shares these commitments. For something to be described as qualitative research, it needs to do more than create and share new ways of looking at the world and to contribute to the proliferation of perspectives. Whilst this can be a valuable activity in its own right, in that it can provide stimulation and inspiration for individuals and groups and potentially contribute to positive social change, it does not qualify as 'research'. This is because research aspires to do more than propose new ideas; it seeks also to systematically ground such ideas in evidence in a way that is open to scrutiny by other researchers.

Qualitative researchers have access to a wide range of methods of data collection and analysis including methods which are highly innovative and unconventional. Some of these involve close collaboration between the researcher and the research participants as in participatory action research or some forms of ethnography, or even a merging of the roles of researcher and participant as in memory work or autoethnography. However, this does not mean that such research does not involve a systematic and

rigorous search for an answer to a specific research question[5]. Qualitative research methods are designed to ensure that qualitative data analysis is not selective or impressionistic, and that the researcher's engagement with the data can generate results that surprise the researcher and make them reconsider their assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation. The purpose of qualitative research is to increase our understanding of a particular phenomenon. It is not to express the researcher's own views or their personal response to the data they have collected. Such views and responses may help the systematic exploration of the data as they can draw the researcher's attention to their own blindspots as well as to the potential emotional impact of a piece of data. However, the researcher's reactions do not in and of themselves constitute a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Such reactions, along with the data as a whole, need to be interpreted in a transparent and methodical fashion that is open to scrutiny and evaluation by other researchers.

Similar considerations apply to the use of innovative forms of dissemination of the results of qualitative research such as poetic condensation, films, or theatre productions. Where artistic forms of expression are used to communicate the findings from a qualitative analysis, there needs to be a clear indication of what is being illustrated through these forms of expression and what they represent (ie. what new insights they contain about the phenomenon of interest). Ideally, a formal research paper presenting the methodology used and the insights generated by the research ought to be produced alongside other forms of dissemination.

[5] A good illustration of this is Stanley's (2006: 150) approach to autoethnography which combines "an evocative, verisimilitude-seeking, firmly anchored 'auto'-ethnography that focuses squarely on one's own lived experience but that also applies critical analysis and aims to formulate theoretical understandings, with the aim of creating understanding beyond the data itself".

How do we decide whether something is qualitative research rather than another kind of meaning-making activity ?

One way of ascertaining whether something counts as research is to check whether it attempts to answer a specific research question. After all, the search for greater understanding is driven by questions or by the identification of gaps in one's knowledge. Although qualitative research questions tend to be open-ended and flexible (in that their focus can change during the course of the research as more information about the subject matter under investigation comes to light), it is important for the researcher to be explicit about the question that drives their research and to acknowledge that decisions about data collection and analysis are always informed by a question. Qualitative research questions often start with the word 'how' as they tend to be concerned with processes (eg. 'How do people make decisions about x ?'; 'How is 'anger' constructed in anger management literature ?'; 'How do couples negotiate the transition to parenthood ?'). Whilst journalists, too, seek to throw light on what happens to people when they report on social phenomena, the purpose of such reporting is different from that of a research report. The journalistic report presents a story to draw attention to a social phenomenon whilst the qualitative research report presents the outcome of a systematic, bottom-up analysis of a data set. The former uses quotes from people involved in the phenomenon of interest to support the argument made in the story, whilst the latter uses quotes from participants to illustrate the themes identified in the research[6].

It is also important to differentiate between research questions and other kinds of questions. In an account of the descriptive phenomenological method, Giorgi,

[6] Investigative journalism forms an exception to this in that investigative journalists do conduct research based upon a methodology that can be subjected to scrutiny and quality checks by third parties.

Giorgi and Morley (2017) suggest that questions about the essential properties of human existence (what the authors call ‘universal essences) can only be answered by philosophical means whilst questions about the essential properties of particular contextualised subjective experiences (what the authors call “psychological essences”) are suitable for qualitative research. For example, the question “What does it mean to be human?” cannot be answered on the basis of qualitative research, whereas the question “What is the participants’ lived experience of sharing their life with a pet dog?” would be a suitable research question. Questions that can be addressed through the medium of qualitative research are those which can be answered through the analysis of a specific data set; the answers to such questions will always and necessarily be specific to a particular context, rather than universal. Philosophy, by contrast, uses a method of philosophical inquiry to draw conclusions from statements rather than from the analysis of data. Philosophical methods include being sceptical, and using logic, dialectics, or hermeneutics to interrogate statements. As such, philosophical investigation is systematic and methodical but not empirical.

Another criterion for deciding whether a piece of work qualifies as research is whether it seeks to contribute to our knowledge about a particular phenomenon. Qualitative psychology distinguishes itself by its attempt to increase our understanding of human experience. It does this by contributing insights into the structure and content of human experience and social engagements. A piece of qualitative research needs to locate itself within the existing body of knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation to demonstrate what it contributes to this body of knowledge (be this by way of expanding, critiquing or even deconstructing current conceptualisations and ways of understanding the phenomenon). Whilst novelists and

poets are also concerned with illuminating human experience, their works constitute stand-alone interpretations of experience, and their value is determined by the effect they have on the reader rather than the contribution they make to a body of knowledge.

A third criterion for identifying a piece of work as research is the presence of a clearly defined method. Qualitative analysis and interpretation ought to involve working through data guided by a method of analysis that has been described and explained to the reader. This method should require the researcher to engage in a process of critical reflection including a systematic questioning of the researcher's emerging interpretations (see also Willig, 2012b, p. 24)[7]. This is required to enable readers to evaluate the quality of the research and to determine its trustworthiness (Williams & Morrow, 2009). In the case of novels and poems, the reader's recognition and response to the work determines their value. Qualitative research, by contrast, needs to demonstrate the presence of a method and its consistent and transparent application to a data set for its insights to be considered trustworthy.

What can qualitative research contribute to psychological knowledge ?

Having differentiated qualitative research from other forms of inquiry, we now turn to the question of what qualitative research can contribute to psychological knowledge. Due to the large amount of time required to analyse qualitative data, qualitative psychologists tend to work with relatively small numbers of research participant. Consequently, the research designs they use do not allow them to make predictions or to generalise their findings to wider populations. Instead, qualitative

[7] Whilst replicability of findings is not a meaningful goal for qualitative research, qualitative researchers reporting a study should provide sufficiently detailed information about the processes of data collection and analysis to allow another researcher to conduct a similar study in another context.

psychologists contribute to psychological knowledge by way of *thick description*, *critique*, and *theory-building*. There are also qualitative methods for conducting *metasyntheses*, whereby findings from different qualitative studies are integrated, enabling qualitative psychologists to identify trends and commonalities across studies. Each of these contributions is examined in more detail below.

Thick description

Thick description is the goal for much qualitative research (Ponterotto, 2006). It requires the researcher to describe the phenomenon under investigation in terms of its meaning(s) rather than simply recording observable 'facts' about it. Denzin (1989:83, in Ponterotto, 2006: 540) defines thick description as follows:

> "A thick description… does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard."

Thick description seeks to provide the reader with access to the inner world of research participants, their emotions, thoughts, perceptions and intentions (Holloway, 1997). Ideally, a thick description will be recognised by the reader and produce "the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described" (Denzin (1989):83-4 in Ponterotto, 2006: 542). Using thick description, qualitative

research can bring to life abstract psychological constructs such as ‘burn-out’, ‘stress’ or ‘anxiety’, and provide the reader with access to the subjective realities of those who experience these phenomena. Thick description can increase our understanding[8] of experiences through i) clarifying their meaning(s) to those involved in and/or affected by them, and ii) providing access to experiential realities to readers who have not had those experiences themselves.

Critique

Qualitative research can be used to challenge assumptions and to take a fresh look at the psychological categories we employ to think about people and to make sense of their actions and experiences. Methods such as discourse analysis have been used to deconstruct psychological constructs (such as ‘psychopathology’ or ‘stress’) by examining how they are put together, how they function, whose interests they may serve, and with what consequences may be deployed in conversations (eg. Parker et al., 1995; Willig, 1999). Theories of ‘health’ and ‘illness’ have been subjected to critical scrutiny, raising questions about the extent to which they are informed by pre-conceived notions of what it means to be ‘healthy’ (eg. Ogden, 1995; Harper and Thompson, 2012). Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to take into account the social and historical contexts within which people (including researchers and other experts) experience themselves and others, and in which they talk or write about those experiences. As such, qualitative research features prominently in accounts of Critical Psychology (eg. Murray, 2015; Gough et al., 2013).

[8] The use of the term ‘understanding’ within this context evokes Dilthey’s differentiation between ‘understanding’ and ‘explanation’ whereby the former requires a hermeneutic methodology and renounces prediction as a goal (see Schmidt, 2006, chapter 2).

Qualitative psychology contributes to psychological knowledge by challenging our assumptions and preconceived notions about human experience and behaviour, as well as by offering insights into the processes by which dominant narratives about human psychology come into being, exercise, and maintain their power.

Theory-building

Qualitative research can contribute to theory-building in several ways. First, idiographic, bottom-up research designs allow for the emergence of new theories that are grounded in the data and reflect the detail and particularities of human experience-in-context. Grounded theory methodology (eg. Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), intrinsic case study designs (eg. Stake, 1995), and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al. 2009) are good examples of this relationship between theory and data. Here, the approach to theory-building is primarily inductive in that the data drive the process of theorising and the theory is the end-product rather than the point of departure of the research. However, there is also a deductive element involved as emerging theoretical constructs and tentative claims about their relationships with one another are continually being checked against the data. This is why Grounded Theory Methodology advises the researcher to move between data collection and analysis in a progressive cycle until no new categories of meaning can be identified and theoretical saturation has been achieved. In reality, saturation remains a goal rather than an actual end-point of the research; theory development is an ongoing process that does not end with the completion of any one study. The originators of Grounded Theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967:40, cited in Dey, 1999: 117), acknowledged this when they cautioned:

> "When generation of theory is the aim, however, one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives, what will change and help develop the theory. These perspectives can easily occur on the final day of study or when the manuscript is reviewed in page proof: so the published word is not the final word, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory."

It has also been suggested that theory development in qualitative research incorporates an abductive element[9] whereby the researcher responds to surprising aspects of their data by creating new forms of explanation that can accommodate these unexpected manifestations (Reichertz, 2014).

A second way in which qualitative research can contribute to theory development is by providing an opportunity to test existing theories against new data. Here, case studies can play a similar role to experiments in that they can falsify a theory. Whilst no number of case studies (or, for that matter, experiments) can prove a theory to be true, a single case that challenges an existing theory's prediction suffices to question its validity and sets limits to any generalisations that can be made on the basis of the theory (see Stake, 1995).

Finally, qualitative research can contribute to theory development by using thick description to map social and/or psychological processes. For example, phenomena such as the practice of self-harm (Josselin and Willig, 2015) or the way in which clients use therapy sessions to change aspects of themselves (Elliott, 2012) can be better understood through a detailed examination of participants' thought processes as they move through these experiences. A focus on participants' own meaning making

[9] According to the pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, *abduction* is a third way of making inferences (with induction and deduction being the other two). Abduction refers to the conception of a new idea or hypothesis in response to unforeseen and noteworthy patterns in the data (see McLeod, 2001).

and their intentions within particular contexts allows the researcher to make sense of participants' actions and to understand how they journey through a process that culminates in the phenomenon of interest (eg. an act of self-harm or a successful therapy outcome). Such research can produce theoretical formulations that capture the inner logic of such processes, map their progress, and offer insight into the motivations that underpin participants' actions.

Qualitative research contributes to theory development by moving beyond descriptions of observable events to consider what may lie beneath them and what may shape and direct them. Theories are non-observational statements that seek to organise experiences and events in a way that renders them meaningful and coherent. As Bendassolli (2013: 9) argues, in order to "develop a theory that is not a simple synthesis of observational statements- that is, a description in a broad sense [r]esearchers must go beyond induction". Qualitative psychology's contribution to psychological knowledge through theory-building is complex and advances through a combination of inductive, deductive and abductive inferences (Reichertz, 2014).

Metasynthesis

Metasynthesis is a qualitative method for integrating the results from different qualitative studies (Shaw, 2012). As qualitative researchers tend to work with relatively small samples, metasynthesis constitutes a welcome opportunity to extend the reach of qualitative research and broaden the evidence base for psychological practice. There are different approaches to metasynthesis with some seeking to establish a cumulative body of knowledge about a particular phenomenon by bringing together findings from different studies that address the same research question, whilst others integrate findings across studies in order to develop theory. All forms of

metasynthesis systematically integrate the findings of a group of studies, although there are differences in the extent to which they attempt to account for diversity within the corpus by explaining differences as opposed to simply focusing on shared themes, and the extent to which the synthesis considers the socio-historical context within which the primary studies have been produced. There are also differences in technical matters such as the number of studies to be included, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the extent to which the findings from primary studies are re-interpreted (eg. by re-labelling or re-grouping the original themes). However, all forms of metasynthesis constitute "a distinct piece of scholarly research and not merely an option for organising and displaying literature in the field" (Thorne, 2015: 1348). As such, the results from metasynthesis research make an original contribution to the literature. Although metasynthesis has only relatively recently been embraced by qualitative psychologists, there is now a growing literature reporting metasyntheses in qualitative health psychology, in particular (e.g. Bennion et al., 2012; Barker et al., 2014; Shelgrove and Liossi, 2013; Willig and Wirth, 2018).

Conclusions

This paper posed the question of what makes qualitative research 'research'. It was concerned with how we decide whether something is qualitative research as opposed to another kind of meaning-making activity. The paper argued that despite important differences between qualitative approaches in psychology including their specific aims, the types of research questions they pose, and the kinds of insights they seek to generate, qualitative research in psychology is engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and is motivated by the desire to improve our understanding of social and psychological processes. The paper identified three criteria for deciding whether a

piece of work qualifies as qualitative research (the presence of a specific research question; contribution to a body of knowledge; a clearly identified method of inquiry), and it identified ways in which qualitative research can contribute to psychological knowledge (by way of thick description, critique, theory development, and metasynthesis). The paper draws the conclusion that qualitative psychology constitutes a research endeavour which locates it firmly within the psychological research community.

References:

Alasuutari, P. (1995) *Researching Culture: Qualitative Method and Cultural Studies*. London: Sage.

Ball, J. (2017*) Post-truth: How bullshit conquered the world.* BitebackPublishing.

Barker, A.B., das Nair, R., Lincoln, N.B. and Hunt, N. (2014) Social identity in people with multiple sclerosis: A metasynthesis of qualitative research, *Social Care and Neurodisability*, 5(4): 256-67.

Bendassolli, P.F. (2013) Theory building in qualitative research: Reconsidering the problem of induction, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research,* 14(1), Article 25, pp.1-19. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1301258

Bennion, A.E., Shaw, R.L. and Gibson, J.M. (2012) What do we know about the experience of age related macular degeneration ? A systematic review and meta-synthesis of qualitative research, *Social Science & Medicine*, 75(6): 976-85.

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. (2007) *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. London: Sage.

Cooper, H. (ed) (2012) *The handbook of research methods in psychology*. American Psychological Association

D'Ancona, M (2017) *Post-truth: The new war on truth and how to fight back*. Ebury Press.

Davis, E. (2017) *Post-truth: Why we have reached peak bullshit and what we can do about it.* Little, Brown

Denzin, N. K. (1989) *Interpretive interactionism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Dey, I. (1999) *Grounding grounded theory: Guidelines for qualitative inquiry*. London: Academic Press.

Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (1992) *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.

Elliot, R. (2012) Qualitative methods for studying psychotherapy change processes, IN: Harper, D. and Thompson, A.R. (eds) (2012) *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy,* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Finlay, L. and Gough, B. (eds) (2003) *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Frost, N. (2011) Qualitative research in psychology, In: N. Frost (ed) *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/Open University Press.

Giorgi, A., Giorgi, B. and Morely, J. (2017) The descriptive phenomenological psychological method, In: Willig, C., & Stainton-Rogers, W. (Eds.) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. London, UK: Sage.

Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine.

Gough, B. and Madill, A. (2012) Subjectivity in psychological science: From problem to prospect, *Psychological Methods*, 17(3): 374-384.

Gough, B., McFadden, M. and McDonald, M. (2013) *Critical social psychology. An introduction*. 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Griffin, C. and Bengry-Howell, A. (2017) Ethnography, In: C. Willig, & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.). (2017) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. London, UK: Sage.

Harper, D. and Thompson, A.R. (eds) (2012) *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy,* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Haug, F. (1987) *Female Sexualisation*. London: Verso.

Henwood, K.L. and Pigeon, N.F. (1992) qualitative research and psychological theorising, *British Journal of Psychology*, 83(1): 97-112.

Holloway, I. (1997) *Basic concepts for qualitative research*. London: Blackwell Science.

Howitt, D. (2016) *Introduction to qualitative methods in psychology*. 3rd edition. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Jackson, M.R. (2015) Resistance to qual/quant parity: Why the "paradigm" discussion can't be avoided, *Qualitative Psychology*, 2 (2): 181-198.

Josselin, D. and Willig, C. (2015) Making Sense of Self-Injury: A Pluralistic Case-Study, *Counselling Psychology Review*, 30:4: 5-15.

Kagan, C., Burton, M. and Siddiquee, A. (2017) Action Research, In: C. Willig, & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.). (2017) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. London, UK: Sage.

Kirk, J. and Miller, M. (1986) *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Kippax, S., Crawford, J., Benton, P., Gault, U. and Noesjirwan, J. (1988) Constructing emotions: Weaving meanings from memories, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 27: 19-33.

Langdridge, D. (2004) *Introduction to research methods and data analysis in psychology*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Lundrum, B. and Garza, G. (2015) Mending fences: Defining the domains and approaches of quantitative and qualitative research, *Qualitative Psychology*, 2(2): 199-209.

Madill, A., Jordan, A. and Shirley, C. (2000) Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: Realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies, *British Journal of Psychology*, 91: 1-20.

Madill, A. and Gough, B. (2008) Qualitative research and its place in psychological science, *Psychological Methods*, 13(3): 254-71.

McLeod, J. (2001) *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage Publications.

Miller, H.L. (ed) (2016) *The SAGE encyclopedia of theory in psychology*. Seven Oakes: Sage.

Murray, M. (2015) *Critical health psychology*. 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ogden, J. (1995) Changing the subject of health psychology, *Psychology and Health*, 10: 257-65.

Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse dynamics: Critical analysis for social and individual psychology*. London: Routledge.

Parker, I., Georgaca, E., Harper, D., McLaughlin, T. and Stowell-Smith, M. (1995) *Deconstructing psychopathology*. London: Sage.

Ponterotto, J.G. (2005) Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2): 126-36.

Ponterotto, J.G. (2006) Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept thick description, *The Qualitative Report*, 11(3): 538-49.

Popper, K. (1959) *The logic of scientific discovery*. London: Routledge.

Potter, J. (1996) *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: Sage.

Reavey, P. (Ed.). (2011) *Visual methods in psychology: Using and interpreting image in qualitative research*. Hove, UK: Psychology Press.

Reichertz, J. (2014) Abduction, deduction and induction in qualitative research, IN: Flick, U. (ed) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.

Robinson, O. (2014) Re-examining the epistemological foundations of quantitative psychology: Pluralism, not positivism, *QMiP Bulletin*, 17, Spring, pp.5-9.

Schmidt, L.K. (2006) *Understanding hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen.

Shaw, R. L. (2012) Identifying and synthesizing qualitative literature, in D. Harper and A.R. Thomson (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy*. Chichester: Wiley.

Shelgrove, S. and Liossi, C. (2013) Living with chronic back pain: a metasynthesis of qualitative research, *Chronic Illness*, 9(4): 283-301.

Smith, J.A. (ed) (2015) *Qualitative psychology. A practical guide to research methods*. London: Sage.

Stake, R.E. (1995) *The art of case study research*. London: Sage.

Stanley, P. (2015) Writing the PhD journeys: An autoethnography of zine-writing, angst, embodiment, and backpacker travels, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,* 44(2): 143-168.

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis. Theory, method and research*. London: Sage.

Stangor, C. (2015) *Research methods for the behavioral sciences*. 3rd ed. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Thorne, S.E. (2015) Qualitative metasynthesis: A technical exercise or a source of new knowledge *?, Psycho-Oncology*, 24: 1347-8.

Weathington, B.L., Cunningham, C.J.L., & Pittenger, D.P. (2010) *Research Methods for the Behavioral and Social Sciences*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Williams, E.N. and Morrow, S.L. (2009) Achieving trustworthiness in qualitative research: a pan-paradigmatic perspective, *Psychotherapy Research*, 19 (4/5): 576-82.

Willig, C. (2012a). Perspectives on the epistemological bases for qualitative research. In H. Cooper, Camic, P., Long, D., Panter, A., Rindskof, D. and Sher, K., (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Vol 1. Foundations, planning, measures, and psychometrics* (pp. 1-17). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Willig, C. (2012b) *Qualitative interpretation and analysis in psychology*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/Open University Press

Willig, C. (2016) Constructivism and 'the real world': Can they co-exist ?, *QMiP Bulletin*, Issue 21, Spring 2016, pp.33-38.

Willig, C. & Wirth, L. (2018) A metasynthesis of studies of the experience of living with terminal cancer, *Health Psychology*, 37 (3): 228-237.

Yin, R.K. (1994) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. London: Sage.