

The theoretical underpinnings of qualitative paradigms

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Qualitative methods were not systematically recognised, used and accepted within psychological research until the late twentieth century (Henwood & Nicholson, 1995). Before this time, psychological research was typically studied through positivism and the scientific method which resulted in using quantitative methods (Breen & Darlaston-Jones, 2010). The positivist view is that ideas and views worthy of scientific study are ones that can be measured and observed (Aliyu et al, 2014). However, it can be argued that for psychological research on human experience, cannot be summarised by mathematically expressed laws (Coolican, 2017).

Therefore, qualitative methods are seen as an alternative approach as they are defined as naturalistic and interpretative with the main focus point being on exploring from within (Flick, 2009) compared to quantitative which builds upon a hypothesis therefore exploring the outside. Overall, qualitative research is an umbrella term which is constantly changing, as many researchers use a multitude of interconnected methods including; verbal, pictorial and thematic analysis, in order to gain further knowledge on the topic being studied (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, due to the ever-changing opinions on the appropriate methods in relation to psychological research, this essay will evaluate the notions underpinning qualitative research. To start, qualitative paradigms offer idiographic understandings of the participant (Bryman, 1988) which facilitates understanding within a bio-psycho-social stance which is useful within all elements of psychological research (Boyle, 1991). One specific qualitative method developed to allow rigorous idiographic subjective experiences and social cognitions is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al, 2009). The main

foci of IPA are to gain an outcome which includes giving a voice to the participant as well as making sense and interpreting the material (Larkin et al, 2006) which is why IPA has become rooted in psychological research.

A study conducted by Connerty et al (2016) used semi-structured in depth face-to-face interviews of eight women who had been discharged from a mother-baby unit after requiring hospitalisation for severe postnatal mental illnesses. The data was analysed using IPA to determine the lived experiences of life following discharge and the support from the community they resided in and the meaning of these experiences. Through the use of interviews and IPA, the main theme characterising the accounts of being discharged and returning home was one linked to challenge and struggle with the transition. By using this qualitative method, it allowed the researchers to examine a subjective meaning of the experiences of the participants view of the world around them which was reflective of their struggle with postnatal mental illness.

Further to this IPA, for the use of psychological research, is valuable as it supports the development of interpretations based upon perceptions which cannot be reduced to numerical form as found with quantitative methods (Smith, 2004). However, this form of qualitative method relies on the validity of language and assumes that language is a crucial tool to access and view that experience (Willig, 2008). Therefore, it can be argued that IPA may not be adequate for all populations, especially those who have difficulty accessing words which would have an effect on interpreting the meaning of the language used by the participant (Beail & Williams, 2014). Further to

this, in a review on the use of IPA conducted by Hefferon & Gill Rodriguez (2011) it has been found that especially amongst students, that there is a lack of confidence in the levels of interpretation within this analysis resulting in IPA that lacks in depth. From this it can be argued that, although IPA can be used as qualitative method that is useful within psychological research, adequate training is crucial in order to gain the best results. Additionally, although IPA usually consists of a small sample, literature states that it is purposeful as it provides an adequate perspective to the given context (Smith & Osborn, 2007). With regards to this, IPA differs from other qualitative methods, such as Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as it aims to illuminate and further explore particular research questions with selected participants. Therefore, studies which use IPA are deeply concerned with examining experiences in smaller samples rather than in the broader population (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

With this in mind, another use is that qualitative methods provide an inductive approach to psychological research, in which theory is generated by the data as opposed to fitting data into an already established hypothesis that is seen in quantitative methods. One specific qualitative method which is frequently referred to when using an inductive approach is Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This technique as aforementioned is useful when existing theories are inadequate and there is a need for the explanation of a particular process. Regarding the construct of Grounded Theory, a 'hands-on guide' was produced by Strauss and Corbin (1990) in order to provide advice on ways to recognise certain kinds of patterns

throughout the data. However, this was criticised by Glaser (1992) in that by providing advice causes certain limitations to the way in which data was analysed. However, this has in the recent decade been found to be a useful guide, especially for students and psychological research as it has been found to encourage confidence in interviewing and aids in avoiding leading questions (Smith, 2008).

An example of a study using Grounded Theory is one conducted by Dobinson et al (2016) which investigated the psychosexual unmet needs of adolescent and young adult cancer survivors. As the pre-existing theories largely ignored adolescent and young adults and focusses on older adult survivors, it was appropriate to use Grounded Theory in order to generate a new theory specific to this age group. The research conducted on eleven participants found that the core theme which emerged from the results was identity conflict and this notion shaped the individual's psychosexual needs. These results concluded that in comparison to previous literature, that identity conflict is unique to adolescents and young adult cancer survivors due to the interruption of normative development (Kent et al, 2012). Therefore, a new Pathways to Problems model was able to be derived for this specific group from using Grounded Theory's inductive approach. Without using the semi-structured interviews with these participants, this theoretical model would have been difficult otherwise to attain. However, Dobinson et al (2016) state that there were difficulties with recruitment of participants, therefore the depth of the data does not reflect the depth of the concept of understanding the psychosexual needs of these individuals. Although, the sample size was

sufficient for theoretical saturation which in turn minimises the interviewer effects. Regarding the term, saturation, this is defined as the point in which when analysing qualitative data, there are no new codes emerging, with mounting instances of the same code therefore, no need to continue collecting data is needed (Urquhart, 2013).

Although saturation applies to many types of qualitative data (Lipworth et al, 2013), its origins lie within Grounded Theory which is why it is appropriate to mention this critique during this point. Throughout a review on the usefulness of saturation (Saunders et al, 2017), it was found that within inductive approaches and more specifically Grounded Theory, saturation is an outcome of the adequate sampling in relation to the development of a theory. However, there are many distinct approaches to saturation and that when applying it to other qualitative methods, such as IPA, it is important that saturation should be considered as a degree dependant on the research in hand rather than something which is attained or unattained (Nelson, 2017). However, as stated in the previous study by Dobinson et al (2016), by using rigour it is possible to attain saturation therefore reducing the researcher effects upon the theory generated. Further to this saturation has been found to not be useful for some forms of qualitative methods such as those based upon narrative analysis (Marshall & Long, 2010).

However, narrative analysis and more specifically discourse analysis is useful for psychological research as it takes on a constructionist position, therefore arguing that language can create the ideas in our head (Madill et al, 2000).

This use of having a constructive viewpoint, avoids a reductionist

generalisation which in turn allows the qualitative method to find variability which would not have been adequately covered using quantitative research (Pekrun et al, 2002). However, a constructivist view point asserts that there is nothing other than discourse that is important and idealises this meaning over other viewpoints (Reed, 2000).

Overall, discourse analysis has been found to be useful within psychotherapy and aids reflection of the session for the therapist. For example, Ayashiro (2016) conducted a discourse analysis of a Japanese client's therapy session in order to examine how dominant discourses are reproduced throughout therapy. Data was transcribed from a therapy session with the client and analysed using discourse analysis. It has been previously found that dominant discourses have the power to overrule other discourses due to them allowing individuals to judge themselves against social norms without noticing the power of the discourse themselves (White, 2011a). From the discourse analysis, the results showed that dominant discourses were mainly found within the therapist's utterances and that by reproducing these discourses forced the client to trivialize in his own suffering. Therefore, the results support that there are abuses of power within therapeutic relationships (White, 2011b), which would not have been found without the use of qualitative methods.

Further to this, discourse analysis is useful as it contributes to the psychotherapists reflexivity as it allows the therapist to understand how dominant discourse works within psychotherapy sessions (Avdi & Georgaca, 2007). Therefore, regarding psychological research, discourse analysis can

be a useful tool in the development in psychological therapies. However, this study is based on an individual case study which cannot be generalised to the greater population and this is one of the largest criticisms found not just within discourse analysis but much of qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015).

To conclude, this essay has shown that the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative paradigms such as; IPA, Grounded Theory and discourse analysis, allow for exploration of areas where little is already known and detailed descriptions of human experiences which is not possible to achieve in such thick detail through quantitative research (Granheim & Lundman, 2004). In order to explore potential misunderstood or not well known phenomena, the theoretical frameworks which surround qualitative methods is rooted within the data with the emergence of new theories and descriptions being able to breathe life through these methods. Additionally, qualitative methods emphasise greatly on the context of what is being studied (Attride-Stirling, 2001) which derives from the notion that there is no correct single version of reality or experience within human behaviour (Patton, 1990). The use of qualitative methods allows for flexible approaches, resulting in the chance for psychological research to evolve with the process and changing theories rather than being set and rigid like that of quantitative methods (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

Further to this, compared to quantitative research, a common theme within qualitative methods is that by However, it must be recognised that although there has been a significant increase within the use of qualitative methods

since the late twentieth century across various psychological specialities (Harper & Thompson, 2012), there are still limitations surrounding the research. Due to qualitative methods using small sample sizes, there cannot be generalisation of results to broad populations which would suggest that it would not be possible to use qualitative methods for all psychological research. In addition to this, even with the adequate training, the researcher's role has an impact upon the analysis of the data due to many qualitative methods using codes and themes in order to derive findings. However, through training, these researcher effects can be reduced significantly as conducting qualitative research requires great skill. Although when reflecting on the content of this essay, qualitative methods hold a great deal of use within psychological research as it allows the researcher to gain depth and scope into human experience that quantitative methods cannot retrieve.