INTRODUCING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY

Carla Willig / Third Edition

Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology

Third edition

Carla Willig

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"All students of qualitative research in psychology will find a wealth of information in Carla Willig's book. With its expanded sections and detailed consideration of concepts, techniques and applications of qualitative research, the interactive approach taken in this book is ably supported by extensive research examples. As usual with Carla Willig's clear and detailed writing style, this book will give both new and existing researchers the opportunity to think clearly about their use of qualitative research and its methods."

Dr Nollaig Frost, Senior Lecturer, Psychology, Middlesex University, UK

"A tour de force from an expert guide which grounds students in the lexicon of qualitative psychology, before explicating a range of major methodologies. Students will appreciate many worked examples, and will be stimulated by the coverage of contemporary innovations, issues and debates – an invaluable textbook."

Professor Brendan Gough, Institute of Health and Wellbeing, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

"In just over a decade, Carla Willig's book has become one of the key introductory texts in the field. Many of my students and supervisees have enjoyed reading it – finding complex issues and debates have been explained in an accessible manner. This latest edition includes helpful advice on writing a research proposal, some newer research methods and discussion about the future of qualitative research. In addition, there are new chapters on epistemology and interpretation which I think my students will find particularly

valuable as these are often the most challenging topics when one is new to qualitative research."

Dr David Harper, Reader in Clinical Psychology, University of East London, UK

"Once again, Carla Willig has produced a wonderfully clear account of how and why qualitative methods ought be used to answer psychological questions. Not only does Willig examine key theories, ethics and debates surrounding the use and interpretation of qualitative data, she shows us 'how' to do it – step by step, with a tremendous sense of balance and integrity. This new edition covers some of the more recent debates in qualitative research, contains new examples of how to design, carry out and approach analysis in qualitative methods and lots of useful questions that researchers ask themselves along the way. My students have used Willig's writings on qualitative methods for many years as they can understand and engage with it. There is simply no other equivalent text in psychology to rival Willig's – her clarity, conviction and sheer brilliance in putting difficult ideas on methods into plain language is something students in psychology will relish for a very long time to come."

Paula Reavey, Professor of Psychology, London South Bank University, UK

"In writing this text originally, Carla Willig argued that, unlike quantitative research (where the aim is to follow a set of rules and get them 'right'), qualitative research is more about 'having adventures'. From the start it sounds a lot more fun, and certainly a lot more interesting! And it was – students and lecturers alike appreciate its lively, practical

approach, its very clear and elegant writing, its use of clever examples of students' own work and its lucid explanations of the theory underpinning methods and methodologies. This new, third edition is a real triumph. It's more comprehensive and it's bang up to date. It has three additional new chapters, more examples of student projects, and overall an even more systematic approach. It is, in my view, the most approachable and person-friendly text around introducing qualitative research in psychology, and a great opportunity to 'boldly go', have adventures, and really get to grips with doing qualitative research."

Wendy Stainton Rogers, Professor Emerita, Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University, UK

Brief Table of Contents

Detailed table of contents

About the author

Acknowledgements

Part 1: Conceptual preparation

1 From recipes to adventures

2 Epistemological bases for qualitative research

3 Qualitative research design and data collection

4 The role of interpretation

5 Putting together a research proposal

Part 2: Doing research

6 Thematic analysis

7 Grounded theory methodology

8 Phenomenological methods

9 Case studies

10 Discursive psychology

11 Foucauldian discourse analysis

12 Narrative psychology

Joanna Silver

13 Visual methods

Joanna Silver

Part 3: Reflections and conclusions

14 Quality in qualitative research

15 Review and conclusions: where next for qualitative psychology?

Appendix 1: What influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs?

Sarah Dryden

Appendix 2: The experience of body dysmorphic disorder

Joanna Silver

Appendix 3: Constructing self-harm at the turn of the twenty-first century

Caroline Silcock

References

Index

Detailed table of contents

About the author

Acknowledgements

Part 1: Conceptual preparation

1 From recipes to adventures

Learning objectives

How, and what, can we know?

Positivism

Empiricism

Hypothetico-deductivism

Critique of the ‘scientific method’

Hypothetico-deductivism does not provide sufficient space for theory development

Hypothetico-deductivism is elitist

Hypothetico-deductivism is a myth

Feminist critique of established epistemologies

The male as the norm

The God trick

Social constructionism

Epistemology and methodology

Qualitative research

Shared concerns: ‘qualitative methodology’

‘Little q’ and ‘big Q’

Epistemological differences: ‘qualitative methodologies’

Overview of the book

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?

How does the methodology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Discussion questions

Further reading

2 Epistemological bases for qualitative research

Learning objectives

Three approaches to knowledge production

Realist approach

Phenomenological approach

Social constructionist approach

Methodological pluralism

Choosing the 'right' approach

Conclusion

Discussion questions

Further reading

3 Qualitative research design and data collection

Learning objectives

General principles of qualitative research design

Reflexivity

Ethics

The research question

Choosing the right method

Semi-structured interviewing

General characteristics of semi-structured interviewing

The interview agenda

Recording and transcription of the interview

Participant observation

Diaries

Focus groups

Using the internet in qualitative data collection

The role of the research participant

Conclusion

Discussion questions

Further reading

4 The role of interpretation

Learning objectives

What is interpretation?

Approaches to interpretation

Realist reading of the data

Phenomenological reading of the data

Social constructionist reading of the data

‘Suspicious’ interpretation

‘Empathic’ interpretation

The relationship between ‘suspicious’ and ‘empathic’ interpretations

Types of interpretation and approaches to knowledge generation

The ethics of interpretation

Conclusion

Discussion questions

Further reading

5 Putting together a research proposal

Learning objectives

Why do we need a research proposal?

The research question

Literature review

Research design and strategy

Epistemological position

Recruitment

Data collection and analysis

Ethical considerations

Reflexivity

Resources and materials

Dissemination

Conclusion

Discussion questions

Further reading

Part 2: Doing research

6 Thematic analysis

Learning objectives

What is a ‘theme?’

Suitable research questions for thematic analysis

Approaches to thematic analysis

How to carry out a thematic analysis

What do I want to know?

What type of data do I need to collect?

How do I code my data?

How do I interpret the themes?

What can I conclude from my analysis?

An example of a thematic analysis

Limitations of thematic analysis

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does thematic analysis aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does thematic analysis make about the world?

How does thematic analysis conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 6.1: Does thematic analysis constitute a qualitative research method in its own right?

7 Grounded theory methodology

Learning objectives

Basic principles of grounded theory

Categories

Coding

Constant comparative analysis

Negative case analysis

Theoretical sensitivity

Theoretical sampling

Theoretical saturation

Memo-writing

Research process

The research question

Data collection

Data analysis

The research report

An example of grounded theory

Versions of grounded theory

The role of induction in grounded theory

Discovery versus construction

A focus on social processes versus individual experience

Limitations of grounded theory as a method for psychological research

The problem of induction, or ‘What grounds grounded theory?’

Suitability for psychological research

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does grounded theory aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does grounded theory make about the world?

How does grounded theory conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 7.1: Grounded theory or full conceptual description? The debate between Glaser and Strauss

8 Phenomenological methods

Learning objectives

Phenomenology

The phenomenological method

Phenomenology and psychology

Descriptive phenomenology

Interpretative phenomenology

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Doing IPA

Analysis of an individual case

Worked example

Integration of cases

Interpretation

Writing up

An example of IPA

Limitations of IPA

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does IPA aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does IPA make about the world?

How does IPA conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 8.1: What's new? The relationship between IPA and grounded theory

9 Case studies

Learning objectives

Research methods for psychological case studies

Twenty Statements Test

Repertory grids

Types of design for case study research

Intrinsic versus instrumental case studies

Single- versus multiple-case studies

Descriptive versus explanatory case studies

Naturalist versus pragmatic case studies

Procedural issues

Selection of cases

Selection of methods of data collection and analysis

The role of theory

Writing up

Ethics

An example of case study research

Recent developments

Limitations of case study research

Epistemological difficulties

Ethical difficulties

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge do case studies aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does case study research make about the world?

How does case study research conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 9.1: Extrapolation or generalizability?

10 Discursive psychology

Learning objectives

The ‘turn to language’

Discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis

Discursive psychology

Data collection

How to do discourse analysis

Procedural guidelines for the analysis of discourse

An example of discourse analysis

Limitations of discursive psychology

Limitations in focus

Inherent limitations

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does discursive psychology aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does discursive psychology make about the world?

How does discursive psychology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 10.1: One method or two?

11 Foucauldian discourse analysis

Learning objectives

Selecting texts for analysis

Procedural guidelines for the analysis of discourse

Stage 1: Discursive constructions

Stage 2: Discourses

Stage 3: Action orientation

Stage 4: Positionings

Stage 5: Practice

Stage 6: Subjectivity

An illustration of the application of the six stages to an interview extract

Stage 1: Discursive constructions

Stage 2: Discourses

Stage 3: Action orientation

Stage 4: Positionings

Stage 5: Practice

Stage 6: Subjectivity

Limitations of FDA

Can subjectivity be theorized on the basis of discourse alone?

What is the relationship between discourse and material reality?

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does FDA aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does FDA make about the world?

How does FDA conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Key differences between discursive psychology and FDA

Research questions

Agency

Experience

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 11.1: What, if anything, exists outside of discourse?

12 Narrative psychology

Learning objectives

What are narratives?

What are the functions of narratives?

How to conduct a narrative analysis

An example of a narrative analysis

Narrative psychology and memory work

‘Saying sorry’: an example of data analysis in memory work

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does narrative psychology aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions does narrative psychology make about the world?

How does narrative psychology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 12.1: Can a coherent story be told about the use of narrative psychology? A review of tensions and differences

13 Visual methods

Learning objectives

Working with photographs

Working with films

Working with drawings and paintings

How do we analyse the visual?

The relationship between visual and qualitative methods of analysis

Ethical considerations

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge do visual methods aim to produce?

What kinds of assumptions do visual methods make about the world?

How do visual methods conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Conclusion

Interactive exercises

Further reading

Snapshot Box 13.1: What is the ‘status’ of images in visual research?

Part 3: Reflections and conclusions

14 Quality in qualitative research

Learning objectives

What constitutes ‘good’ qualitative research?

Epistemology and evaluation

Evaluation of the methods introduced in this book

Some caveats

Conclusion

Discussion questions

Further reading

15 Review and conclusions: where next for qualitative psychology?

Learning objectives

The critique of ‘methodolatry’

Pluralism and integration

What makes research ‘research’?

Where next for qualitative psychology?

A word about technology

Conclusion

Discussion questions

Further reading

Appendix 1: What influences a person’s decision to want to stop using drugs? A grounded theory study exploring the experiences of heroin users

Appendix 2: The experience of body dysmorphic disorder: an interpretative phenomenological analysis and photo elicitation study

Appendix 3: Constructing self-harm at the turn of the twenty-first century: a Foucauldian discourse analysis

References

Index

About the Author

Carla Willig is professor of psychology at City University London. Her publications are concerned with the theory and practice of qualitative research methodology. She is the author of *Qualitative Interpretation and Analysis in Psychology* and co-editor of the *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*.

Chapter Contributors

Sarah Dryden is a health psychologist employed at Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, working in both a research and clinical capacity. Her research interests include service users' experiences of their drug and alcohol use and she has undertaken a variety of NHS and community-based applied research projects.

Caroline Silcock is a psychologist working within women's health at University College London Hospitals NHS Trust and

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Joanna Silver is a counselling psychologist. She specializes in working with adults and children suffering from body image concerns including body dysmorphic disorder and eating disorders. Joanna has an interest in qualitative research methods and lectures on this topic to psychology undergraduates at City University, London.

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Since the publication of the first edition in 2001, I gained further knowledge and experience in the use of phenomenological methods thanks to undertaking training in existential counselling psychology at Regent's College, London. I would like to thank staff at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling at Regent's College and in particular Ernesto Spinelli and Harriet Goldenberg for

providing guidance and inspiration. The second edition of this book (published in 2008) provided me with an opportunity to incorporate some of these new perspectives. Since life does not stop until it stops, as one of my clients puts it, I have continued to learn more about qualitative research, particularly through supervising trainees on the doctoral programme in counselling psychology at City University London. I am immensely grateful to my students whose commitment and enthusiasm for qualitative research within the context of an extremely demanding training programme have been inspirational. Special thanks go to Joanna Silver who contributed two chapters as well as Appendix 2 of this book, and Sarah Dryden and Caroline Silcock who contributed Appendices 1 and 3, respectively. Their contributions are much appreciated.

This third edition is influenced by my work with trainees and practitioners as well as my own therapeutic practice. It includes wider coverage of conceptual issues, and epistemological and theoretical challenges in qualitative research, as well as three additional methods chapters (on thematic analysis, narrative and visual methodologies). As well as reflecting my own development as a qualitative psychologist, this edition also demonstrates how qualitative psychology has grown and evolved over the years.

Part 1

Conceptual preparation

Part contents

1 From recipes to adventures

2 Epistemological bases for qualitative research

3 Qualitative research design and data collection

4 The role of interpretation

5 Putting together a research proposal

Chapter 1

From recipes to adventures

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the aims and defining features of qualitative research
- what differentiates qualitative research from quantitative research
- some key concepts from the philosophy of science and their relevance to qualitative research
- what it means to ask epistemological questions

'It involves opening up to new and possibly unsettling experiences.'

'It means venturing into new territory.'

'It's discovering something new and exciting; there's a little bit of danger.'

'It is exciting and unusual, out of the ordinary. There's a big element of enjoyment and there may be an element of challenge. It's something that will develop me as a person.'

'Enid Blyton stories . . . [laughs] . . . It's exciting, possibly involving a degree of risk to oneself; scary on occasion but it comes out all right at the end. You're glad you've had them.'

'An exploration involving new places, meeting new people and having new experiences outside of the norm. These could be both positive and negative in nature.'

'Adventures are sudden, surprise events which are pleasurable, because they are unexpected.'

Talk of an 'adventure' captures the imagination. We want to know what it was like, how it felt, what happened next. We look upon the adventurer as someone who has been changed by the experience, someone who will never be quite the same again. The definitions above were provided in response to my question, 'What does the term "adventure" mean to you?' Most of them include references to something 'new' and as yet unknown, something we have not experienced before. At the same time, the 'adventure'
is perceived as a positive, if somewhat risky, enterprise. I suggest that we should think about the research process as a form of adventure. When I was an undergraduate student, I thought of 'research methods' as recipes. Research appeared to involve choosing the right ingredients (a representative sample, a standardized measurement instrument, the

appropriate statistical test) and administering them in the right order (the 'procedure'). Having done our best to 'get it right', we would hold our breath, hoping that the experiment had 'worked' – much like hovering about the kitchen, waiting for the perfect roast to emerge from the oven. Now I look upon research in a different light. 'Research methods' have become ways of approaching a question. They are also ways of justifying an answer (this is where research methods meet *epistemology*, to be discussed below). Either way, my understanding of research has moved from a mechanical (how-to-apply-appropriate-techniques-to-the-subject-matter) to a creative (how-can-I-find-out?) mode. In the process, I have replaced the metaphor of research-methods-as-recipes with a view of the research-process-as-adventure.

In this chapter, I want to explore in some detail what 'research' is all about and how qualitative research methods in psychology fit into this picture. To do this, I need to introduce some key concepts from the philosophy of science, such as 'epistemology', 'positivism', 'empiricism' and 'hypothetico-deductivism'. In the process, I shall problematize familiar concepts such as 'science' and 'knowledge'. The aim of the chapter is to provide a context within which to place qualitative research methods in psychology and to identify the defining features of such research.

How, and what, can we know?

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. It attempts to provide answers to the question, 'How, and what, can we know?' This involves thinking about the nature of knowledge itself, about its scope

and about the validity and reliability of claims to knowledge. Research methods provide ways of approaching, and hopefully answering, our research questions. Research methods can be described as 'the way to the goal' (Kvale 1996a: 278). However, first we need to identify our goal and be able to justify our choice. We need to be clear about the objectives of our research and we need to have a sense of what kinds of things it is possible for us to find out. In other words, we need to adopt an epistemological position.

Positivism

One epistemological position is *positivism*. Positivism suggests that there is a straightforward relationship between the world (objects, events, phenomena) and our perception, and understanding, of it. Positivists believe that it is possible to describe what is 'out there' and to get it right. Such a position is also referred to as the 'correspondence theory of truth' because it suggests that phenomena directly determine our perception of them and that there is, therefore, a direct correspondence between things and their representation. Kirk and Miller's (1986: 14) definition of positivism emphasizes positivism's assumption that 'the external world itself determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing'. A positivist epistemology implies that the goal of research is to produce objective knowledge; that is, understanding that is impartial and unbiased, based on a view from 'the outside', without personal involvement or vested interests on the part of the researcher.

Positivism has a long history and few, if any, scientists and researchers today claim to be unreconstructed positivists. In

fact, when the label is used in contemporary epistemological debates, it usually constitutes an insult. This is because it is now generally accepted that observation and description are necessarily selective, and that our perception and understanding of the world are therefore partial at best (for a clear discussion of the nature and limitations of scientific knowledge, see Chalmers 1999). What people disagree about is the extent to which our understanding of the world can *approach* objective knowledge, or even some kind of truth, about the world. The different responses to this question range from naïve realism, which is akin to positivism, to extreme relativism, which rejects concepts such as 'truth' or 'knowledge' altogether. In between, we find positions such as critical realism and the different versions of social constructionism (see Parker 1998).

Empiricism

Empiricism is closely related to positivism. It is based on the assumption that our knowledge of the world must be derived from 'the facts of experience' (see Chalmers 1999: Chapter 1). In other words, sense perception provides the basis for knowledge acquisition, which proceeds through the systematic collection and classification of observations. These include experiments. According to this view, simple observations are combined to give rise to more complex ideas, and theory follows from observations. That is to say, theory is constructed to make sense of the data collected through observation. Again, few, if any, scientists and researchers subscribe to a pure form of empiricism nowadays. It is generally accepted that sense perception does not provide direct and uncontaminated access to 'the facts'. The more we know about a phenomenon, the more detail we perceive when

we observe it. Perception is inevitably selective and people can be trained to observe the same phenomenon in different ways, depending on the purpose of the observation. However, modern-day empiricists would argue that knowledge acquisition depends on the collection and analysis of data. They do not believe that purely theoretical work can move us closer to the truth, and they propose that all knowledge claims must be grounded in data. At this point, it is important to differentiate between the terms 'empiricist' and 'empirical'. While 'empiricist' refers to the attitude that all knowledge claims must be grounded in data, 'empirical' is a descriptive term referring to research involving the collection and analysis of data.

Hypothetico-deductivism

A number of serious practical as well as logical limitations of positivism and empiricism led to the development of alternative theories of knowledge. Karl Popper's critique of *inductivism* and subsequent formulation of *hypothetico-deductivism* constitute the most influential alternative. It now forms the basis of mainstream experimental psychology. Popper was aware of the fact that a collection of observations could never give rise to a categorical statement such as 'a follows b'. However many times we observe that a follows b, we can never be sure that our next observation will be the same again. There is always the possibility that the next occurrence will be an exception. This is the problem of *induction*. Popper was also unhappy about the fact that many influential theories appeared to be able to accommodate a wide range of observations, interpreting them as confirmation of the theory's claims. It seemed that no scientific theory could ever be conclusively

verified. This is the problem of *verification*. To circumvent these problems, Popper proposed that instead of induction and verification, scientific research ought to rely upon *deduction* and *falsification*. Popper's *hypothetico-deductive method* does just that. Here, theories are tested by deriving *hypotheses* from them that can then be tested in practice, by experiment or observation. The aim of the research is to put a theory's claims to the test to either reject the theory or retain it for the time being. Thus, rather than looking for evidence that *confirms* a theory's claims, hypothetico-deductivism works by looking for disconfirmation, or *falsification*. In this way, we can find out which claims are *not* true and, by a process of elimination of claims, we move closer to the truth.

Critique of the 'scientific method'

Popper provided science with a method that avoided the problems associated with induction and verification. However, Popper's hypothetico-deductivism, in turn, was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s for failing to acknowledge the role of historical, social and cultural factors in knowledge formation. The critique of hypothetico-deductivism includes the following charges:

Hypothetico-deductivism does not provide sufficient space for theory development

Here, it is argued that the method's reliance on hypotheses generated by existing theories forecloses the possibility of generating completely new theories. If all we can do is test existing theories to either reject or retain them, we are unlikely to come across entirely new and unexpected insights in our research practice. To be fair, Popper (1969: 231) did

propose that researchers should be adventurous and test 'bold conjecture(s)', since most is learned from mistakes; however, even the boldest hypotheses are based upon existing knowledge and expectations. What hypothetico-deductivism does not allow for is that the evidence overturns received wisdom and makes us see things in a completely different light.

Hypothetico-deductivism is elitist

Since hypothetico-deductivism works with existing theories and relies upon deduction from existing systems of thought, it excludes those people who are not familiar with such theories and systems from its practice. The hypothetico-deductive method encourages the formation of communities of scientists and researchers who test their own and each other's theories. For the outsider or novice, it is difficult, if not impossible, to contribute to knowledge generation, if knowledge is defined as the rejection or retention of existing theories.

Hypothetico-deductivism is a myth

Popper proposed that knowledge generation should be a piecemeal process. Through the rejection of false hypotheses, knowledge would grow, slowly but continuously. Individual scientists contribute to this process by testing their hypotheses to identify those theories that could be discarded. Thomas Kuhn ([1962] 1970) fundamentally disagreed. He argued that, in reality, theories are not really put to the test in this way. While scientists were attached to a particular theory, they did not reject it on the basis of experimental evidence. Instead, if the evidence did not support the theory, they assumed that the experiment had gone wrong in some way. Thus, failure was

attributed to the scientist and the design of the experiment rather than to the inadequacy of the theory. Kuhn argued that science did not progress in an evolutionary, piecemeal fashion, as Popper had suggested, but that it developed in leaps, through scientific revolutions leading to *paradigm shifts*. Here, a paradigm – a particular conceptual framework – is stretched to accommodate all kinds of evidence. Anomalies and inconsistencies accumulate until wider socioeconomic and historical processes allow a new paradigm to emerge and to provide a legitimate alternative to the previous one. Once the new paradigm has gained the upper hand, it in turn will resist change for some time to come.

Feminist critique of established epistemologies

Many of the problems and limitations associated with the established epistemological perspectives outlined above were identified by feminist scholars. In the 1960s and 1970s, they drew attention to the fact that women had been largely invisible in social scientific work and that where women had been 'studied', they had been found to be inferior to men in terms of attributes such as moral development, intelligence and conversational style. Such 'findings', feminists argued, were then used to justify and perpetuate existing inequalities between men and women in society. To challenge these inequalities and to end the oppression of women, feminist scholars questioned the epistemological (and methodological) foundations upon which sexist knowledge claims rested. This gave rise to an extensive critique of 'male science'. This critique includes the following key arguments.

The male as the norm

The vast majority of studies using human participants were carried out with male subjects. This was partly due to opportunity (most researchers used university undergraduates as easy-access subjects and most of these were men) and partly due to the assumption that men constitute the prototypical 'human subject'. As a result, findings based upon studies with (young, white, middle-class) male subjects were generalized to the population as a whole. In other words (young, white, middle-class), men set the standard against which other members of society were then measured. This meant that when women were later used as participants, their performance and behaviour were assessed against the male norm and found to be wanting. One of the most well-known critiques of the 'male as norm' approach in relation to moral development was formulated by Carol Gilligan (1982). Gilligan challenged Kohlberg's (1976) claim that, on average, women's moral development was less advanced than that of men. Kohlberg's claim was supported by many studies that had used his moral development scale. This scale places individuals somewhere between Level 1 (lowest) and Level 3 (highest) of moral development. The levels, and stages in between, represent a transition from basic moral considerations (e.g. in terms of the outcome for the individual) through those based on external approval to those involving personal conscience. The scale had been developed by presenting male subjects with a series of hypothetical moral dilemmas and by categorizing their responses. Gilligan argued that men and women were socialized to develop different moral orientations, whereby girls were encouraged to develop a care orientation and boys were encouraged to develop a justice orientation. Kohlberg's scale was based upon a justice orientation and was therefore bound to favour male participants. Gilligan conducted research that identified

alternative patterns of moral reasoning used by female participants who faced a real-life moral dilemma (abortion). She argued that the women's moral considerations based around non-violence within a care orientation were just as advanced as Kohlberg's Level 3 (personal conscience). They were merely different.

The God trick

'Male science' claimed to be, or at least aimed to be, 'objective'. This meant that researchers had to remain detached from and impartial towards their subject matter. Various procedures were developed to ensure that data collection and analysis were not 'contaminated' by the researcher. These included standardized instructions for subjects, minimization of contact between researcher and participants, blind or double-blind procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as various attempts to 'neutralize' the research environment (e.g. by removing any personal items from the laboratory or by having the researchers wear white coats). Feminist critics argued that the attempt to be 'objective' and the strategies adopted towards this aim did, in fact, serve to obscure the fact that the researcher's identity and standpoint do fundamentally shape the research process and the findings. They argued that it is impossible for a researcher to position themselves 'outside of' the subject matter because the researcher will inevitably have a relationship with, or be implicated in, the phenomenon that he or she is studying. Donna Haraway (1988) refers to attempts to pretend otherwise as the 'God's eye view'. The alternative to the 'God's eye view' is for researchers to reflect upon their own standpoint in relation to the phenomenon they are studying and to attempt to identify the ways in which such

a standpoint has shaped the research process and findings. This notion of *reflexivity* will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and will be returned to throughout this book.

Even though there can be said to be a general feminist critique of established epistemologies and 'male science', there is no one feminist epistemology or even methodology. Feminist scholars have responded in different ways to the problems and limitations associated with positivism, empiricism and hypothetico-deductivism. Among the various alternative approaches developed by feminist social scientists and philosophers are standpoint epistemology (e.g. Harding 1991), ethnomethodology (e.g. Stanley and Wise 1983) and various versions of feminist post-structuralism (e.g. Henriques et al. 1984; Haraway 1991).

Social constructionism

In recent years, *social constructionism* has become an increasingly influential approach (see Burr 2003). Social constructionism draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically. That is, what we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions. This does not mean that we can never really know anything; rather, it suggests that there are 'knowledges' rather than 'knowledge'. Language is an important aspect of socially constructed knowledge. The same phenomenon or event can be described in different ways, giving rise to different ways of perceiving and understanding it, yet neither way of describing it is necessarily wrong. An obvious example of this is the choice between describing a glass of

water as 'half-full' or 'half-empty'; both descriptions are equally accurate, yet one of them provides a positive, optimistic gloss on the situation ('half-full'), whereas the other emphasizes absence and a lack ('half-empty').

Research from a social constructionist perspective is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality that are available in a culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice. Social constructionist researchers in psychology, for instance, have critically examined psychological categories such as 'emotion' (e.g. Harré 1986), 'prejudice' (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987) and 'psychopathology' (e.g. Parker et al. 1995) to show how they provide a way of constructing reality rather than simply reflecting it.

Epistemology and methodology

What is the relationship between epistemology and methodology? To what extent does the epistemological position we adopt prescribe which research methods we ought to use? To address these questions, we first need to differentiate between 'method' and 'methodology'. Although often used interchangeably, the two terms do, in fact, refer to different aspects of doing research. Silverman (1993: 1) suggests that 'methodology' identifies 'a general approach to studying research topics', whereas 'method' refers to 'a specific research technique'. (A further distinction can then be made between methods of data collection and methods of data analysis; see Chapters 2 and 3.) It is helpful to differentiate between 'a general approach to studying research topics' and 'specific research techniques' because the former is much

more directly informed by the researcher's epistemological position than the latter. For example, a researcher who takes a predominantly empiricist view of knowledge acquisition will approach research topics through the collection of data rather than through theoretical formulations. However, exactly *how* such data are collected (e.g. through observation, questionnaires, interviews) is another question, and it is not something that the researcher's empiricist epistemological position prescribes. Hypothetico-deductivism constitutes an exception here, since it offers the researcher both an epistemological position *and* a research method, namely hypothesis-testing through experimentation (but see Chapter 9 for the use of hypothetico-deductivism in case study research).

However, not *all* research methods are compatible with *all* methodologies. Even though there is some flexibility in relation to our choice of methods, a researcher's epistemological and methodological commitments do constrain which methods can be used. For example, a social constructionist methodology is not compatible with methods that are designed to measure variables in a population. This is because social constructionism problematizes given constructs such as 'psychological variables'; it questions their validity and it is concerned with exploring the various ways in which they are 'made real'. This cannot be achieved through an attempt to 'measure' such constructs. According to a social constructionist viewpoint, the measurement of psychological variables is itself one more way of making them real, of constructing them.

Qualitative research

This book is about qualitative research in psychology. Having introduced the concept of epistemology and having considered, briefly, some major epistemological positions, it is now time to explore how qualitative methodology fits into this picture.

First, it is important to acknowledge that qualitative research methods can be, and are, used by researchers with quite different epistemological positions. For example, there are empiricist as well as social constructionist qualitative researchers. This means that, strictly speaking, there are 'qualitative methodologies' rather than 'qualitative methodology'. Chapter 2 discusses the most important differences in the ways in which qualitative researchers have approached the question of knowledge generation. However, qualitative researchers also share a number of concerns, and it is these that are commonly referred to as 'qualitative methodology'. In this section, I shall: (1) identify these shared concerns and provide a general characterization of 'qualitative methodology'; (2) introduce the 'little q/big Q' dichotomy; and (3) draw attention to epistemological differences between approaches to qualitative research.

Shared concerns: 'qualitative methodology'

Qualitative researchers tend to be concerned with meaning. That is, they are interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events. They aim to understand 'what it is like' to experience particular conditions (e.g. what it means and how it feels to live with chronic illness or to be unemployed) and how people manage certain situations (e.g. how people negotiate family life or relations with work colleagues). Qualitative researchers tend, therefore,

to be concerned with the quality and texture of experience, rather than with the identification of cause–effect relationships. They do not tend to work with 'variables' that are defined by the researcher before the research process begins. This is because qualitative researchers tend to be interested in the meanings attributed to events by the research participants themselves. Using preconceived 'variables' would lead to the imposition of the researcher's meanings and it would preclude the identification of respondents' own ways of making sense of the
phenomenon under investigation. The objective of qualitative research is to describe and possibly explain events and experiences, but never to predict. Qualitative researchers study people in their own territory, within naturally occurring settings (such as the home, schools, hospitals, the street). These are 'open systems' where conditions continuously develop and interact with one another to give rise to a process of ongoing change. Participants' (and researchers') interpretation of events itself contributes to this process. Therefore, 'prediction of outcomes' is not a meaningful goal for qualitative researchers. Instead, they ask questions about processes, such as 'What do people do when they form groups?', 'How do people manage change in the workplace?' or 'How do people live with chronic pain?'

'Little q' and 'big Q'

Kidder and Fine (1987) distinguish between two meanings of 'qualitative research'; 'big Q' refers to open-ended, inductive research methodologies that are concerned with theory generation and the exploration of meanings, whereas 'little q' refers to the incorporation of non-numerical data collection techniques into hypothetico-deductive research designs. For

example, researchers may include an open-ended question in an otherwise forced-choice questionnaire and then use content analysis to 'score' the qualitative material. 'Little q' does not work from the bottom up. That is, 'little q' methods of data collection and analysis do not seek to engage with the data to gain new insights into the ways in which participants construct meaning and/or experience their world; instead, they start with a hypothesis and researcher-defined categories against which the qualitative data are then checked.

This book is about 'big Q' methodology. The eight approaches to qualitative research introduced here are all concerned with the exploration of lived experience and participant-defined meanings. They do take different positions in relation to *epistemology, reflexivity* and *critical language awareness* (see next section), but they can all be classified as 'big Q'. I have decided to exclude 'little q' methods because, although non-numerical in nature, they are characterized by the imposition of the researcher's meanings during data collection and analysis, and strict control over what can emerge from the analysis through the application of predetermined categories for coding. This is, in my view, not compatible with the spirit of 'qualitative methodology'.

Epistemological differences: 'qualitative methodologies'

Silverman (1993: 1) argues that 'without theory there is nothing to research'. This statement draws attention to the role of theory in the interpretation of data (see Anfara and Mertz 2006 for a detailed discussion of the role of theory in qualitative research). For example, if our data consist of several pages of interview transcript, we need to decide what this transcript represents before we can analyse it (see Kvale

1996a: 278). It could represent a factual account of what happened to the interviewee. On the other hand, it could represent the interviewee's attempt to disclaim responsibility for what happened. Alternatively, it could be read as an expression of the interviewee's unconscious desires. Or it could provide insight into the interviewee's view of the world. Which view we take of what the transcript represents – that is, how we define the 'status of the text' (see Flick 1998) – will depend on the theoretical framework from within which we approach the text. And this framework, in turn, is informed by our epistemological stance. For example, if our epistemological position is a social constructionist one, we may approach the text using a discourse analytic framework. This means that the text is seen as a manifestation of available discursive resources that the interviewee is drawing upon to construct a particular version of events. If, however, our epistemological position is an empiricist one, we might use a version of the grounded theory method or interpretative phenomenological analysis to identify the categories of meaning used by the interviewee to make sense of events. In this case, the text is seen as a verbal expression of the interviewee's mental processes. In both cases, the analysis of the interview transcript would be qualitative. In a recent exhibition, French artist Sophie Calle provided a fascinating illustration of how a text (in this case, an email message ending a romantic relationship) can be read in innumerable ways, each one based upon the attribution of a different 'status' to the text. Calle invited 107 women of different backgrounds and professions (including a psychoanalyst, a forensic psychiatrist, a Talmudic scholar, a judge, an etiquette consultant, a social worker and a copy editor) to read and interpret the message that had been sent to her by her (then) boyfriend. The exhibition and companion text (Calle 2007)

display these readings alongside one another, demonstrating how what appears to be a simple message can be decoded in as many ways as there are professional (and personal) perspectives, leading to widely differing interpretations of one and the same text. Chapter 4 discusses the role of interpretation in qualitative research in more detail.

'Qualitative methodologies' can also be differentiated according to the extent to which they emphasize reflexivity and by the importance they place on the role of language. These two features are related. *Reflexivity* requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity, then, urges us 'to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research' (Nightingale and Cromby 1999: 228).

There are two types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. *Personal reflexivity* involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers. *Epistemological reflexivity* requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found'? How have the design of the study and the method of analysis 'constructed' the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this

have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings. Qualitative researchers differ in the emphasis they place upon reflexivity in their research. For some, both personal and epistemological reflexivity are central to the research process and form an integral part of the research report. Others acknowledge the importance of reflexivity but do not include an in-depth discussion of it in their research reports (see also Finlay and Gough 2003, for an in-depth discussion of reflexivity in qualitative research).

Critical language awareness (Fairclough 1995) forms part of reflexivity. The words we use to describe our experiences play a part in the construction of the meanings that we attribute to such experiences. Language has a constructive dimension; it does not simply mirror reality. This means that the categories and labels researchers use during the research process will shape their 'findings'. For example, certain answers are made impossible by certain kinds of question. If the researcher asks a respondent 'how she felt' during, say, a medical procedure, the researcher is invoking the category 'emotion'. This means that whatever the respondent chooses to say in response to the question, 'emotion' will have to be oriented to. It has been made salient and the respondent's answer will position her in relation to this construct, even when she denies its importance. Qualitative researchers take different views of the extent to which language constructs versions of reality. At one end of the continuum, researchers argue that language plays a central role in the construction of

meaning and that it is the task of researchers to study the ways in which such constructions are produced, how they change across cultures and history, and how they shape people's experiences. At the other end of the continuum, we find qualitative researchers who believe that it is possible to describe, more or less accurately, 'what is going on' in a particular setting; here, language is simply a means to an end or a tool. In between, there are many degrees of critical language awareness (see also Willig 2012a for a fuller discussion of the role of language in the interpretation of qualitative data).

There are various ways in which we may classify qualitative approaches in order to highlight their epistemological differences. Readers will come across a number of different classificatory systems and terminologies in the literature, and this may be confusing at times. The important thing to remember is that in order to understand differences between approaches, we need to ask a series of questions of them. These will be discussed in the final section of this chapter and in more detail in Chapter 2.

Overview of the book

This book aims to introduce people unfamiliar with qualitative research methods to some of those methods that are most appropriate for qualitative research in psychology. Chapter 2 clarifies the epistemological bases for qualitative research and maps out a number of available positions from which to conduct qualitative research in psychology. Chapter 3 discusses key aspects of qualitative research design including the formulation of a research question, the selection of suitable data collection techniques, as well as ethical

considerations and reflexivity. Chapter 4 discusses the role of interpretation in qualitative research, available approaches to interpretation and their ethical implications. Part 1 of the book concludes with some guidance about how to put together a qualitative research proposal in Chapter 5.

In Part 2, Chapters 6–13 introduce eight approaches to qualitative research in psychology: thematic analysis, grounded theory, phenomenological methods, case studies, discursive psychology, Foucauldian discourse analysis, narrative analysis and visual methodologies. Each chapter introduces the approach and its procedures and techniques for gathering and analysing data. It identifies its advantages and disadvantages, and it discusses ways of writing up the research. To facilitate comparison between the eight methods, I shall raise three epistemological questions in relation to each approach. These questions are identified in the next section. The final two chapters constitute Part 3 of the book, addressing the question of evaluation of qualitative research (Chapter 14) and the role of qualitative research within the profession of psychology (Chapter 15). All methods chapters in Part 2 include interactive exercises designed to help readers put into practice some of the methodological thinking introduced in each chapter. Each methods chapter also presents current debates or controversies around the approach introduced in the chapter in a box at the end. The more conceptual chapters (in Part 1 and Part 3 of the book) conclude with discussion points in the form of questions which the reader is encouraged to debate with colleagues and peers. The book also reproduces three research reports of qualitative research conducted by trainees on the DPsych Psychology programme at City University London (see Appendices 1–3). These reports illustrate how qualitative

research methods can be applied in practice, within the real-world constraints of a psychology training programme.

Three epistemological questions

To be able to evaluate research in a meaningful way, we need to know what its objectives were and what kind of knowledge it aimed to produce. For example, there is no sense in criticizing a study for not identifying the cognitive precursors of a particular behaviour, when the aim of the study was to find out what it felt like to engage in the behaviour. On the other hand, a study concerned with the subjective quality of a particular experience *can* be criticized for using methods that constrain participants' ability to express their feelings openly and in sufficient detail. To be able to compare methodological approaches with one another and to be able to evaluate the extent to which studies using these approaches have met their own objectives, we need to have a clear understanding of their epistemological basis and their methodological requirements. The following questions can help us identify a methodology's epistemological roots:

What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?

Qualitative research can produce descriptions or explanations. It can aim to 'give voice' to those whose accounts tend to be marginalized or discounted. It can aim to interpret what people have said in order to explain why they may have said it. It can aim to make links between micro-processes, such as doctor–patient communication, and macro-structures, such as economic and social relations. It may be designed to capture the subjective 'feel' of a particular experience or condition, or

it may wish to identify recurring patterns of experience among a group of people. What kind of knowledge a methodology aims to produce depends on its epistemological position (i.e. its view of what can be known and how). Epistemological positions commonly adopted within qualitative psychology range from radical relativist to naïve realist (Madill et al. 2000). A realist position entails the belief that the data we collect ought to provide us with information about the world, about how things really are. This means that the methods we use ought to be designed (and implemented) in such a way as to facilitate true and undistorted representations. For example, a study of the quality of life of the elderly in inner cities from a realist perspective would need to find ways of accessing the true feelings and experiences of a relevant group of participants. A key challenge for the researcher in this situation would be to find data collection methods that encourage participants to express themselves as freely and openly as possible. By contrast, a relativist position subscribes to the view that there is no such thing as 'pure experience' and that the aim of research ought to be an exploration of the ways in which cultural and discursive resources are used in order to construct different versions of the experience of ageing within different contexts. This type of research requires the use of methods that can identify and unpack such resources. Methods of data collection and analysis, in this case, would need to be sensitive to tensions, contradictions and variations in accounts. There is a range of positions in between the 'realist' and 'relativist' endpoints of the continuum. These include a perspective that combines the realist ambition to gain a better understanding of what is 'really' going on in the world with the acknowledgement that the data the researcher gathers may not provide direct access to this reality.

Such a position may be described as 'critical realist'. Another 'in-between' position is one that argues that while experience is always the product of interpretation and, therefore, constructed (and flexible) rather than determined (and fixed), it is nevertheless 'real' to the person who is having the experience. This position could be described as 'phenomenological'. While classification of methods along the realism–relativism continuum can be helpful, it is also clear that the terminology used raises as many questions as it answers (e.g. What does it mean for something to be 'real'? What is the relationship between truth and reality?). As a result, it is important that we do not get too hung up about the use of the correct labels; rather, what matters is that we identify, clearly and correctly, what type of knowledge we aim to produce and that we select a research methodology that is designed to generate that type of knowledge.

What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?

This question takes us into the realm of *ontology*. Ontology is concerned with the nature of the world. While epistemology asks 'How can we know?', the question driving ontology is 'What is there to know?' It can be argued that ontological concerns are fundamental and that it is impossible not to make at least some assumptions about the nature of the world. For example, our starting point may be the assumption that events are generated by underlying structures such as socioeconomic relations. This would constitute a materialist ontology. Alternatively, we may assume that psychological phenomena are independent from such structures. This would be an idealist position. Ontological positions can be described as 'realist' and 'relativist'. A realist ontology maintains that

the world is made up of structures and objects that have cause–effect relationships with one another. Materialism, for instance, subscribes to a realist ontology. A relativist ontology, by contrast, rejects such a view of the world and maintains instead that the world is not the orderly, law-bound place that realists believe it to be. A relativist ontology questions the 'out-there-ness' of the world and emphasizes the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to it. Idealism is an example of a relativist ontology.

How does the methodology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

All qualitative methodologies recognize that the researcher is, in one way or another, implicated in the research process. However, there are differences in the extent to which qualitative methodologies see the researcher as being the author, as opposed to the witness, of their research findings. Some methodologies (usually those with relativist leanings) see the researcher as the central figure in the research process because it is the researcher who constructs the findings. A helpful metaphor here would be to describe the researcher as a builder who constructs a house. The same bricks (the data) could be used to build a number of very different buildings. Other (usually more realist) methodologies, while acknowledging the importance of the researcher, do not perceive the researcher as the author of the findings. Instead, they see the researcher as someone who uses their skills to unearth the evidence. Here, the research process is perceived as a treasure hunt rather than a construction process.

These three epistemological questions will be raised again in relation to each of the eight qualitative method(ologie)s

introduced in this book. They will provide a framework for discussion, evaluation and comparison of the eight approaches in the final chapter.

Discussion questions

1. What is 'knowledge'?
2. What is the relationship between epistemology and methodology?
3. What makes a research project 'qualitative'?

Further reading

Anfara, V.A. and Mertz, N.T. (2006) *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Burr, V. (2003) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge.

Chalmers, A.F. (1999) *What Is This Thing Called Science?*, 3rd edn. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Curtis, B. and Curtis, C. (2011) *Social Research: A Practical Introduction*. London: Sage.

Frost, N. (2011) *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Harding, S. (1991) *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Kirk, J. and Miller, M. (1986) *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Kvale, S. (1995) The social construction of validity, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(1): 19–40.

Willig, C. and Stainton Rogers, W. (eds) (2008) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 2

Epistemological bases for qualitative research

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- three basic epistemological orientations (realist, phenomenological and social constructionist) and the types of knowledge they seek to produce
- their implications for the research process, including the formulation of the research question, choice of methods for data collection and analysis, and the interpretation of the data
- methodological pluralism as an alternative approach to knowledge generation
- how to identify a research design which is appropriate to one's research aims

In Chapter 1 it was acknowledged that qualitative research methods can be used by researchers who adopt quite different epistemological perspectives. A brief introduction to some of the available epistemological positions was provided in the

section on *Epistemological differences: 'qualitative methodologies'*. In this chapter, I want to extend this discussion and look in more detail at the ways in which qualitative researchers in psychology have approached the question of knowledge generation. I shall focus on three basic orientations (*realist*; *phenomenological*; *social constructionist*) and explore their implications for our choice of research methods and the research process as a whole (see also Willig 2012b). The chapter concludes with a look at *methodological pluralism* as an alternative approach to producing psychological knowledge.

As we will see, qualitative researchers can adopt a wide range of positions regarding the nature and status of the type of knowledge their research seeks to generate. In Chapter 1 we established that epistemological positions are characterized by a set of assumptions about knowledge and knowing. These provide answers to the question 'What, and how, can we know?'. Interestingly, although we tend to think about research as being about finding answers to questions, the starting point of any research project must always be a set of assumptions. This is inevitable, and the important thing is that researchers are fully
aware of the nature and content of the assumptions that they make (about the world, about people, about knowledge, about research, and so on). This is not always easy as the most fundamental assumptions we make about the world are often unacknowledged and implicit, and we take them for granted. Often, they seem like 'common sense'.

In this chapter, I aim to map out the range of epistemological positions available to qualitative researchers and to discuss their relationships with one another. I also suggest ways in

which researchers can identify and clarify their own assumptions.

As indicated in Chapter 1, the easiest way for a researcher to access the assumptions (s)he makes is to ask him- or herself a series of questions such as:

- What kind of knowledge do I aim to create?
- What are the assumptions that I make about the (material/social/psychological) world(s) which I study?
- How do I conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process? What is the relationship between myself and the knowledge I aim to generate?

Our responses to these questions will help us clarify our epistemological position in relation to the research we plan to conduct, and this in turn will allow us to adopt one of several available approaches to knowledge production.

Three approaches to knowledge production

Broadly speaking, qualitative researchers can aim to create three types of knowledge. Let us refer to them as realist knowledge, phenomenological knowledge and social constructionist knowledge. In this section I shall characterize them each in turn, focusing on key differences between them and the approaches to knowledge production which they inform (see Willig 2012b for an expanded version of this discussion).

Realist approach

Qualitative researchers can use qualitative research methods in order to obtain an accurate picture of (some aspects of) the social world or of human psychology. Here, the researcher seeks to generate knowledge that captures and reflects as truthfully as possible something that is happening in the real world. It is assumed that this 'something' exists independently of the researcher's, and indeed the research participants', views and/or knowledge about it. The sorts of things a researcher who aspires to generate this type of knowledge might study include social or psychological processes. An example of qualitative research concerned with understanding a social process might be a study that investigates what happens when a new member joins an established reading group. An example of research concerned with psychological processes might be a study of the way in which people who lost a parent at an early age approach intimate relationships. A realist approach to knowledge generation assumes that there are processes of a social and/or psychological nature which exist and which can be identified. These processes are 'real' in that they characterize or even determine the behaviour and/or the thinking of research participants, irrespective of whether or not the research participants are aware of this. It is also assumed that these processes can be identified and described by the researcher. A realist approach presupposes that the world and what happens in it, how and why, can be understood provided that the researcher is skilled enough to uncover the patterns, regularities and structures of experience and behaviour which characterize human existence. The researcher can succeed or fail in this enterprise which means that realist research aspires to generate valid and reliable knowledge about a social and/or psychological reality which exists independently of the researcher's awareness of it. As such, this type of research is

characterized by a discovery orientation (see Madill et al. 2000). The role of the researcher in this situation is akin to that of a detective who uses his or her skills, knowledge and experience in order to uncover what is really going on.

Realist aspirations to knowledge generation range from what is sometimes referred to as 'naïve' to more 'critical' varieties. 'Naïve' realist approaches assume that there is a relatively uncomplicated and direct relationship between what the researcher can see (the data, the evidence) and what is really going on (the reality we want to understand). In other words, it is assumed that the data more or less directly represents reality. For example, if we wanted to find out how people make decisions about whether or not
to have an HIV antibody test and we interviewed individuals who have recently made such a decision, a 'naïve' realist approach would suggest that we take our participants' accounts at face value and that we accept that their accounts constitute accurate descriptions of how they made their decision. The task of the researcher would, therefore, be (1) to ensure that participants feel safe and comfortable enough to provide the researcher with accurate and detailed accounts, and (2) to analyse the accounts in such a way as to produce a clear and systematic model of the decision-making process. It could be argued that the label 'naïve' implies that this approach lacks depth and sophistication, and that it should, therefore, be avoided. My view, however, is that there is some very valuable research which aims to 'give voice' to otherwise marginalized individuals and communities and which is underpinned by the assumption that what participants are telling the researcher about their experiences (e.g. of suffering, of exploitation, of oppression) reflects a social reality which needs to be exposed, acknowledged and

understood. To call such research 'naïve' is to devalue research which clearly does have its uses and significance. Perhaps a less value-laden term such as 'direct' realism would, therefore, be preferable.

A critical realist approach differs from the more 'direct' (or 'naïve') version in that it assumes that although our data can tell us something about what is going on in the 'real' world, it does not do so in a self-evident, unmediated fashion. A critical realist approach does not assume that our data constitutes a direct reflection of what is going on in the world (like a mirror image); rather, it proposes that the data needs to be interpreted in order to further our understanding of the underlying structures which generate the phenomena we are trying to gain knowledge about. For example, if we want to find out why people smoke cigarettes, it may not be enough to ask people why they think they smoke and accept their answers at face value. From a critical realist perspective, it may be necessary to dig deeper and to interpret what the smokers have told the researcher in order to try to identify factors or forces beyond the individual smoker's knowledge and/or control which drive their smoking behaviour. Such forces could be social (e.g. peer pressure or social learning), physiological (e.g. addictive processes) or psychological (e.g. unconscious structures such as an oral fixation). So although the research participants are unlikely to be aware of what it is that really drives their behaviour, the underlying structures (forces, factors, mechanisms, etc.) which the researcher identifies are said to be 'real'. Critical realist research, however, does vary in the extent to which it proclaims the existence of the underlying structures and mechanisms identified by the researcher with anything approaching certainty.

Phenomenological approach

Here, the aim of the research is to produce knowledge about the subjective experience of research participants. Although the phenomenological researcher still aspires to capture something that exists in the world – namely the participants' feelings, thoughts and perceptions which constitute their experience – (s)he does not make any claims about what causes these thoughts, feelings or perceptions. Phenomenological research is concerned with the quality and texture of experience (with 'what it is like' to have the experience). As such, it aims to understand experience rather than to discover what is 'really' going on or what causes social and/or psychological events to take place. It does not matter, therefore, whether what a research participant describes is an accurate reflection of what really happened to them because the type of knowledge the researcher is trying to obtain is phenomenological knowledge – that is, knowledge of the quality and texture of the experience itself. For example, a researcher might want to find out how a participant experiences the process of going through a divorce. Finding that a participant experiences himself as 'rejected by the whole world', for example, constitutes phenomenological knowledge irrespective of whether or not the participant really is being rejected by everyone he encounters. The aim of this type of research is to get as close as possible to the research participant's experience, and to enter their experiential world by stepping into their shoes and looking at the world through their eyes. The role of the researcher within this context resembles that of a *person-centred counsellor* who listens to the client's account of their experience empathically, with an attitude of unconditional, positive regard and without questioning the

external validity of what the client is saying. Phenomenological research is interested in the experiential world of the participant rather than the 'real' (material, social or psychological) structures which may give rise to particular experiences. This means that phenomenological research assumes that there is more than one 'world' which can be studied because, from a phenomenological point of view, what appears to be the 'same' event (e.g. a divorce, a diagnosis, an accident) can be experienced in many different ways, so that there are potentially as many (experiential) worlds as there are individuals. A researcher who attempts to generate this type of knowledge asks, 'What is the world like *for this participant*?'

There are differences in the extent to which phenomenological research concerns itself with the possible meaning (as well as the texture and quality) of experience. Some phenomenological researchers prefer to focus on the description of experience while others also want to understand more about its underlying meaning. Phenomenological approaches to knowledge generation, therefore, range from *descriptive* to *interpretative* varieties. Descriptive phenomenology is concerned with capturing experience 'precisely as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it' (Giorgi 1992: 121). Such an approach requires that the researcher stays as close as possible to the data, extracting the essence of the experiential quality of the experience from the account without attributing meanings to it which are 'imported' from outside of the account itself. For example, a descriptive phenomenologist might be interested in the phenomenon of 'being surprised'. Accounts of the experience of 'being surprised' from individuals who have recently experienced a surprise (such as winning a prize,

being invited on an unexpected holiday, receiving a letter from a long-lost friend, etc.) would be analysed in order to generate an understanding of what characterizes the experience of 'being surprised'. Here, the researcher would want to know what it is that people experience when they are 'surprised'. Such a study's findings may tell us that the experience of 'surprise' involves a sense of a loss of control, of ambivalence, of uncertainty about how to respond, and perhaps also feelings of joy and excitement. Of course, we cannot know what characterizes the experience until we have conducted a phenomenological analysis of the data. The end product of a descriptive phenomenological study would, therefore, be an account of the structure of the phenomenon of 'being surprised' which is based entirely upon participants' accounts of their experience.

An interpretative phenomenological approach differs from this in that it does not take accounts of experience entirely 'at face value' in the same way; instead, it seeks to also understand the meaning of an account of experience by stepping outside of the account and reflecting upon its status as an account and its wider (social, cultural, psychological) meanings. As Larkin et al. (2006: 104) put it, such an interpretative phenomenological analysis 'positions the initial "description" in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context. This second-order account aims to provide a critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants' personal "sense-making" activities.' For example, if we wanted to gain a better understanding of the experiences of women who have tried and failed to conceive with the help of IVF treatment, we could start by producing a description of the experience (based on the women's own accounts) which captures its quality and texture, and which

portrays its structure and essence. We could then attempt to shed further light on the phenomenon by relating it to its wider context – for example, by reflecting on the social and economic structures within which women in our culture experience reproduction, and/or the social and cultural expectations and norms which prevail at the time of data collection. Through doing this we may be able to make sense of some aspects of the women's experience. For example, during our initial analysis of the accounts we may have been struck by the fact that many women feel compelled to provide reasons for the decision to pursue IVF. The women's experience of feeling the need to account for their decision may be better understood when looked at within the context of the prevailing notion that conception ought to be a 'natural act' and that any deviation from this requires strong justification. Interpretative phenomenological research, therefore, seeks to generate knowledge about the quality and texture of experience as well as about its meaning within a particular social and cultural context. In addition, while descriptive phenomenologists aspire to produce descriptions which capture and comprehend the experience as it presents itself to the participant, interpretative phenomenologists do not believe that it is possible to produce a pure description of experience and that description always involves a certain amount of interpretation.

Social constructionist approach

Finally, a qualitative researcher can put aside questions about the true nature of social/psychological events (*realist* approach to knowledge) or the actual quality of experiences (*phenomenological* approach), and focus on the way in which people talk about the world and their experiences. Such a

researcher would be concerned with the social construction of 'knowledge' itself, and with how people construct versions of reality through the use of language. Here, the type of knowledge aspired to is not knowledge about the world or knowledge about how things really are, or even about how they are experienced by individuals, but rather knowledge about the *process* by which such 'knowledge' is constructed in the first place. Since language plays such an important part in the social construction of what we regard as 'knowledge', qualitative researchers who adopt a *social constructionist* orientation to knowledge generation tend to study discourses. For example, a researcher might analyse the language used in policy documents in order to
understand how something like 'antisocial behaviour' is constructed within these documents. Of particular interest to a qualitative (social constructionist) psychologist might be how these documents construct those who are constructed as the targets of proposed interventions and how such constructions position them (e.g. in relation to other people, the law, the police, etc.). Such an approach to research is based upon the assumption that in one way or another all human experience is mediated by language, that it is discursively constructed, and that there is, therefore, no such thing as 'pure individual experience'. From a social constructionist point of view, when research participants tell the researcher about their experiences, they are not simply describing an inner reality (as would be assumed in phenomenological research) or providing information about social/psychological processes (as would be assumed in realist research); rather, the social constructionist researcher approaches such accounts as providing information about how socially available ways of talking about the 'something' are deployed by the participant and with what consequences for those who are affected (that

is to say, who are 'positioned') by these discursive constructions. Here, the role of the researcher can be compared to that of an architect who looks at the phenomenon of interest with a view to how it has been constructed and from what resources and materials.

The social constructionist perspective is often described as *relativist* because it rejects the idea that objects, events and even experiences precede and inform our descriptions of them. A social constructionist perspective replaces the notion of 'description' with that of 'construction' because it argues that language is a form of social action which constructs versions of reality for particular purposes. In other words, according to this view, it is language ('discourse') that constructs reality rather than reality that determines how we describe or talk about it. However, not all social constructionist researchers would describe themselves as relativists. There are more or less radical strands of social constructionism, with social constructionist approaches to 'knowledge' production ranging from *radical* to more *moderate* versions.

The radical version of social constructionist research tends to be particularly concerned with the ways in which speakers within very specific social contexts deploy discursive resources in order to achieve a particular interactional objective. Here, the researcher is not interested in the participants' inner experience or how they may feel or think about it. The researcher assumes that participants will construct different versions of events depending upon the social context within which they find themselves. The particular version a research participant constructs will be informed by the stake that they have in a particular

conversation. This means that such a socially constructed 'reality' does not survive the context within which it has been constructed because a different 'reality' will need to be constructed to suit the next context. Radical social constructionist researchers aim to understand how and why discursive objects and positions are constructed in particular ways within particular contexts, and what they achieve within those contexts (e.g. how they may serve the interests of the speakers in a conversation). For example, a researcher might be interested in how people who have decided to start seeing a psychotherapist introduce themselves to the therapist in their first session. Suitable data for such a study would be tape-recordings of first psychotherapy sessions which would need to be transcribed verbatim before analysis. The analysis would proceed by examining the ways in which the clients deploy discursive resources when they introduce themselves and explain why they are there, and how these are positioning them in relation to the psychotherapist. The researcher might find that many clients began their sessions by pointing out that they had waited as long as possible (using constructions such as 'I had reached the end of my tether', 'I couldn't take it any more', 'I had reached the end of the line' and so on) before deciding to approach a psychotherapist for help. The researcher might suggest that by doing this, clients were disclaiming an undesirable identity (of someone who is weak or needy, and cannot cope on their own). By emphasizing that they have never sought help before and that their current visit to the therapist is an exceptional event, they position themselves within a moral discourse, constructing themselves as responsible adults whose help-seeking is not a sign of weakness or of psychopathology and who deserve to be supported because they have tried very hard to sort out their own problems before asking for help. A radical social

constructionist researcher would not be interested in whether or not these clients had, in fact, tried to solve their problems on their own first, or whether or not they are indeed 'strong' or 'needy'. From a radical social constructionist point of view, the validity of these accounts is irrelevant. In fact, some would suggest that it is not actually possible to establish these accounts' validity as it could be argued that whether or not someone has 'tried hard to solve their problems' is a matter of opinion in any case. The point of social constructionist research is to identify localized, context-specific discursive productions (e.g. of the self as 'adult', as 'strong', 'normal' or 'deserving') and to find out what these achieve (i.e. what their 'action orientation' might be) within the specific context. The *radical* social constructionist researcher is
only interested in the particular reality constructed for the purposes of a specific conversation (in this case, the first psychotherapy session).

By contrast, more moderate (that is to say, less relativist) approaches to social constructionist research do seek to make connections between the discursive construction of a particular localized reality and the wider sociocultural context within which this takes place. For example, having identified the use of discursive strategies designed to distance clients from constructions of help-seeking as a sign of weakness, the moderate social constructionist researcher might want to take a closer look at contemporary 'therapy culture' more generally. This may involve scrutiny of self-help texts, TV shows which make reference to psychotherapy and 'problem pages' in newspapers and magazines. The researcher might want to explore how the dominant discourses surrounding counselling and psychotherapy position people (e.g. as damaged by their past, as in need of expert help, as

responsible for working through their issues, etc.) and with what consequences (e.g. as a society we may expect individuals to invest in their mental health and well-being). This will allow the researcher to make further sense of clients' constructions of their help-seeking within the context of a first therapy session as one may expect such localized discursive productions to engage with dominant cultural constructions in one way or another. This demonstrates that moderate social constructionist researchers are making reference to a (discursive) reality outside of the original text (i.e. the transcripts of first therapy sessions); some go yet further by attempting to ground dominant discourses in social, cultural, economic and material structures such as institutions, laws and customs, as well as economic and financial relations. In this way, moderate social constructionist researchers may invoke a social reality which pre-exists and indeed shapes the ways in which individuals then discursively construct meaning within specific contexts. There is a difference, then, between radical social constructionists who emphasize the flexibility and variability in people's use of discursive resources as they construct the social realities which suit their needs at a particular moment in time, and more moderate social constructionists who focus on the wider social context and the ways in which this shapes and constrains what can be said, how and when, by individual users of discourse within specific social contexts.

Methodological pluralism

Although the three approaches to knowledge generation adopt quite different perspectives on how to increase our understanding of social and/or psychological phenomena, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible to

combine different qualitative methodologies, even those which subscribe to different epistemological positions. Such an approach has come to be known as *methodological pluralism* (e.g. Frost and Nolas 2011). Pluralistic qualitative research recognizes that a data set can tell us about a number of different things, depending on the questions we ask of it. A pluralistic approach involves asking a series of questions of the same data; each new question that is asked of the data requires that the researcher returns to the data and interprets it in a new way (see also Willig 2012b). For example, a researcher might want to understand what happens when someone is diagnosed with a terminal illness. As a first step, the researcher might want to collect a number of first-person accounts of this experience and conduct a thematic analysis of these accounts. The aim at this stage in the research would be to gain a better understanding of what actually happens to people when they receive a terminal diagnosis. Here, the researcher adopts a (direct) realist approach to knowledge generation which means that (s)he assumes that what the research participants are telling him or her about their experience reflects what actually happened to them. Therefore, their first-person accounts are taken to provide the researcher with information about the social and psychological processes which accompany being given a terminal diagnosis. While the researcher may identify many shared themes in the accounts (e.g. in relation to difficulties in communicating with medical staff or accepting help from loved ones), (s)he may also notice some interesting differences in the ways in which individuals talk about what their diagnosis means to them. In order to pursue questions about the personal meaning of a terminal diagnosis, the researcher may return to the data and focus on the subjective experience – the texture and quality of the experience of

being diagnosed with a terminal illness. Now the researcher adopts a phenomenological stance, being interested only in what it is like for the individual to receive a terminal diagnosis and what this means to them. As a result of this second round of analysis, the researcher may generate a second set of themes which capture a range of different subjective meanings that can be given to the experience. At this point, the researcher may become interested in the way in which many of the accounts seem to invoke notions of responsibility (for contracting the illness in the first place, for obtaining the right treatments, for trying to survive the illness) and engage with the question of who may be to blame for their situation. The researcher may decide to conduct a third round of analysis of the data, this time adopting a (moderate) social constructionist approach. The question driving this phase of the research would be concerned with the availability of discursive resources with which to talk about a terminal diagnosis and how these may position those who have been diagnosed (e.g. as having brought it on themselves; as being innocent victims; as being expected to fight the illness, etc.). The number of possible questions which a researcher could ask of their data, and, therefore, the number of phases of analysis which constitute a pluralistic research project as a whole are potentially limitless, although in reality, of course, all researchers are constrained by available resources such as time and money. However, even two or three cycles of analysis, as demonstrated in our hypothetical study of the experience of being diagnosed with a terminal illness, can produce a rich reading of a data set and demonstrate the advantages of a pluralistic approach. The strength of such an approach lies in its rejection of the idea that realist, phenomenological and social constructionist forms of knowing are mutually exclusive. Instead, it is

proposed that they can be thought of as complementary in that each provides access to different aspects of (social, psychological, subjective, discursive) 'reality'. A pluralistic approach to qualitative research is based on the assumption that human experience is complex, multi-layered and multi-faceted, and that therefore a methodology which is equally complex, multi-layered and multi-faceted is perhaps the most suitable way to find out more about it.

Pluralist researchers can take one of two approaches to the presentation of their findings. They can attempt to integrate the results from the various cycles (or layers) of analysis in some way, thus presenting a coherent narrative which includes all of the aspects of 'reality' uncovered by the research. Alternatively, they can simply present the various readings alongside one another without any attempt at integration or even cross-referencing. Which of these is chosen depends on the degree of compatibility between the epistemological positions which underpin their various layers of analysis (e.g. it may be difficult to integrate a radical social constructionist reading with a direct realist interpretation), as well as the researcher's own preference. Some researchers prefer to present a coherent, integrated narrative of what their research has taught them about the phenomenon of interest, while others choose to leave it to their readers to decide which of the various interpretations is of most interest to them (see Frost 2009b; see also Frost 2011 for more on combining different qualitative methods).

Yet others (e.g. Frosh 2007) take the view that the attempt to 'make sense' of the data by formulating a story that turns a messy and confusing data set into something coherent and logical is in fact a questionable goal in qualitative analysis.

This is because the nature and quality of human experience are always and necessarily (at least somewhat) fragmentary and contradictory, and qualitative analyses that 'make sense' of human experience may not, in fact, reflect the nature and quality of that human experience.

It is important to acknowledge that in order to pursue a pluralistic approach to qualitative analysis the researcher needs to have a sound understanding of the epistemological bases of the various qualitative methods employed. (S)he also needs to have a good grasp of what is required by each one of the analytic phases (or layers) of the research. Although pluralistic research is heterogeneous and inclusive, it requires that the researcher maintains conceptual clarity about the differences between methodological approaches throughout the research. This combination of diversity and integration will be a challenge for novice researchers, and it is probably a good idea to start with single-method studies before getting involved in pluralistic research.

Choosing the 'right' approach

In this chapter I have proposed that every qualitative research project is informed by a research question (about human experience, about the construction of meaning, about social and/or psychological processes, etc.) which is itself based upon some assumptions about the world and about people. These assumptions can be described as *ontological*. Every research question also makes assumptions about knowledge, about what can be known and how. These are *epistemological* assumptions. I have described three approaches to knowledge generation (*realist*, *phenomenological* and *social constructionist*), focusing on the differences between them. A

pluralistic approach to producing knowledge has also been introduced.

Before concluding this chapter, I want to address the question of how a researcher may go about choosing the 'right' approach for his or her research. As indicated earlier, the first thing to do is to formulate a research question. This question needs to be specific enough to focus the research, and it needs to clearly identify what it is the researcher wants to know. It is not enough to declare an interest (e.g. 'I am interested in stress in nurses') as this would not allow the researcher to identify a suitable strategy for collecting and analysing data. The research question needs to take the form of an actual question and needs to direct the researcher's attention to a particular aspect or dimension of a phenomenon of interest. For example, a researcher may want to know what it is like for a nurse to feel stressed (phenomenological approach); (s)he may want to know how 'stress' as a concept emerges within a nursing context (social constructionist approach), or alternatively, (s)he may be interested in how stressful events are managed within a hospital setting (realist approach). Once the research question has been chosen, the researcher needs to identify its epistemological orientation (e.g. realist, social constructionist or phenomenological) and to consider the advantages and disadvantages of this. In other words, (s)he needs to acknowledge the limitations of the chosen epistemological position and to be clear about what it can and cannot allow the researcher to find out about. For example, a social constructionist approach to the study of 'stress' in nursing does not allow the researcher to find out about how much stress nurses are actually experiencing within a particular setting. Once the researcher is happy with the research question and feels able to commit to it, (s)he can

start to think about which methods of data collection and analysis may be the most appropriate. Again, it is important to remember that methods are a means to an end. They are ways of getting at the research question by generating data and analytic strategies which will help the researcher to find an answer to their question in the data. There are a number of methods of data collection and analysis which are compatible with each of the epistemological orientations identified in this chapter and which will be discussed in the next chapter and in Part 2 of this book. This means that once a researcher has chosen a research question and has embraced the epistemological orientation demanded by the question, (s)he still has a another choice to make regarding which particular method of data collection and which analytic strategy to pursue. For example, realist research questions are compatible with thematic analysis (Chapter 6), some versions of grounded theory (Chapter 7), case studies (Chapter 9) and some visual methodologies (Chapter 13). Phenomenological research questions, not surprisingly, call for one of the phenomenological methods (Chapter 8) while social constructionist research questions are best answered using a form of discourse analysis (Chapters 10 and 11) or narrative analysis (Chapter 12). The differences between these methods and their relationships with different kinds of research question will be discussed in much more detail within the context of each chapter.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to review and clarify the ways in which qualitative researchers can approach the question of knowledge generation. I have suggested that qualitative researchers can aim to produce three types of knowledge, and these were given the labels *realist*, *phenomenological* and *social constructionist*. Each approach to knowledge generation is based on different assumptions about what 'knowledge' is and about what can be known, different assumptions about the world and about people, and different assumptions about the role of the researcher in the research process. It was also proposed that different methods of data collection and analysis are required in order to generate the different types of knowledge. *Methodological pluralism* was introduced as a way of integrating different approaches to knowledge generation in one and the same study.

Discussion questions

1. What types of knowledge can qualitative researchers aim to produce, and how are these different from one another?
2. What is 'methodological pluralism', and how might such an approach inform the research process?

3. How might a qualitative researcher go about choosing the 'right' approach for their research project ?

Further reading

Frosh, S. (2007) Disintegrating qualitative research, *Theory and Psychology*, 17(5): 635–53.

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Onlinee

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 3

Qualitative research design and data collection

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- general principles underpinning qualitative research design, including reflexivity and ethics
- how to formulate a research question
- how to match research questions with research methods
- the most widely-used qualitative methods of data collection

In Chapter 1, I identified a set of concerns shared by qualitative researchers (see pp. 8–9). These centred around the construction and negotiation of meaning, and the quality and texture of experience. These concerns have implications for research design. Qualitative data collection techniques need to be participant-led, or bottom-up, in the sense that they

allow participant-generated meanings to be heard. They need to be open-ended and flexible enough to facilitate the emergence of new, and unanticipated, categories of meaning and experience. Pre-coding and the use of researcher-generated categories are not compatible with 'big Q' methodology (see p. 9). There are, therefore, a number of general principles associated with qualitative research design, and these are outlined in the next section. This is followed by a discussion of the formulation of research questions and the selection of appropriate data collection techniques. In the remainder of the chapter, some major qualitative data collection methods are introduced. These include semi-structured interviewing, participant observation, diaries, focus groups, working with documents, using the internet, ethnography and action research. The role of the research participant in the research process, ethical considerations and reflexivity issues are also addressed in this chapter.

General principles of qualitative research design

The general principles which underpin qualitative approaches to research inform the type of data we should aim to collect in the research process. The *type of data* we collect for a qualitative study need to be *naturalistic*. This is to say, the data must not be coded, summarized, categorized or otherwise 'reduced' at the point of collection. Strictly speaking, this is impossible because any process of collecting data requires some form of translation from one medium to another (see also Willig 2012a, Chapter 4). For example, a verbatim transcript of what a participant says is not the same as the participant's performance of their speech in real time. Even a video-recording of that performance constitutes a transformation of the real-life act. Nevertheless, qualitative

data collection methods are designed to minimize data reduction. In qualitative research, the objective of data collection is to create a comprehensive record of participants' words and actions. This means making sure that as little as possible is lost 'in translation'. As a result, qualitative data tend to be voluminous and hard to manage. Qualitative researchers have to wait for the data analysis phase of the research before they can begin to 'reduce' the data, and even then they need to be very careful about what they 'leave out' (for a detailed discussion of this process, see the chapters in Part 2).

Such considerations raise the issue of *validity*. To what extent can we ensure that our data collection (and analysis) really addresses the question we want to answer? That is, how can we be sure that we are, in fact, researching what we think we are researching? Validity can be defined as the extent to which our research describes, measures or explains what it aims to describe, measure or explain. As a result of their flexibility and open-endedness, qualitative research methods provide the space for validity issues to be addressed during the research itself. Unlike quantitative research, which relies on pre-coded data collection techniques such as multiple-choice questionnaires or structured interviews, qualitative data collection allows participants to challenge the researcher's assumptions about the meaning and relevance of concepts and categories. For example, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, experimental social psychological research had demonstrated that women were more conformist than men. However, it later transpired that a validity error had been made: the studies had, in fact, measured familiarity with a task rather than conformity (see Kirk and Miller 1986: 27–8). When Sistrunk and McDavid (1971) repeated the experiment,

this time using a wide range of statements with which participants could agree or disagree, they found that women were more conformist when it came to statements about specialist tools, whereas men were more conformist in relation to statements about needlework. There was no difference between men and women in relation to gender-neutral statements. In the earlier studies, gender-related lack of familiarity with stimuli had been taken for female conformity.

Even though validity can be a problematic concept for qualitative researchers, qualitative methodologies engage with concerns about validity in a number of ways. First, qualitative data collection techniques aim to ensure that participants are free to question and, if necessary, correct the researcher's assumptions about the meanings investigated by the research. Some qualitative researchers also obtain feedback on their study's findings from participants (participant validation). If the study and its findings make sense to participants, the argument goes, it must at least have some validity. Second, much qualitative data collection (and in some cases also analysis) takes place in real-life settings, such as workplaces or youth clubs. As a result, there is no need to extrapolate from an artificial setting, such as the laboratory, to the real world, which means that such studies have higher ecological validity. Third, reflexivity (see p. 10) ensures that the research process as a whole is scrutinized throughout and that the researcher continuously reviews his or her own role in the research. This discourages impositions of meaning by the researcher and thus promotes validity.

An important aspect of quantitative data collection is *reliability*. A measurement is reliable if it yields the same

answer on different occasions. Qualitative researchers are less concerned with reliability. This is because qualitative research explores a particular, possibly unique, phenomenon or experience in great detail. It does not aim to measure a particular attribute in large numbers of people. However, there are qualitative researchers (e.g. Silverman 1993) who emphasize that qualitative research methods, if applied appropriately and rigorously, ought to generate reliable results. That is, the same data, when collected and analysed by different researchers using the same method, ought to generate the same findings, irrespective of who carried out the research. It has to be acknowledged that there is disagreement among qualitative researchers about the extent to which reliability ought to be a concern for qualitative research.

Finally, data collection needs to confront the issue of *representativeness*. Quantitative research relies upon representative samples. To be able to generalize their findings to the general population, quantitative researchers need to ensure that participants in their study are representative of this population.
Qualitative research tends to work with relatively small numbers of participants. This is due to the time-consuming and labour-intensive nature of qualitative data collection and analysis. As a result, qualitative studies do not work with representative samples. Is this a problem?

The answer to this question depends at least in part on the research question the study is designed to answer (see next section). If the study is a case study (of an individual, a group or an organization), representativeness is not an issue. Here, the aim of the study is to understand the internal dynamics of the case. However, if the study aims to explore a phenomenon

that is relevant to more people than are actually involved in the study, representativeness can be an issue. This is because, in such circumstances, we are likely to want to be able to generalize from our study. For instance, if we study six women's experiences of childbirth, it is likely that we would want to move beyond our data and say something about its implications for women's experience of childbirth in general. Even though, strictly speaking, we cannot generalize from small-scale qualitative research of this type, it could be argued that, if 'a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalisation' (Haug 1987: 44). Thus, even though we do not know who or how many people share a particular experience, once we have identified it through qualitative research, we do know that it is available within a culture or society. If we assume that our participants' experiences are at least partially socially constituted, we can agree with Kippax et al.'s (1988: 25) claim that 'each individual mode of appropriation of the social . . . is potentially generalisable'.

Another way of attempting to solve the problem of generalizability is through accumulative techniques. These can be applied within and across studies. Within a study, accumulative techniques ensure that a particular observation made in one context is checked against related observations in other contexts, in case a more generalized, or overarching, category may be identified. Across studies, accumulative techniques allow us to review different studies' findings in relation to one another. Here, rather than relying on one isolated qualitative study, we aim to integrate the findings from a number of comparable studies to draw wider conclusions.

Reflexivity

As indicated in Chapter 1, qualitative research acknowledges that the researcher influences and shapes the research process, both as a person (*personal reflexivity*) and as a theorist/thinker (*epistemological reflexivity*) (see p. 10). Reflexivity is important in qualitative research because it encourages us to foreground, and reflect upon, the ways in which the person of the researcher is implicated in the research and its findings. It is not easy to focus attention on our own role within the research process, especially if we have been trained to think of 'the researcher' as (ideally) detached, neutral and unbiased – more of an instrument than a person. Reflexivity, however, means more than acknowledging personal 'biases'; reflexivity invites us to think about how our own reactions to the research context and the data actually make possible certain insights and understandings. In this sense, reflexivity in qualitative research has much in common with how psychoanalytic psychotherapists use 'countertransference' – the therapist's emotional response to the client's behaviour – in order to gain a better understanding of the client (see also Frosh and Saville Young 2008: 111–15). Finlay and Gough (2003) provide a wide-ranging discussion of the complex issues that can arise in relation to considerations of reflexivity in qualitative research.

Reflexive considerations can be discussed under a separate heading (e.g. 'Reflexivity'); for example, at the end of a research report the researcher may reflect on how the research has changed him or her and their way of thinking about the subject matter of the research. Alternatively, they can be integrated into the report and raised in context, whenever they are relevant. For example, in the methods section there may

be a discussion of the researcher's person (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, personal experience of the subject matter of the research, etc.) and the ways in which this may affect data collection and/or analysis. Reflexivity can be revisited many times within the same report. There are ways of highlighting and differentiating reflexivity considerations from the rest of the report, for example by introducing a different font or colour, or by positioning reflexive comments as a series of footnotes throughout the report. However, there is no set format for addressing reflexivity. The important thing is to include reflections on the researcher's role in the research in a way that is clear, honest and informative.

Ethics

The same basic *ethical considerations* apply to the treatment of participants in both qualitative and quantitative research. These include (see Elmes et al. 1995):

1. *Informed consent*. The researcher should ensure that participants are fully informed about the research procedure and give their consent to participate in the research *before* data collection takes place.
2. *No deception*. Deception of participants should be avoided altogether. The *only* justification for deception is when there is no other way to answer the research question *and* the potential benefit of the research far exceeds any risk to the participants.
3. *Right to withdraw*. The researcher should ensure that participants feel free to withdraw from participation in the study without fear of being penalized.

4. *Debriefing*. The researcher should ensure that, after data collection, participants are informed about the full aims of the research. Ideally, they should also have access to any publications arising from the study they took part in.
5. *Confidentiality*. The researcher should maintain complete confidentiality regarding any information about participants acquired during the research process.

To summarize, researchers should protect their participants from any harm or loss, and they should aim to preserve their psychological well-being and dignity at all times. However, many qualitative researchers go beyond these basic ethical guidelines. Brinkmann and Kvale (2008: 263) argue that qualitative research is saturated with ethical issues because '[T]he human interaction in qualitative inquiries affects researchers and participants, and the knowledge produced through qualitative research affects our understanding of the human condition.' From this point of view, ethical issues arise from the very beginning of the research (e.g. regarding the formulation of the research question), they stay with us throughout our interactions with our research participants, and they continue to be relevant throughout the process of dissemination of the research findings. For example, instead of merely protecting participants from any harm or loss, some qualitative researchers aim to deliver positive benefits for participants. Action research is designed to generate knowledge about a process or system through changing it for the better. Here, any action taken has to be 'in the best possible interests of the people involved' (see Hart and Bond 1995). Similarly, critical discourse analysis aims to challenge

social inequality, injustice and relations of power. Van Dijk (1987: 4) identifies the following aims for critical science:

Beyond description or superficial application, critical science in each domain asks further questions, such as those of responsibility, interests and ideology. Instead of focusing on purely academic or theoretical problems, it starts from prevailing social problems, and thereby chooses the perspectives of those who suffer most and critically analyses those in power, those who are responsible and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2008) caution against the practice of ethics as rule-following. They suggest that ethical issues and concerns cannot be addressed and 'solved' once and for all during the planning stages of the research. Rather, ethical dilemmas will surface throughout the research process, requiring the researcher to remain ethically attuned throughout. This may mean, for instance, that the issue of consent is revisited throughout the study, something known as 'processual consent' (Rosenblatt 1995). Instead of simply learning the ethical rules for the treatment of participants in psychological research (see list 1–5 above), Brinkmann and Kvale (2008: 276–8) recommend that researchers learn 'ethical research behaviour' and develop 'the ability to sense, judge and act in an ethically committed fashion' (p. 278).

This is particularly useful in qualitative research because the open-ended, exploratory nature of such research means that apparently straightforward requirements such as informed consent and confidentiality can become an ethical challenge (e.g. How can we obtain informed consent for a study whose direction and remit is likely to change during the research

process? How can we guarantee confidentiality in a case study of one exceptional individual? What happens if criminal behaviour comes to light during a confidential interview?). Furthermore, qualitative in-depth interviews can lead to quasi-therapeutic relationships between researcher and participant, potentially giving rise to feelings and expectations on the part of the participant that the researcher may not be equipped to deal with. In addition, interviewees may feel betrayed when reading research reports offering interpretations of their accounts that do not tally with their own understanding of their experience (see also Willig 2004). Power relations between researchers and participants are perhaps more subtle and more covert in qualitative research; however, this does not mean that they should be ignored or denied by qualitative researchers. To the contrary, it could be argued that the close personal relationship between researcher and participants in qualitative
research carries a particular risk for the abuse of trust – for example, when the researcher 'fakes friendship' in order to obtain information (see Duncombe and Jessop 2002).

The research question

Qualitative research projects are guided by one or more research questions. Research questions are different from hypotheses. A hypothesis is a claim, derived from existing theory, which can be tested against empirical evidence. It can be either rejected or retained. A research question, by contrast, is open-ended. That is, it cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. A research question calls for an answer that provides detailed descriptions and, where possible, also explanations of a phenomenon.

Qualitative research questions identify the phenomenon (i.e. the process, object or entity) that the researcher wants to investigate. They point us in a direction without predicting what we may find. Good qualitative research questions tend to be process-oriented: they ask *how* something happens. For example, we may ask, 'How do women with chronic illness manage a pregnancy?' or 'How do married couples negotiate childcare arrangements?' Qualitative research questions are always provisional because the researcher may find that the very concepts and terminology used in the research question are, in fact, not appropriate or relevant to the participants' experiences. Asking the wrong question undermines the validity of the findings; qualitative research is open to the possibility that the research question may have to change during the research process. It could be argued that one of the outcomes of qualitative research should be an understanding of what would have been an appropriate research question to ask in the first place!

In Chapter 2 we established that every research question is underpinned by a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions and that the researcher's choice of data collection method and analytic strategy needs to be compatible with the epistemological orientation of the study. We can add to this that the research question plays a slightly different role in different qualitative method(ologie)s. In some methodologies, such as discourse analysis, the research question is directly shaped by the methodology itself. That is, the methodology, through its epistemological assumptions, dictates what we can and cannot ask. For example, a methodology informed by a social constructionist epistemology can (only) address research questions about the social and/or discursive construction of phenomena.

Appropriate research questions within this context might be 'How is "failure" constructed in contemporary academic institutions?' or 'How do clinical psychologists construct "mental health" in their interactions with clients and colleagues?'

Other methodologies can address a wider range of research questions. For example, a realist version of the grounded theory method (see Chapter 7) assumes that the data themselves generate categories that emerge during the research process and which capture the reality of the phenomenon under investigation. As a result, research questions for grounded theory research can be about processes, experiences, structures or even cognitions. Examples of appropriate research questions within this context are: 'How do students make decisions about their future careers?'; 'How does a telephone helpline train its volunteers?'; 'What happens when a person undergoes a gender reassignment?'

When formulating our research question, we also need to think about its ethical and political dimensions. We need to think about in whose interest it may be to ask the question in the first place, and how the answer to it may be used by individuals and organizations in society. We need to reflect on the value of the knowledge that our research question aims to produce and for whom we are producing this knowledge. If our research is funded, we should consider the motives of the funding body in supporting the research, and the extent to which we share these motives. *Reflexivity* also demands that we examine very carefully our own personal and professional reasons for asking our research question. The formulation of

research questions is discussed in more detail in relation to the different qualitative method(ologie)s discussed in Part 2.

I conclude this section by citing Lorion (1990: 321–2), whose 'street lamp' metaphor reminds us that our research question should always precede our choice of methodology:

I am frequently reminded of the old joke about the individual who explained that he was looking for his missing keys under the street lamp because 'the light is better there' . . . The 'street lamp' draws us to it by its apparent capacity to facilitate our search.

Lorion makes the point that we should not look for answers in certain places simply because they are familiar or easily accessible; rather, we need to look in places where the answer is likely to be, no
matter how inhospitable these places may be. This insight can be applied to research methods. Methods are a means to an end. They are 'the way to the goal' (Kvale 1996a: 278). This means that our research question (the 'goal') should inform our choice of methods, not the other way around. It may be tempting to choose a research question that can be answered by the method we know best. For example, we may have learned how to do t-tests and then decide to carry out research that addresses a question about differences in performance between two groups of people. But is this really what we want to know about the two groups? If it is, we can go ahead with our between-subjects design. If it is not, however, we ought to formulate our research question first and then choose the most appropriate research method to answer our question. It is within this context that research can take on the characteristics of an adventure (see pp. 3–4).

Choosing the right method

Strictly speaking, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' methods. Rather, methods of data collection and analysis can be more or less appropriate to our research question. Having formulated a research question, the researcher needs to make a decision about how to collect the sort of data that can answer that question. That is to say, he or she needs to choose a method of data collection. The researcher also needs to think about how the answer to the research question may be extracted from the data. That is, he or she needs to select a method of data analysis. It is important to understand that the research question, data collection technique and method of data analysis are dependent on one another. They cannot be considered separately and they should not be chosen independently from one another. A good qualitative research design is one in which the method of data analysis is appropriate to the research question, and where the method of data collection generates data that are appropriate to the method of analysis. Researchers should never collect data without having decided how to analyse it. It could be argued that both qualitative and quantitative researchers share a common purpose, and that, ideally, they 'share a belief in the fallibility of knowledge, the need to link theory and empirical observation, the obligation to carry out research rigorously and conscientiously, and the necessity of critique and dissemination of research' (Yardley and Bishop 2008: 363).

From a pragmatic point of view, the aim of research is not to gain access to an abstract truth independent from human experience but rather to generate understanding that will be useful to us. It is designed to answer our questions, and as such, research designs and methods of data collection and

analysis cannot be in themselves 'wrong' but they can be more or less appropriate (to the question put). Sometimes, the most appropriate way to answer a research question requires the use of two or more research methods (mixed methods design). We can combine qualitative and quantitative methods within the same study in order to answer related questions. For example, we can use a questionnaire to establish whether there are significant differences between two groups of people in terms of a particular behaviour or preference, and then use semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups to find out why there may be such differences by obtaining more information about what the behaviour or preference means to the two groups of people. Similarly, we can use more than one qualitative method within one study if our research question requires it. For example, we may want to gain a better understanding of a particular community (e.g. football clubs, reading groups, support groups, etc.) and the participants' experience of it. To achieve our research aim, we may choose to conduct some participant observation in order to identify the implicit and explicit rules of behaviour associated with it. This could be followed by semi-structured interviews with a selection of participants (perhaps representing different social categories such as women and men, regulars and newcomers, etc.) that would provide us with information about how participants feel about their role within the community. Again, the important thing is to select methods that are able to generate data which will help us to answer our research question(s).

There is a wide range of qualitative data collection techniques that generate quite different kinds of data. Even though one technique (e.g. audio-recording of semi-structured interviews) may generate data that can be analysed in a number of

different ways (including interpretative phenomenological analysis and discourse analysis), there are other techniques that are simply not compatible with some methods of data analysis. For example, notes written by the interviewer during the course of a semi-structured interview cannot be subjected to conversation analysis. In the remainder of this chapter, some major data collection methods are introduced, and their relationship with various forms of qualitative data analysis is highlighted.

Semi-structured interviewing

Semi-structured interviewing is the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research in psychology. This is partly because interview data can be analysed in a variety of ways, which means that semi-structured interviewing is a method of data collection that is compatible with several methods of data analysis (e.g. discourse analysis, grounded theory, interpretative phenomenology). Another reason for the popularity of semi-structured interviews is that they are somewhat easier to arrange than other forms of qualitative data collection. This is not to say that the actual process of semi-structured interviewing is 'easy'; rather, I am suggesting that there may be fewer logistical difficulties in arranging a series of semi-structured interviews with a small number of volunteers than in designing a longitudinal study that may involve the negotiation of access to organizations or groups for the purpose of participant observation or gaining participants' commitment to keeping diaries over a period of time. The popularity of semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection has given rise to a debate about the role of interviews in qualitative research (see *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2005). Potter and Hepburn (2005)

have drawn attention to the fact that much qualitative analysis of interview-generated data does not pay attention to the many contextual features of the interview material (e.g. interactional features, its status as a conversation between two people, the stake that both participants inevitably have in the interview, etc.) and instead takes such data at 'face value'. It is important to reflect on the meaning and experience of the interview for both interviewer and interviewee, and to take care not to assume that the interviewee's words are simple and direct reflections of their thoughts and feelings. After all, the interview is a conversation between two people whose interaction with one another generates the data to be analysed. Within this context, it is possible that as a result of taking part in the interview, the interviewee begins to think about aspects of their experience in a new or different way so that new knowledge and new understanding are generated for both the interviewer and the interviewee (see Curtis and Curtis 2011).

Semi-structured interviewing requires careful preparation and planning. The researcher needs to think about who to interview (and why), how to recruit participants, how to record and transcribe the interview, what style of interviewing to use, and what to ask participants. In this section, I discuss (1) the general characteristics of semi-structured interviewing; (2) the interview agenda; and (3) recording and transcription of the interview.

General characteristics of semi-structured interviewing

The semi-structured interview provides an opportunity for the researcher to hear the participant talk about a particular aspect of their life or experience. The questions asked by the researcher function as triggers that encourage the participant

to talk. This style of interviewing is sometimes described as non-directive; however, it is important to acknowledge that it is the researcher whose *research question* drives the interview. Through his or her questions and comments, the interviewer steers the interview to obtain the kind of data that will answer the research question. The interviewer needs to find the right balance between maintaining control of the interview and where it is going, and allowing the interviewee the space to redefine the topic under investigation and thus to generate novel insights for the researcher. This can be difficult. A carefully constructed *interview agenda* can go some way towards ensuring that the interviewer does not lose sight of the original research question (see below).

To encourage the participant to speak freely and openly, and to maximize their own understanding of what is being communicated in the interview, researchers are advised to consider the possible effects of their own social identities (i.e. gender, social class, ethnicity, nationality, age, etc.) on the interviewee. They should also familiarize themselves with the participant's cultural milieu, and the status of 'the interview' within this milieu. For example, a middle-aged professional may be more comfortable with a formal interview than an unemployed youth because, in the latter's experience, such interviews may be associated with administrative distrust and judgemental assessments. The researcher needs to know what the interview means to the interviewee to fully understand the interviewee's contribution.

The researcher also needs to be aware of linguistic variability. The same term may not mean the same thing to all interviewees. In semi-structured interviewing, the emphasis is on meaning rather than lexical comparability. This means that

the researcher needs to try to understand what the interviewee *meant* by what he or she said, irrespective of *how* (s)he chose to say it (discourse analysis constitutes an exception to this; see Chapters 6 and 7). It is also worth bearing in mind that language is indexical; that is, the meanings of words depend on the context within which they are spoken. For example, waiting for 'a long while' probably refers to something like 20 minutes within the context of waiting for a bus, whereas the same expression used when talking about buying a house may mean months or even years.

Semi-structured interviewing, perhaps more than other types of interviewing, depends on the rapport established between interviewer and interviewee. The semi-structured interview is, however, somewhat ambiguous. This is because it combines features of the formal interview (e.g. fixed time limit; fixed roles of 'interviewer' and 'interviewee'; the existence of an interview agenda) with features of an informal conversation such as the open-endedness of the questions and the emphasis on narrative and experience. This means that although rapport can be established quickly between interviewer and interviewee, it can also be disrupted suddenly when the interviewer's role as researcher becomes salient. This can happen during the interview; for example, when the interviewer needs to attend to the recording device, thus reminding the interviewee that they are 'being interviewed'. It can also happen after the interview; for example, when the interviewee reads the transcript of the interview and realizes how much they revealed about themselves in comparison with the interviewer who revealed very little in what appeared, at the time, to be a 'normal' conversation. The semi-structured interview requires sensitive and ethical negotiation of rapport

between the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviewers should not abuse the informal ambience of the interview to encourage the interviewee to reveal more than they may feel comfortable with after the event.

The interview agenda

The interview agenda for a semi-structured interview consists of a relatively small number of open-ended questions. It is a good idea to start with more public questions and move on to more personal matters when rapport has been established. Some researchers prefer to identify topic headings instead of questions, around which they then formulate questions during the course of the interview. This allows the researcher to incorporate the interviewee's own terms and concepts into the questions, and thus to make the questions more appropriate or relevant to the interviewee. However, the problem with using topic headings is that, as a result of their intense involvement in the interview process, researchers may formulate questions that are less open and more directive than necessary. Better formulations of questions may emerge from careful reflection and consideration of alternative versions before the interview, especially where the interviewer is a novice. However, it is a good idea to restate interviewees' comments and to incorporate them into further questions throughout the interview. This demonstrates to the interviewee that the interviewer is indeed listening, and it allows the interviewer an opportunity to check with the interviewee that they have understood correctly. It also serves to maintain coherence and continuity throughout the interview. Semi-structured interviews can last from around 40 minutes to two hours, depending on the topic and the interviewee's willingness and ability to talk about their experiences in depth and in some

detail. It is a good idea, however, to agree a timeframe with the interviewee at the beginning of the interview.

A good way to obtain detailed and comprehensive accounts from interviewees is to express ignorance. A naïve interviewer encourages the interviewee to 'state the obvious' and thus to give voice to otherwise implicit assumptions and expectations. This can be extremely enlightening. Another way to encourage interviewees to elaborate is to ask for illustrations of events or experiences. This is particularly helpful when abstract concepts or general opinions are being referred to. For instance, having heard the interviewee say that people do not take him or her seriously, the interviewer can ask the interviewee for a concrete example of when (s)he felt this way and how (s)he dealt with it.

Another way of encouraging interviewees to produce rich and varied accounts is to use a stimulus such as a film clip, a newspaper cutting or a photograph in order to stimulate and focus the discussion. Alternatively, interviewees can be invited to bring along their own images or items of significance so that they can then talk about what these mean to them during the interview (see Chapter 13 for more on this). In this way, the data produced during the interview are likely to be richer in detailed description of interviewees' experiences, memories and feelings, and less likely to remain at an abstract, impersonal level.

Spradley (1979) has produced a useful guide to formulate four different types of question: descriptive, structural, contrast and evaluative:

Descriptive questions prompt the interviewee to provide a general account of 'what happened' or 'what is the case'. Such questions ask for biographical information (e.g. 'What do you do for a living?'), anecdotes (e.g. 'What happened that day?'), life histories (e.g. 'How did you come to live in London?'), and so on.

- *Structural* questions are about how the interviewee organizes his or her knowledge. They prompt interviewees to identify the categories and frameworks of meaning that they use to make sense of the world. Here we may ask questions such as 'What does it mean to be an innocent victim of a crime?' or 'How did you decide to have an HIV antibody test?'
- *Contrast* questions allow the interviewee to make comparisons between events and experiences. For example, we may ask, 'Would you rather report a crime and run the risk of revenge, or keep quiet and be safe from harassment?' or 'Did you prefer working in the public or the private sector?'
- *Evaluative* questions are about the interviewee's feelings towards someone or something. We can be vague in our formulation and ask, 'How do/did you feel about this?', or we can be more specific and ask about a particular emotion (e.g. 'Did you feel afraid when you took the blood test?').

Finally, it is important to ensure that the questions asked are actually meaningful to the participants. Cross-cultural researchers have drawn attention to the fact that not all questions make sense in all cultures. For example, Deutscher

(1978) reminds us of Lerner's observation that hypothetical questions ('What would you do if . . . ?') may be considered unworthy of attention by some (e.g. the French) but be unproblematic for others (e.g. North Americans). It is important for an interviewer to be aware of the assumptions which underpin their questions and to pay attention to how the interviewee responds to these. For example, the question we ask may presume a sense of agency on the part of the interviewee (e.g. 'Why did you do that?', 'How did you decide to do that?') whereas our interviewees may not feel that they did have agency. As a result of such a mismatch, the question may not make sense to the interviewee and they may simply answer, 'I don't know' or 'I just did it'. Rather than moving on to the next question, it may be worth following up with a direct question about the extent to which the interviewee agrees with the basic assumption contained within the original question, for example by asking, 'Did you feel that you had a choice in the matter?'.

Recording and transcription of the interview

To be able to carry out a full analysis of the data, it is necessary to audio- or video-record and transcribe the interview. Most qualitative methods of analysis require that the material is transcribed verbatim, or near verbatim. Taking notes during the interview is no substitute for a full recording. Note-taking also distracts both the interviewee and interviewer. It interferes with eye contact and non-verbal communication and does not encourage the development of rapport between interviewee and interviewer. However, taping the interview may also affect what is being said. Participants may not be entirely comfortable and relaxed in the presence of a tape-, or worse, a video-recorder. It is

important that the researcher explains why the recording is being made and how it is going to be used. It is also a good idea to offer the interviewee a copy of the transcript of the interview, if at all possible. The researcher may ask the interviewee to comment on the transcript. Such feedback constitutes additional data.

If the interview is being tape-recorded, the researcher needs to make sure that the recorder is placed in a position where it will record clearly. This could be on a table between the interviewer and the interviewee. Such positioning also allows the researcher to keep an eye on the recorder to make sure that it is taping the interview. It also allows the researcher to adjust the position of the recording device if necessary. It is vital that the researcher checks that the tape-recorder is working before the interview. It is a good idea to use a new set of batteries for each interview. It is extremely frustrating to find that an hour-long interview has not been recorded or has been recorded so badly as to be inaudible. Badly recorded interviews also take much longer to transcribe.

There are different ways in which an interview can be transcribed. If we are interested in the subtleties of communicative interaction between interviewer and interviewee, we need to transcribe the words as well as the way in which they are spoken. This means including pauses, interruptions, intonation, volume of speech, and so on. These various features of speech are represented by the signs of the *transcription notation*. A commonly used form of notation for such detailed transcription was developed by Gail Jefferson. Guidance to using this type of notation can be found in Potter and Wetherell (1987) and in Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

Curtis and Curtis (2011: 42) provide a helpful list of the most commonly used notations;
these include pauses measured in tenths of seconds (e.g. 2.5), capital letters indicating an increase in volume (e.g. BUT), degree signs indicating a decrease in volume (e.g. °but°), underlining for emphasis (e.g. but), colons to indicate the prolonging of a sound (e.g. Bu::t), brackets to indicate that the transcriber was unsure about a sound or word (e.g. (but)), empty brackets indicating that the transcriber could not hear what was said at all (e.g. ( )), a double 'h' to mark an audible exhalation (hh), and a description of the sound in brackets for any other sounds made (e.g. (sigh)). Detailed transcription is required for conversation analysis and some types of discursive analysis. If we are interested only in the content of the interview, we do not need to transcribe non-linguistic features of speech. In this case, it is sufficient to transcribe what is being said (the words). This would be appropriate for grounded theory analysis, for example. However, even here we need to make a decision about what we wish to include. For instance, we may wish to include incomplete sentences, false starts, laughter and repetition of words. Alternatively, we may wish to 'tidy up' the transcript. It all depends on what we aim to do with the transcript. That is, our decision about what type of transcription to use depends on our research question and the method of analysis we have chosen. It is important to bear in mind, however, that *all* types of transcription constitute a form of translation of the spoken word into something else (see also Willig 2012a: Chapter 4). An interview transcript can never be the mirror image of the interview.

Participant observation

‘Observation’ is part of a wide range of research activities. It could be argued that without engaging in some type of observation, a researcher would not be able to carry out any kind of research. In this section, however, we are concerned with ‘observation’ as a method of data collection. Flick (1998: 137) identifies five features that define types of observation. They include the extent to which the observation is covert, the extent to which it is systematic (or standardized), whether or not it takes place in a natural setting, whether or not the observer takes part in the activity that is being observed, and how much of it involves self-observation (or reflexivity). The type of observational method we are concerned with here is *participant observation*. This tends to take place in natural settings (e.g. a school or hospital; a bar or club), where the observer can be either incognito (covert) or known as a researcher (overt). It tends to involve at least some self-observation (see *Reflexivity*, p. 10), and the observations made tend not to be standardized (i.e. are not systematic), at least in the early stages of the research. Participant observation requires the researcher to engage in a variety of activities including participation, documentation, (informal) interviewing and reflection. The researcher needs to maintain a balance between participation and observation. In other words, the researcher needs to be involved enough to understand what is going on, yet remain detached enough to be able to reflect on the phenomenon under investigation. This can be extremely difficult, particularly when the research is concerned with emotionally charged subject matter. For example, it may be easier to maintain reflective distance when we are observing visitors to an art gallery than when we are engaged in participant observation in an intensive care unit. In their book about soccer fans, Marsh et al. (1978: 119) remind us of the

importance of emotional involvement in participant observation (emphasis in original):

A point should be made here concerning participant observation. Many people seem to equate this kind of methodology with going along to events and simply looking at what goes on – they seem to leave out the participation bit. But an involvement, albeit a rather restrained one, in the action is a basic requirement. One needs not only to observe what is happening but also to feel what it is like to be in a particular social situation. This experiential aspect does not come about by being a totally disinterested onlooker. It comes about through an attempt to share in the excitement and emotions which, for soccer fans, constitute the 'electric' atmosphere which is seen as being the most important aspect of Saturday afternoons.

The participant observer needs to keep detailed notes of any observations made. In some settings, it is a good idea to phase observation and writing. This is particularly the case where participation in the activities under investigation requires the researcher's full attention. Note-taking will then have to wait. However, it is important that the researcher records his or her observations as soon as possible after they have been made. This is partly to counteract forgetting but also because we may see things differently after a period of reflection. First impressions cannot be recaptured. Observational notes should feature as much detail as possible, including verbatim (or near verbatim) quotes of what people said, and concrete descriptions of the setting, people and events involved. In the early stages of the research, in particular, the
researcher should take care not to exclude observations that appear trivial at the time. This is because apparent trivia may

well turn out to contain crucial information, the value of which may only emerge in later stages of the research.

Some researchers find it helpful to think about observational notes in terms of their focus. Most of what is recorded will be concerned with the actual observations made. Such notes will include descriptions of settings, events and people, as well as quotations and/or summaries of what people said. These may be referred to as *substantive notes*. Another set of notes will be concerned with the process of observation itself. Such notes will reflect on the researcher's role in the research, his or her relationship with the other participants, and problems encountered in the field, such as any difficulties associated with the negotiation of roles. These are *methodological notes*. Finally, the researcher will wish to record emerging themes, connections, patterns, and so on. These constitute the beginnings of data analysis and theory-building; they may be referred to as *analytical notes*.

Some approaches to participant observation *combine* data collection and analysis. This is how participant observation is used in ethogenic research. In this case, the analytical notes will be extensive and progressively complex. Others *phase* data collection and analysis whereby a period of data collection is followed by a period of analysis of the observational notes. Preliminary data analysis then gives rise to another, this time more focused, phase of data collection, and so on. This is how grounded theory researchers use participant observation. A third approach to participant observation involves a period of data collection followed by analysis of the data. This is suitable when the researcher has little time or is unable to return to the field for whatever reason.

The first two approaches (*combining* and *phasing* of data collection and analysis) require focused observation. Focused observation involves the identification of a particular aspect of the phenomenon as the focus for intensive observation. Focused observation constitutes a move beyond a purely descriptive approach to observation. It is based upon emergent theoretical formulations and it is designed to 'test' the researcher's hunches against reality. For example, if we think that we may have identified a recurrent pattern in our observational data (e.g. that nurses take cigarette breaks after particularly stressful or distressing encounters with patients), we may wish to focus our observations around relevant situations or events (e.g. stressful or distressing encounters with patients) to further explore the pattern. It is important, however, to maintain an open mind and to observe widely enough to allow disconfirming observations to occur. Emerging theory should not constrain the researcher's ability to consider alternative explanations. A shift from a descriptive to an explanatory level needs to be managed carefully.

Ethnography and *action research* are qualitative research methods which rely heavily on participant observation. The aim of ethnographic research is to obtain an insider view of some aspects of people's everyday lives by participating in those lives for a sustained period of time, either overtly or covertly. Ethnographic researchers tend to be interested in specific cultural practices and their meanings for those who take part in them. They are concerned with what Griffin and Bengry-Howell (2008: 16) describe as 'cultural interpretation' and with understanding 'the cultural and symbolic aspects of people's actions and the contexts in which those actions occur' (see also Howitt 2010: Chapter 5; Curtis and Curtis

2011: Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of ethnography and participant observation). Action research shares ethnography's interest in the lived experience of its research participants. In addition, action research requires that the researcher works with the research participants in order to bring about positive change in some aspects of their everyday lives. The precise nature and direction of this change emerge from the work itself and are not predetermined by the researcher. However, it is hoped that taking part in an action research project will allow the researcher to develop a better theoretical understanding of how social change can come about (see also Hart and Bond 1995; Kagan et al. 2008 for a more detailed discussion of action research).

Diaries

Diaries are not widely used as a method of data collection in psychological research. This is because the diary method constitutes a challenge for both researcher and participant. Participants make a commitment to maintain a record (of their experiences, of their activities, of their feelings) over an extended period. Keeping the diary will inevitably have an effect upon their daily routines and most probably also on their experiences. The diary becomes the participant's companion, and yet it has to be handed over to the researcher at the end of the data collection phase. The researcher in turn has to face the challenge of
recruiting participants who are willing to keep a diary. Some sections of the population will be more likely to agree to take part in such a study than others. Literacy, however, should not have to be a precondition for taking part in a diary study. Tape-recorders can take the place of journals. Video-diaries are another possibility (see Chapter 13 for more on this). The

researcher has to formulate a set of instructions that will guide participants in their diary-keeping without constraining them unnecessarily. Participants are likely to differ in their expectations of what is involved in keeping a diary for research purposes. Some of them will have kept diaries for themselves; others will find the idea of writing about themselves strange and possibly uncomfortable. The researcher needs to identify the appropriate medium of communication for the participants. Recruitment and initiation of participants, therefore, require a lot of thought.

As with interviews, diaries can be more or less structured. Here, we are concerned with unstructured diaries. That is, participants are asked to keep a record of their experiences, activities and feelings in relation to a particular issue or topic (e.g. their pregnancy, their spouse, their work, their chronic illness), *in their own words*. They are not provided with a set of questions or rating scales to complete each time they make an entry in their diary. However, even with unstructured diaries, the researcher needs to provide participants with some guidance as to:

- how frequently they are expected to make entries (e.g. every hour, day, week, month, etc.);
- which medium of reporting is to be used (e.g. audio-taping, written, photographic, video, etc.);
- what to write about (i.e. the focus of the study);
- the time period covered (e.g. one day, week, month, year, etc.).

Depending on the research question, there may be more or less flexibility in relation to any one, or all, of these. In

addition, the researcher may need to indicate to participants in how much detail they are expected to write about their experiences. However, it is important not to be too prescriptive, as this may undermine participants' motivation to take part in the study. It is a good idea for the researcher to collect diary entries regularly (e.g. daily or weekly) to maintain contact with participants, answer any questions they may have and to motivate them to continue keeping the diary.

When used successfully, the diary method of data collection can provide access to information that is otherwise very hard to obtain. The diaries generate data that are temporally ordered; that is, they reveal how events unfold prospectively, in real time. They avoid problems associated with retrospective reporting, which can easily be coloured by the participant's present circumstances, retrospective interpretation of events or simply forgetting of details. Diaries can also facilitate access to very personal or intimate information that may not emerge in a face-to-face interview. However, the diary method does suffer from poor recruitment and high drop-out rates, due to the high demands it places upon participants. Its success depends very much on the participants' motivation and commitment to the study. There are also ethical concerns. Keeping the diary may sensitize participants to certain experiences. For example, keeping a pain diary may increase some participants' pain. Keeping a diary may also prompt the respondent to reflect upon aspects of their lives that they feel unhappy about. The commitment to keep the diary may increase pressure on participants, particularly during stressful episodes. Researchers need to monitor any harmful effects of keeping the diary on participants and offer support where needed.

Focus groups

Focus groups have only recently emerged as a standard data collection technique for qualitative researchers in psychology. However, focus groups are rapidly gaining in popularity, particularly in qualitative health psychology (e.g. Wilkinson 1998). Focus groups provide an alternative to semi-structured interviewing. The focus group is really a group interview that uses the interaction among participants as a source of data. Here, the researcher takes on the role of moderator whose task it is to introduce the group members to one another, to introduce the focus of the group (e.g. a question or a stimulus such as an advert or a photo) and to gently 'steer' the discussion. Such 'steering' may involve periodically recalling the original focus of the group, prompting group members to respond to issues raised by others, or identifying agreements and disagreements among group members. As a focus group can give rise to difficult group dynamics which have the potential to distress individual members of the group, it is also important that the moderator ensures that a set of ground rules is adopted by the group before the discussion begins. Such ground rules include the agreement that everything that is said within the group is confidential and will
not be taken outside of the group by individual members, that members will respect one another and listen to one another. The moderator also sets certain limits to the discussion, such as its beginning and its end. Focus groups tend to run for one and a half to two hours.

The strength of the focus group as a method of data collection lies in its ability to mobilize participants to respond to and comment on one another's contributions. In this way, statements are challenged, extended, developed or qualified in

ways that generate rich data for the researcher. Such data allow the researcher to address questions about the ways in which attitudes may be formed and changed, and about how participants jointly construct meanings. The focus group provides evidence of the ways in which participants may justify their positions, and how they may be persuaded by others to change their views. In addition, it provides a setting that is less artificial than the one-to-one interview, which means that the data generated by it are likely to have high(er) ecological validity.

Ideally, focus group participants should interact with one another in the same way that they would interact with peers outside of the research context. This is more likely to be the case if participants are already acquainted with one another before they take part in the focus group. The moderator's contribution to a focus group discussion consists of a series of questions that are informed by the research question which drives the wider research as a whole. This is very similar to the relationship between a research question and the interview agenda in semi-structured interviewing. It has been suggested (e.g. Flick 2006; Curtis and Curtis 2011) that a focus group moderator can also use provocative questions to stimulate the discussion and to encourage the expression of different views and positions. Focus groups should consist of no more than six to eight participants. This is to ensure that all participants remain actively involved in the group discussion throughout the data collection phase. It is extremely difficult to transcribe a group discussion of more than around six participants accurately.

Depending on the research question, focus groups can be: (1) homogenous (where participants share key features) or

heterogeneous (where participants are different), (2) pre-existing (e.g. a group of friends or work colleagues) or new (where participants have not met before), and (3) concerned (where participants have a stake in the subject matter) or naïve (where participants do not have any particular commitment in relation to the subject matter). For example, we may be interested in the experience of pregnancy in women whose partners have died shortly after conception. Our research question may be 'How do women whose partners have died shortly after conception manage their pregnancies?' To address this research question, we need to recruit a homogeneous focus group (i.e. women whose partners have died shortly after conception). The group could be either pre-existing (e.g. a support group for women in this situation) or new (brought together through the researcher). The group would probably be concerned rather than naïve, since the subject matter of the focus group discussion concerns their personal circumstances.

Even though focus groups may appear to be more productive, or at least more efficient, than the one-to-one interview because they invite accounts from a number of people at the same time, they are not appropriate to all research questions. If the subject matter is sensitive and the participants are expected to talk about intimate aspects of their experience, semi-structured interviews may be more appropriate. Disclosure is not necessarily enhanced through the presence of other participants, although mutual questioning within a group may have this effect. The researcher needs to think carefully about the extent to which the focus group setting would, or would not, facilitate disclosure in relation to the research question. It is also important to be clear about one's aims in analysing focus group-generated data. If our aim is to

obtain valid and reliable information about the participants' views and/or experiences in relation to a particular concern (i.e. a *realist* research aim), then we need to employ analytic techniques that will allow us to detect, and remove from our analysis, distorting influences such as the contributions of domineering group members or overly acquiescent comments. On the other hand, if the aim of the research is to trace the ways in which meanings are collectively constructed within a group and how consensus may be achieved through discussion (i.e. a *social constructionist* research aim), then all contributions are equally useful to our analysis. In both cases, however, the researcher needs to pay careful attention to the group dynamics within the group. A focus group with six participants is never the equivalent of six individual interviews because, as Kidd and Parshall (2000: 294) point out 'individuals in groups do not speak or answer questions in the same way as they do in other settings'. Again, as is the case in relation to data generated through semi-structured interviewing, our choice of an appropriate method of analysis for focus group data will depend upon the research question and the epistemological orientation of the study. For example, if our focus group data was generated in an attempt to answer a *realist* research question such as 'What do first-year students' expect from their time at university?', then a form of thematic analysis would probably be the most appropriate method of data analysis. If, however, our research question was
social constructionist in nature, asking, for example, 'How do first-year students construct their identities as "students"?', then a discursive analysis would be more suitable. Although it is rare to see focus group data used to address phenomenological questions, it is conceivable that a researcher might ask a question such as, 'What is it like to

find out that one's parents are not one's biological parents?' and conduct a focus group with a small number of homogenous and concerned participants. A suitable method of analysis would then be a form of phenomenological analysis (but see Smith et al. 2009: 71–3 for a word of warning and some good advice on the use of focus groups in phenomenological research).

Using the internet in qualitative data collection

In recent years qualitative researchers have begun to use the internet as a source of data (see Mann and Stewart 2000; Evans et al. 2008). The internet can provide access to a range of data sources, including unsolicited data (e.g. web pages, blogs, newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms) (see Robinson 2001), as well as internet-mediated interviews and discussions (e.g. using emails in real time, or audio- or video-conferencing). For example, ethnographic researchers have become interested in the social dynamics of internet communities (e.g. Garcia et al. 2009) and there has been an increase in the use of virtual focus groups (see Stewart and Williams 2005). It could be argued that internet-based data is likely to have high ecological validity because such data has been generated within an environment which is highly familiar to users, which draws on forms of communication which they are accustomed to and which may be considered a safe space by those who use it. In this regard, the use of the internet for data collection shares some features with forms of observation in naturalistic environments. The internet also allows the researcher to manage challenges around time and space; for example, the researcher does not need to be in the same place as the research participants (e.g. interviews and focus groups can be conducted via Skype). However, it is

important to also be aware of the potential disadvantages of using the internet to collect data. These include difficulties in establishing the true identity of research participants, especially where the data take the form of written comments, and the loss of non-verbal communication which can lead to misunderstandings and/or misinterpretations of what is being communicated. It is also more difficult to establish rapport across distances in time and space, although such distances can also facilitate disclosure due to an increased sense of anonymity. As with all methods of data collection, it is essential that the researcher is clear about what it is that (s)he wants the data to tell him or her about, and that (s)he ensures that the data collection technique used does indeed generate suitable data which will allow him or her to answer the research question. The context within which the data have been generated is important because it shapes the nature and quality of the data, and as a result it determines what the data can tell us about.

The use of the internet as a tool for data collection generates its own ethical challenges. A helpful summary of some of these is provided by Howitt (2010: 408–9). The Association of Internet Researchers provides a set of guidelines for ethical decision-making in internet research (see Ess and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee 2002), and the British Psychological Society has produced its own guidelines for ethical practice in psychological research online (see www.bps.org.uk/webethic).

I would argue that it is particularly important to consider ethical issues when planning to use unsolicited data from internet-based sources; after all, those who express their thoughts and feelings within the context of an internet-based

support group or discussion group may not wish their words to be used for research purposes. Curtis and Curtis (2011: 94) cite Paccagnella (2006) who likens the collection of data from internet forums and chat rooms to 'eavesdropping on a private conversation in a café', thus raising ethical concerns regarding the absence of informed consent within such settings.

The role of the research participant

The *role of participants* in qualitative research can differ dramatically from that of the 'subjects' of quantitative studies. After all, most qualitative research is concerned with research participants' lived experience, the meanings research participants give to their experiences, and/or the cultural resources they draw on as they make sense of their world. As such, qualitative researchers tend to want to gain a better understanding of their research participants' perspectives rather than apply some pre-existing measures or standards in order to evaluate their participants' performance or behaviour. However, despite this
commonality, there are also big differences between qualitative methodologies in the way they are positioning their research participants. At one end of the continuum, there are qualitative methodologies, such as feminist approaches, participatory action research or memory work, where the distinction between 'researcher' and 'participant' is blurred. Here, the researcher becomes a participant in the research, and the participants contribute to the analysis of the data they generate. In some cases, there is no distinction between researchers and participants because the researchers actually study themselves (e.g. in memory work or autoethnographic research). At the other end of the continuum, there are

qualitative methodologies, such as conversation analysis or discursive psychology, where the participants generate the type of data required by the researcher without any further involvement in, or indeed awareness of, the research. This is particularly the case where the data are recordings of everyday interactions that would have occurred anyway and in the absence of any data collection.

Epistemological differences between qualitative research methods (see Chapter 2) also have implications for how research participants are positioned within the research. For example, within a study which adopts a *direct realist* orientation the role of the research participant is akin to that of a witness. Here, the researcher consults research participants because (s)he believes that they can tell him or her something important about what is going on. The research participants' accounts are valued because they are seen to provide much needed information which will help the researcher understand better how a particular social or psychological process unfolds. By contrast, within a *radical social constructionist* study the research participants are positioned as users of discursive and cultural resources, and as such their accounts constitute exemplars of possible deployments of such resources. Here, the participants are not so much witnesses as social actors who embody and operationalize sociocultural practices.

The positioning of the research participants within the research has implications for the process of *participant validation* (or 'member checking', as it is sometimes called). Participant validation is one way in which qualitative researchers can assess the validity of their research. This is done by taking the researcher's analysis of the data back to

those who generated the data on which the analysis was based (i.e. the research participants) and finding out whether (or to what extent) they feel that the analysis captures what they tried to communicate with their accounts. The assumption underpinning this validation strategy is, of course, that the research participants' agreement with the researcher's analysis constitutes a measure of validity. This assumption is probably justified within the context of *direct realist* research and some types of *phenomenological* research but it is less appropriate in relation to *critical realist* and *social constructionist* research. This is because the former tend to take research participants' accounts at face value and treat them as relatively straightforward descriptions of experiences and events, while the latter take a more suspicious approach in that they assume that the accounts are merely the surface level manifestation of an underlying deeper structure (e.g. of a social, psychological or discursive nature) which will only become apparent as a result of a full analysis of the data. In the latter case, participant validation is less meaningful because the research participants cannot be expected to be aware of the existence of such structures or indeed of the form they may take.

Conclusion

Semi-structured interviewing, participant observation, diaries and focus groups are not the only qualitative methods of data collection available. New ways of collecting data for qualitative analysis are being

developed by researchers as they attempt to answer new research questions (see e.g. Chapter 13 on *Visual method*).

The four methods introduced in this chapter can generate a wide range of qualitative data. In addition, methods of data collection can also be used in combination (e.g. participant observation and semi-structured interviewing) to view the same phenomenon from different angles. This constitutes a form of *triangulation*. Triangulation involves the use of more than one method in order to mobilize multiple sources of evidence. The aim here is to gain a better understanding of something by drawing on more than one perspective on it. However, it is important to be aware that, in qualitative research, triangulation does not necessarily constitute an attempt to corroborate one's findings. The qualitative researcher does not assume that the different perspectives will *necessarily* converge and generate a coherent picture. Different perspectives do not constitute different measures of the same thing which need to correlate with one another in order to give us valid results. Rather, the insights generated through triangulation may complement one another, thus giving rise to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of interest. For example, a researcher may find that within the context of a semi-structured interview participants provide very emotional accounts of their experiences of having failed an exam, whereas within the context of a focus group discussion participants minimize the personal significance and emotional impact of such an event. This may tell the researcher something about the way in which

academic failure is socially constructed and how participants position themselves within this. It may be, for example, that the feelings of shame expressed in the interviews can be partly explained by the presence of a powerful social imperative to not associate oneself with the possibility of failure. The important thing is to think about how the different data sources, and insights generated by them, relate to one another. From this perspective, 'triangulation is conceived as a way of increasing our understanding over and above what the methods achieve in isolation' (Howitt 2010: 371) (see also Moran-Ellis et al. 2006 for more on triangulation).

Finally, there are qualitative approaches for which methods of data collection and methods of data analysis are inseparable. Here, the gathering of data and the process of analysing the data do not take place at different, and consecutive, points in time. Instead, the researcher collects and analyses data in a cyclical fashion so that initial attempts at data analysis inform strategies for further data collection, and so on. Such studies' findings emerge, in cumulative and piecemeal fashion, from the research process as a whole. Grounded theory (see Chapter 7) is an example of such an approach.

Discussion questions

1. What is the role of the research question in qualitative research?
2. How might the qualitative researcher decide which method(s) of data collection to use in their study?
3. What is the role of the research participants in qualitative research, and what may be some of the implications of this for the insights gained on the basis of such research?

Further reading

Brinkmann, S. and Kvale, S. (2008) Ethics in qualitative research, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

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Puchta, C. and Potter, J. (2004) *Focus Group Practice*. London: Sage.

Smith, J.A. (1995) Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis, in J.A. Smith, R. Harré and L. Van

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Wilkinson, S. (1998) Focus groups in health research: exploring the meanings of health and illness, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 3(3): 329–48.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig***<***http://www.openup.co.uk/willig***> to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 4

The role of interpretation

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the role of interpretation in qualitative research
- the difference between 'empathic' and 'suspicious' interpretation
- the relationship between epistemological positions and approaches to interpretation
- the ethical challenges associated with interpretation in qualitative research

In Chapters 2 and 3 we established that qualitative researchers need to engage with questions about the ontological and epistemological foundations which underpin their research question(s) and which inform their choice of data collection methods and analytic strategies. Chapter 2 identified three

different approaches to knowledge generation (*realist*; *phenomenological*; *social constructionist*) and traced the ways in which these shape research strategies and generate rather different kinds of insights. As such, both chapters acknowledged that qualitative research is inherently interpretative in that qualitative data never speaks for itself – it needs to be read through a particular lens which gives it (a particular) meaning. In this chapter we are going to concern ourselves more directly with the role of interpretation in qualitative research.

What is interpretation?

Interpretation involves finding meaning in something. It requires that we engage with something (e.g. a text or an image) in a way that allows us to make some kind of sense of it. Interpretation usually means that the interpreter brings to light aspects or dimensions of the object which are not immediately obvious
but which help us understand better what it may be about. Clearly, interpretation is an essential part of qualitative research because, without some form of interpretation, we would not be able to make sense of our data.

Interpretation has a long history. Initially, interpretation was considered to be required only in order to make sense of particularly difficult or obscure documents, such as mythical or religious writings. Here, interpretation was seen to be necessary because the ancient texts which had been revered and held sacred for a very long time did not make any immediate sense to contemporary audiences any more; however, in order to continue to play their traditional role within a culture they needed to be made relevant and this was

achieved through interpreting them (see Sontag 1994: 6). Later, the art of interpretation, or 'hermeneutics', began to be applied across a range of disciplines including the interpretation of the law (legal hermeneutics), interpretation of the Bible (biblical hermeneutics) and interpretation of the classics (philological hermeneutics). More recently, the role of interpretation in everyday life emerged as a concern; now interpretation began to be perceived as a generalized human endeavour (universal hermeneutics) whereby interpretation happens whenever we try to understand spoken or written language or, indeed, any human acts (see Schmidt 2006 for an excellent introduction to hermeneutics).

Approaches to interpretation

As we saw in Chapter 2, depending on the researcher's epistemological position, a number of quite different interpretations of the same data could potentially be generated as a result of asking different questions about it. Once we understand that every qualitative analysis is underpinned by the assumptions a researcher makes (about what is important and what is worth paying attention to, and about what can be known about and through the data), we must accept that different interpretations of the same data are always possible. In order to obtain a clearer sense of what such interpretative differences may look like in practice, let us take a look at what happens when we apply different interpretative lenses to the same data. We shall use a brief description of a street robbery as our data (taken from Willig 2012a: 68) and reflect on a number of possible readings of it.

An account of a street robbery

'Well, I was on my way to the shops, just walking down the high street, when I heard this noise. It was right behind me. I looked round and I saw a commotion, people being shoved and pushed, and there is this young girl in the middle of this mêlée and she's struggling, her eyes looked really wild and I immediately thought, they're trying to hurt her. I was going to turn around and go back to help her of course, but then I saw what I thought was the blade of a knife and I got scared. I've got a bad back so I can't move very fast so I didn't think it was a good idea for me to get involved. I'm in my sixties now so I don't feel as strong as I used to. I know it's bad but I just didn't feel like I was going to be of any use to the girl. Luckily a couple of young lads stepped in and scared them off so it had a good ending.'

Realist reading of the data

Taking a direct realist approach to the data we may assume that the account produced by the witness constitutes a straightforward description of what happened in front of his eyes. As direct realist researchers we may be interested in how street robberies happen and how bystanders respond to them. From such a perspective we would take the account provided by the witness at face value and our analysis would be concerned with identifying patterns in his own and other people's behaviours and reactions as described by the witness. The insights generated by such an analysis would most likely be concerned with the social psychological processes associated with street robberies. For example, we may conclude that bystanders' decision-making about whether or not to intervene depends upon their appraisal of the risks to themselves which are associated with an attempt to help the victim. A more critical realist interpretation of the

data would not necessarily assume a straightforward relationship between the account and what 'really happened' during the robbery. Here, the researcher may make inferences about the underlying mechanisms which generate the account provided by the witness. For example, it could be that there was in fact no knife involved in the incident, and that the fearful witness only thought that he saw a knife because that is what he expected to see in this situation. Insights generated by this type of analysis could be
concerned with the operation of cognitive biases under conditions of emotional arousal. However, in both cases (direct realist and critical realist readings) the researcher is asking the data to tell him or her something about the social and/or psychological processes that take place in a particular situation. These processes, once identified, allow the researcher to make sense of the data by providing an explanatory account of what is described in the data.

Phenomenological reading of the data

Phenomenological research is concerned with understanding the phenomenal world and the lived experience of research participants. This means that it would be the witness's experience of the robbery (rather than the robbery itself) that would be of interest to the phenomenological researcher. Here, the researcher wants the data to tell them something about the quality and meaning of the witness's experience of observing the attack on the girl. In order to extract information about the experiential meanings contained within the account of the robbery, the phenomenological researcher might pay particular attention to the way in which the witness foregrounds his own vulnerability (e.g. by referring to himself as having 'a bad back', as being 'in his sixties' and as not

feeling as 'as strong as I used to'). Such references suggest that the witness may be experiencing himself as somewhat fragile, and that he does not experience himself as the sort of person who is robust enough to challenge the robbers. This is confirmed by his reference to the 'young lads' who eventually did what he himself did not feel capable of doing. Another experiential dimension of the witness's account is revealed through his repeated references to his senses (e.g. he describes himself as having 'heard this noise' which 'was right behind me'; he 'looked around' and 'saw a commotion'; he 'sees' what he believes to be the blade of a knife). These references suggest that the witness experiences himself as alert, as being tuned in to his physical environment. At the same time, he describes something of a tension between his acute awareness of what is going on around him and his initial impulse to get involved by helping the victim, and his awareness of his own fragility and limited physical strength which ultimately stop him from acting upon this impulse. A phenomenological reading of the account would, therefore, be concerned with the witness's experience of himself within the context of witnessing a robbery. Insights generated by a phenomenological analysis would take the form of a better understanding of the meaning of the experience of witnessing a robbery for the particular individual who provided the account.

Social constructionist reading of the data

A social constructionist approach to the data requires that the researcher looks upon the account as a *production*. Here, the account is of interest because it provides the researcher with information about how the witness is constructing his experience of the robbery through available discursive

resources. As a result, the types of questions a social constructionist researcher would ask of the data are concerned with how language is used by the witness in his account and what kind of a version of events is produced as a result. Since a social constructionist approach to the account is based on the assumption that the event could have been described in a number of different ways, the researcher will be interested in possible alternative versions of the event and the implications of the particular discursive choices made by the author of the account.

For example, the fact that the account of the robbery contains references to the witness's bad back, his age and his lack of strength and agility is of interest because these references position him as someone of whom heroic interventions could not be expected. In addition, the fact that the witness does not include references to other personal qualities that he may possess and which may be seen to make him more eligible for active intervention (e.g. his life experience or perhaps some experiences in the army or the fact that he is carrying a strong walking stick) is significant from a discursive point of view because such references would compromise the witness's construction of himself as unable (rather than unwilling) to help the victim of the robbery. Another interesting feature of the account, from a discursive point of view, is its vagueness and the lack of descriptive detail in relation to the events that are being depicted in the account. There are references to a 'mêlée' and a 'commotion' but the account does not specify how many people were involved, who shoved whom (the witness merely says that there were 'people being shoved and pushed') and what was actually done to the girl (she is referred to as simply being 'in the middle'). It could be argued that this way of constructing the event positions the

witness as someone who is caught up in events he does not fully understand and, as a result, cannot be expected to intervene in any meaningful way.

From a social constructionist perspective, the witness's account of his experience of seeing the robbery cannot be separated from what he is doing within the context of providing an account of it. In this case, for instance, be may be constructing a version of the event which serves to disclaim potential negative attributions and blame for not helping the girl. Social constructionist readings of an account are interested in how it is put together, for what purpose and with what consequences. Social constructionist researchers do not search for a 'true' account of what happened; rather, the insights they generate are concerned with better understanding the ways in which people construct 'reality' through language (and other cultural resources) within a social context.

Our example of looking at the account of a street robbery through a range of interpretative lenses has demonstrated that the process of interpretation can generate quite different types of knowledge. These included the identification of processes and/or structures which underpin and shape the phenomenon described in the data (realist approach), the elaboration of meanings and the experiential quality of the events for the person who is describing the events (phenomenological approach), and the deconstruction of the account by examining the discursive resources used in the production of the account (social constructionist approach).

It has been suggested that interpretations can be driven by either suspicion or empathy (or a mixture of the two).

Ricoeur's (1970, 1996) distinction between interpretations generated on the basis of an 'empathic' attitude (e.g. where the aim is to better understand what the author of a text wanted to express) and those generated on the basis of a 'suspicious' attitude (e.g. where the aim is to find out why someone said what they said) has been taken up by qualitative psychologists (e.g. Langdridge 2007; Willig 2012a) in order to help us gain clarity about the purpose of our analytic endeavours. The following sections will characterize these two interpretative orientations and identify the major differences between them. The relationship between them and the three approaches to knowledge generation discussed earlier (i.e. realist, phenomenological and social constructionist) will also be explored.

'Suspicious' interpretation

This type of interpretation is called 'suspicious' because its goal and purpose is to reveal a hidden truth. It can be compared to detective work where the evidence at the scene of a crime must be interpreted in order to find out who committed the crime and why. Here, what presents itself to our senses is not taken at face value. Instead the images we see and the words that are spoken function as clues which, if interpreted correctly, will allow us to access more significant but latent meaning. 'Suspicious' interpretation aims to get beneath appearances in order to find out 'what is really going on'. Psychoanalysis (in its original 'classical' Freudian form) serves as a good example of the use of 'suspicious' interpretation (see Ricoeur 1970) because it demonstrates how apparently trivial or irrational phenomena (such as acts of forgetting or slips of the tongue) can be made meaningful by following their traces right back to their origin to discover

their ‘true’ meaning. Since ‘suspicious’ interpretation requires that the evidence is decoded in some way so that it can be deciphered and translated back into its deeper meaning, this type of interpretation tends to be theory-driven. After all, if we want to decode something, we need to know how to do that; we need a code or a key. This means that in order to produce a ‘suspicious’ interpretation it is necessary to have access to a theoretical formulation which provides us with concepts with which to interrogate the text. Since the usefulness and validity of these concepts is presupposed, there is a danger that ‘suspicious’ interpretations impose meaning upon the data by making the data fit the theory. A good example of this process is an interpretation which invokes the concept of ‘resistance’ whereby someone’s rejection of a particular attribution is interpreted as evidence of the importance and indeed accuracy of the original attribution. The frequently invoked quotation, ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’ (from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II) provides an excellent illustration of such a suspicious reading of denial.

‘Suspicious’ interpretations are explanatory in that the ultimate aim of such an interpretation is to generate an account which can explain why something takes the form that it does. A ‘suspicious’ interpretation makes sense of its subject matter (be this a text, a symptom, a behaviour or a wider social phenomenon) by referring to its underlying meaning. It presupposes that the phenomena we encounter are merely the surface level manifestations of usually hidden or at least invisible underlying processes and structures which generate them. The assumption here is that real understanding can only be gained by looking underneath the surface in order to find out ‘what is really going on’.

Given the importance of prior knowledge of relevant theories and the complex nature of the process of decoding the evidence, the 'suspicious' interpreter necessarily occupies the role of the expert. In addition, since the expert interpreter has access to the knowledge and skills required to produce a 'suspicious' interpretation, whereas the person whose experiences are being interpreted may not have such access, there is a strong possibility that the interpretations produced may not make sense to the latter. This would mean that the interpreter would claim to be in a position to gain a better understanding of a person's experience that than person themselves can ever have. From this point of view, to experience something or to enact something is not the same as understanding it. This is a controversial claim whose ethical implications will be discussed later in this chapter.

'Empathic' interpretation

A second approach to interpretation is called 'empathic' because here the researcher's goal is to get as close to the research participant's experience as possible and to try to understand it 'from within'. This type of interpretation seeks to obtain a better understanding of the meaning which is contained within the data by engaging with what presents itself (e.g. a text, an interview transcript) without bringing theoretical concepts from the outside. Therefore, 'empathic' interpretation does not use theory in the same way as 'suspicious' interpretation does. 'Empathic' interpretations focus on what is *there* rather than what might be hidden. They do not aim to identify underlying structures which generate the phenomena which present themselves; instead, they seek to elaborate and amplify the meanings which are contained within the material to be analysed. For example, 'empathic'

interpretation may involve paying special attention to the features and qualities of an account, making connections between them and noticing patterns and relationships. It may also involve noticing absences but this would only be done in order to obtain a clearer sense of what may be foregrounded in an account rather than in order to reveal something that is hidden or suppressed. The aim of an 'empathic' interpretation is to gain a fuller understanding of what presents itself rather than to find out what is going on behind (or underneath) the scenes.

While 'empathic' interpretation does not seek to explain why something occurred or what causal mechanisms might underpin something, there is a difference between an 'empathic' interpretation and a simple description of what someone has said or done. After all, all types of interpretation are carried out with the aim of discovering meaning, and this inevitably means adding something to the material that is being interpreted. Any attempt to clarify, to elucidate or to increase our understanding of something requires that we engage with it, look at it in a number of different ways, ask questions about it and reflect on it. The difference between 'suspicious' and 'empathic' interpretation is that the former applies theoretical concepts imported from outside of the data in order to make sense of the data, while 'empathic' interpretation attempts to draw out and explicate meaning that is implicit in the data. For example, in the phenomenological reading of the account of the street robbery discussed earlier in this chapter, we established that the witness foregrounded his physical vulnerability by referring to his 'bad back', his advanced age and the fact that he is not feeling as 'as strong as I used to'. Although the witness does not state explicitly that he does not experience himself as the sort of person who

is robust enough to challenge the robbers, it could be argued that this meaning is indeed implicit within what he is saying about himself.

Unlike 'suspicious' interpretations, 'empathic' interpretations are potentially accessible to anyone as they do not require familiarity with theories and concepts from the academic literature. This means that those whose experiences are being interpreted (e.g. our research participants) may find that 'empathic' interpretations capture and reflect the quality of their experiences in a way that 'suspicious' interpretations would not. Since the 'empathic' interpreter does not claim expert status, their interpretations reflect their aim of generating shared understanding by entering the world of the research participant. Doing so may allow the research participant to notice aspects of their experience which they have not noticed before. However, there would be no claim on the part of the researcher to know better than the research participant what is going on for (or indeed within) him or her.

The relationship between 'suspicious' and 'empathic' interpretations

Although the two approaches to interpretation outlined in the preceding sections have different aims, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, Ricoeur (1996) argues that while the two
approaches produce different kinds of knowledge (one being concerned with generating understanding through 'empathy', and the other with generating explanations through 'suspicion'), neither of them can generate satisfactory insights on their own. Ultimately, a combination of the two is required.

This is because the two approaches to interpretation have a relationship with one another, and this relationship is grounded in the way in which humans make sense of the world around them. When we encounter a phenomenon (e.g. a street robbery) we seek to make sense of it. We ask ourselves questions such as 'What is going on here?' and 'What shall I do in this situation?'. In order to make sense of something and to understand what is going on, we need to adopt a perspective from which to view it (e.g. we may decide that we are a potential victim in this situation) and this in turn shapes our relationship with it (e.g. we may feel afraid and vulnerable). The perspective we adopt (our standpoint) inevitably shapes how we perceive something and this, in turn, removes the possibility of taking an 'objective' or 'neutral' view of it. However, without adopting a standpoint, we would not be able to make any sense of the situation at all as there is no such thing as a view from nowhere. We need to draw on some ideas and assumptions in order to make sense of what we encounter. After all, meaning is always made, not simply given. This idea is reflected in the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle' (e.g. Schmidt 2006: 4) which demonstrates how the parts of a whole (e.g. the words within a sentence) can only be understood on the basis of an understanding of the whole, even though the whole itself can only really be grasped if we understand the meaning of the parts. So when we read a sentence, we notice that an understanding of the entire sentence helps us to make sense of the meaning of individual words (e.g. the word 'blind' has a different meaning depending on the context within which it is used: 'Please, draw the blind' versus 'She has been blind from birth'). At the same time, we also know that if we did not understand the meaning of individual words in the first place, we would not be able to form an understanding of the

meaning of the whole sentence. In this way, the hermeneutic circle acknowledges the interdependency between the parts and the whole in the process of making sense of something.

We cannot deny that prior knowledge and the assumptions we bring with us play an important role in the process of making sense of something. However, at the same time we do not simply project our expectations out into the world and find them confirmed. Instead, we tend to grapple with the tensions between what we think may be going on and the evidence of what presents itself in a never-ending struggle for meaning. It seems that it is the relationship between the old (in the form of the interpreter's presuppositions and assumptions which are informed by tradition and received wisdom) and the new (in the form of the phenomenon that presents itself) which makes understanding possible (see also Gadamer 1991; Schmidt 2006: Chapter 5). If this is the case, it follows that the process of understanding something always requires an element of empathy as well as an element of suspicion.

Types of interpretation and approaches to knowledge generation

So what may be the relationship between the two orientations to interpretation ('empathic' and 'suspicious'), and the three approaches to knowledge generation (realist, phenomenological and social constructionist) introduced in Chapter 2 and applied to the account of a street robbery at the beginning of this chapter? We have seen that 'suspicious' interpretations require that the researcher subscribes to a chosen theoretical framework which they then use in order to make sense of the data. The type of knowledge generated through a 'suspicious' approach to interpretation aspires to

identify underlying structures or mechanisms which generate the phenomena which we encounter. As such, 'suspicious' interpretations have a realist affinity, and they are particularly compatible with a critical realist position. By contrast, an 'empathic' approach to interpretation does not seek to draw conclusions about the structure of the social world or the human psyche; instead, it is concerned with getting closer to the quality and meaning of a phenomenon as it presents itself. Therefore, an 'empathic' style of interpretation resonates with a phenomenological approach to knowledge generation. Finally, social constructionist research is perhaps more difficult to locate. Social constructionist research is underpinned by a set of premises which define the researcher's understanding of what is involved in the social construction of reality. For example, from a social constructionist perspective, language (and the social discourses into which it is organized) play a crucial role in this process. So although social constructionist researchers do not use theories in the same way that realist researchers might, there is still a sense in which social constructionist research reads the data through a clearly defined, theoretically informed lens (i.e. a social constructionist lens). This means that the approach to interpretation adopted here is at least to some extent 'suspicious'.

The ethics of interpretation

There are some ethical challenges associated with the task of interpretation. After all, to interpret another person's experience means claiming to have something potentially useful or significant to say about it. It is important to reflect on the epistemological position taken by an interpreter and to be mindful of the possible effects of a researcher's claims to

know or understand something, especially if that something is somebody else's experience. We have seen that the act of interpretation always involves a process of transformation as what presents itself is looked at in a new light, from a different angle, through a different lens. As a result, the interpreter has the power to shape what comes to be known about somebody's experience, and with this power comes responsibility. It is imperative that qualitative researchers engage with their responsibility to interpret ethically.

It has been be argued (e.g. Barker et al. 2007; Flowers and Langdridge 2007) that the ethical challenges associated with interpretation are particularly difficult to negotiate when we are dealing with 'suspicious' interpretations. This is because here the researcher's expert position implies that they may well know better than the research participants themselves what their experience means. 'Suspicious' researchers do not take research participants' accounts of their experiences at face value because they believe that people's actions are often motivated by forces outside of their conscious awareness (e.g. unconscious forces, socioeconomic structures, cultural discourses, social norms and imperatives). While this perspective can generate fascinating insights, especially in situations where research participants themselves are puzzled by their behaviours and experiences and feel unable to provide an explanation for them (e.g. where someone does not understand why they cannot stop smoking or what attracts them to a particular type of relationship), it also carries the risk of misrepresenting participants' experiences by imposing theory-driven meanings upon the data. Some researchers are so uncomfortable with a situation which allows a researcher to read theoretically-derived meaning into the data, including meaning which could potentially present participants in a

negative light, that in order to avoid this risk they would rather not engage in 'suspicious' interpretation at all (see e.g. Flowers and Langdridge 2007). By contrast, those who are willing to take the risk argue that it is worth moving beyond participants' explicit accounts of their experiences because not to do so would mean giving up the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of what motivates people (see e.g. Hollway and Jefferson 2005).

Clearly, interpretation in qualitative research raises a number of important ethical questions which the researcher needs to engage with. There is the question about who 'owns' the interpretation; does it belong to those who have generated it or to those whose words and actions have been interpreted? We also need to think about the status of the interpretation; what does it really tell us about? How much does it tell us about the phenomenon under investigation (e.g. someone's behaviour or experience), and how much does it tell us about the interpreter and their assumptions and theoretical preferences? And last but not least, we should also consider the wider social and psychological effects of the interpretation and what may be its consequences for those whose behaviour has been interpreted in a particular way (see also Willig 2012a: Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of the ethics of interpretation). These questions will be addressed in relation to specific approaches to data analysis when we take a closer look at a number of qualitative research methods in Part 2 of this book.

Conclusion

To conclude, every qualitative study, irrespective of which specific method of data analysis is used, interprets its data because the data never speaks for itself. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, decisions are made, and these decisions are informed by the researcher's stance, their aims and objectives in carrying out the research. Implicit within the researcher's decisions about how to conduct the research is their orientation to the interpretative endeavour. The ethical researcher needs to think about their own position and reflect on its implications for the type of knowledge that will be generated.

Discussion questions

1. What is 'interpretation'?
2. How might the epistemological position a researcher adopts inform their approach to interpretation?
3. What are some of the ethical challenges associated with interpretation in qualitative research?

Further reading

Cohn, H.W. (2005) Interpretation: explanation or understanding? in E. van Deurzen and C. Arnold-Baker (eds)

Existential Perspectives on Human Issues: A Handbook of Therapeutic Practice. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Flowers, P. and Langdridge, D. (2007) Offending the other: deconstructing narratives of deviance and pathology, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46: 679–90.

Frosh, S. and Emerson, P.D. (2005) Interpretation and over-interpretation: disputing the meaning of texts, *Qualitative Research*, 5(3): 307–24.

Parker, I. (2005) *Qualitative Psychology: Introducing Radical Research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1996) On interpretation, in R. Kearney and M. Rainwater (eds) *The Continental Philosophy Reader*. London: Routledge (original work published 1983).

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

Willig, C. (2012) *Qualitative Interpretation and Analysis in Psychology*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig***<***http://www.openup.co.uk/willig***> to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 5

Putting together a research proposal

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the importance of preparing a full research proposal
- the function and purpose of a research proposal
- what needs to be included in a research proposal and why these components are essential

Part 1 of this book concludes with some guidance about how to put together a qualitative research proposal. In Chapters 1–4 we reflected on the types of research questions qualitative researchers ask, and examined the epistemological bases for qualitative research. We also reviewed some general principles of qualitative research design and looked at some widely-used data collection techniques. Finally, we discussed the role of interpretation in qualitative research. On the basis of the conceptual preparation accomplished in Chapters 1–4

we are now in a position to draw on our understanding of qualitative research in general in order to develop a specific qualitative research proposal. The aim of Chapter 5 is, therefore, to explain the purpose of a qualitative research proposal and to provide guidance as to what needs to be included.

Why do we need a research proposal?

Research proposals have two functions. First, they are required in order to convince others that the proposed research is workable, that its design is appropriate to the research question asked, and that it is ethically sound. A research proposal should enable those who review it (be they course tutors, members of an ethical review board or funding bodies) to form a view about the extent to which the proposed research can be expected to make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge in a particular discipline. If a reviewer is not satisfied that the proposed research is ethical, that it is methodologically and
epistemologically sound, and that it is at least to some extent original, then they are unlikely to allow the research to go ahead. So, the first function of a research proposal is to persuade those who have been asked to review it that the proposed research is worth supporting.

A second function of a research proposal is to help the researcher clarify their ideas and to think through both conceptual and practical aspects of the proposed research. It is all too easy to get excited about a potential research question, and to leap ahead and imagine what one might discover without having thought through exactly how to get there. Putting together a research proposal requires the researcher to

be disciplined and to consider how the research may unfold, step by step and in real time, within the real-life constraints of the particular context within which the research will be carried out. Since a research proposal requires the researcher to provide a rationale for every decision (s)he makes, however small or insignificant it may appear to be, the processs of writing the proposal helps the researcher to clarify their ideas as it compels them to continually ask themselves 'Why?': 'Why am I asking this question?', 'Why am I thinking of collecting data in this way?', 'Why do I want to use this particular method to analyse the data?', etc. In research, nothing is done without providing an explicit, clearly argued rationale, and no decision is made without careful consideration of its consequences and its implications for the insights generated by the research.

Research proposals are usually structured on the basis of subheadings which identify the key ingredients of the proposal. These can vary to some extent but every research proposal should identify *the research question* the proposed research seeks to address. It should also provide *a rationale* for the research question, and in order to do this it ought to review some relevant *literature* in the field. Every research proposal should provide information about the chosen *research design*, together with a rationale for this choice. This means that there needs to be some discussion of the researcher's *epistemological position*. There should be information about *data collection procedures* and about how the data will be *analysed.* The research proposal needs to have something to say about the *recruitment* of the research participants, and about how the researcher will ensure that the research is *ethically sound*. Qualitative research proposals also require the researcher to include some reflections about

the role of the researcher in the study and about how the researcher may influence the research and how they may be influenced by it (i.e. *reflexivity*). Finally, a research proposal should include some consideration of the *resources* required (e.g. financial resources, time, materials, equipment) and any plans for *dissemination* of the findings of the study.

In the remainder of this chapter, we shall examine each one of these 'ingredients' in more detail and provide some guidance as to how to ensure they are adequately covered in a qualitative research proposal.

The research question

As discussed in Chapter 2, qualitative research projects work with research questions rather than hypotheses. The formulation of the research question is important because it identifies what it is the researcher wants to find out. There is a big difference between identifying a phenomenon of interest (e.g. by saying 'I am interested in stress among nurses') and asking a specific research question about it (e.g. 'I am wondering how nurses in an intensive care unit manage high levels of stress' or 'I'm wondering what the term "stress" means to nurses'). It is, in fact, impossible to develop a research proposal on the basis of a phenomenon of interest alone; the researcher needs to decide what exactly they want to know about it. As it is impossible to find out everything about a phenomenon all at the same time, the researcher needs to identify a particular aspect of the phenomenon that (s)he wants to explore in more detail and then ask a question about it. The research question helps the researcher to focus the research. It can be helpful to think of the research question as a torch or a spotlight that the researcher points in a

particular direction in order to illuminate a part of the phenomenon of interest. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the formulation of the research question also has implications for the researcher's epistemological position and for the methodological choices (s)he makes. Again, without a clearly formulated research question the researcher cannot actually develop a meaningful research proposal. The first step in putting together a research proposal is, therefore, the formulation of the research question. The research question can usually be used as a working title for the research proposal (e.g. 'How do nurses in an intensive care unit manage high levels of stress?'). Once the researcher has decided on the methodological approach (s)he is planning to take in the research, the working title can be revised in order to include a reference to the method to be used in the research (e.g. 'A grounded theory study of how nurses in an intensive care unit manage high levels of stress').

Literature review

It is important to remember that the literature review in a research proposal serves a specific function. The aim here is not simply to write about all the interesting things that other researchers and authors have had to say about the phenomenon of interest. Rather, the point of the literature review within the context of a research proposal is to develop a rationale for the choice of the research question. Having identified and defined the phenomenon of interest, the researcher needs to draw on the literature in the field in order to make a case for their decision to ask a particular question about it. It may be that existing research in the field has neglected certain dimensions of the phenomenon or it may be that the research methods used in this area have foreclosed

some important potential insights. Whatever the reasons, the researcher needs to develop a convincing argument, drawing on the existing literature in the field, in support of their decision to pursue a particular research question. It may of course happen that in the process of reviewing the literature the researcher changes his or her mind about the research question and decides to reformulate it. This would not be problem at all; in fact, it would be a good thing as it would demonstrate to the researcher that (s)he is approaching the research with curiosity and an open mind, both of which are desirable qualities in a qualitative researcher (see Chapter 1). To conclude, then, the literature review in a research proposal ought to make it clear to the reader why the research question addressed by the proposed research is worth asking and what an answer to it might be likely to contribute to the literature in the field.

Research design and strategy

Having identified and justified the research question, the researcher now needs to explain how (s)he proposes to conduct the investigation. As we established in Chapters 2 and 3, the formulation of the research question contains assumptions about the world (ontology) and what can be known about it (epistemology). It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that the researcher's choice of research methodology is compatible with these assumptions. In other words, it is the research question itself which informs the research design and strategy. For example, if we have committed ourselves to a research question about how nurses in an intensive care unit manage high levels of stress, we need to acknowledge that we are assuming that nurses are active agents who will try to find a way of managing their

challenging experiences. We also assume that there is such a thing as 'stress' and that there can be more or less of it (i.e. higher and lower levels). Finally, we assume that as researchers we can find out how nurses manage stress; in other words, we assume that this information (about how they do it) is potentially accessible to us. It follows that our research design is likely to be based on a realist approach to knowledge generation. As we are asking a question about a process ('How?') which is likely to involve both social and psychological dimensions, a grounded theory approach to the research might be advisable. In order to find out whether nurses would indeed have something to say about how they manage stress, we could run a small pilot study, perhaps involving a one-off focus group consisting of three nurses recruited from among our acquaintances. Such pilot work can help the researcher refine the research question; it can also provide useful information about potential difficulties or challenges which the researcher may encounter during the research proper. For example, if our three nurses all say that they do not feel that they are 'managing' their stress at all and that instead they feel overwhelmed by it, we may need to rethink our research question.

A qualitative research proposal needs to acknowledge that the research plan may need to be modified in the light of insights generated on the basis of any pilot work, or indeed as a result of what may transpire during the early stages of the research itself. So while the declared research design and strategy need to be carefully described and justified in the research proposal, they are not set in stone and this also needs to be acknowledged in the proposal.

Epistemological position

As explained in the previous section, the researcher's epistemological position flows from their chosen research question and it underpins the research design and strategy they adopt. Although a research proposal is not an essay and should not discuss epistemological or indeed methodological issues in the
abstract, it is important that the reader of a research proposal understands the researcher's epistemological position. However, it is not enough to declare one's affiliation with a particular label (e.g. 'I am a social constructionist') as labels used to describe different epistemological positions can be given different meanings by different writers and indeed readers (see Willig 2012b for a more detailed discussion of this). The best way to explain one's epistemological position within the context of a research proposal is probably by identifying the assumptions which underpin the research question (as demonstrated in the previous section using the example of the research into how nurses manage stress) and to then locate the position associated with those assumptions within a particular published classification system. There are quite a number of these (e.g. Madill et al. 2000; Hansen 2004; Guba and Lincoln 2005; Ponterotto 2005; Willig 2012b) and so it is important to be clear and explicit about whose system one is using.

Recruitment

The research question already identifies whose views, experiences, behaviours, thoughts and/or feelings the researcher is interested in (e.g. in our earlier example these were nurses who work in an intensive care unit). The researcher now needs to explain how exactly they are planning to recruit research participants to the study. They

need to decide who would be included and who would be excluded from taking part in the study. For example, would all nurses be eligible or does the researcher want to restrict recruitment to nurses with a minimum of five years' experience in intensive care? The researcher needs to justify the inclusion and exclusion criteria they propose to use, and they need to explain exactly how these would be implemented (e.g. self-selection or selection by the unit's manager). There needs to be information about the recruitment procedure, how information about the study will be made accessible to potential participants in the first place and how informed consent from those who have agreed to participate will be obtained. Decisions also need to be made, and justified, about target numbers of participants and the timeframe within which they will be recruited as well as about the location where recruitment will take place (this could be a physical location like a hospital, a virtual location like a website, or indeed no location at all as would be the case in recruitment via word-of-mouth or 'snowballing').

Data collection and analysis

The researcher's choice of research question, research design and strategy have direct implications for the selection of methods for data collection and analysis. As discussed in Chapters 1–3, in order to answer a research question the researcher needs to generate data whose analysis will provide them with an answer to their research question. For example, it would not make sense to ask a question about how nurses manage stress within the context of an intensive care unit, and then propose to collect data by administering a personality inventory to a group of nurses. A research proposal needs to identify a data collection strategy which will provide the

researcher with data which can tell them what they want to know. This data collection strategy needs to be identified, justified in the light of the research question and the overall research design, and then described in some detail, including the practicalities of how the data will be stored and managed. For example, if the data consists of tape-recordings of semi-structured interviews, the researcher needs to provide some information about how they will be transcribed (e.g. verbatim, with or without information about extra-linguistic features such as pauses, false starts, laughter, etc.). If the method of data collection involves participant observation, we need to know what kind of notes of their observations will be kept by the researcher. It is possible that there may be two or more possible data collection methods which could potentially be used to generate suitable data. If this is the case, the researcher needs to say something about how they made the decision to choose one of these over the others. Reasons given within this context could be practical (e.g. only one of the methods is practically feasible due to limitations in access to the research participants, perhaps because they are not able to all come together for a focus group meeting), ethical (e.g. one of the potential methods would be considered too intrusive by the research ethics board the researcher is planning to apply to), or they could be conceptual (e.g. one of the possible methods is most closely aligned with the researcher's epistemological position). For example, although it is possible to conduct phenomenological interviews in order to find out more about how nurses manage high levels of stress within the context of an intensive care unit, the research question (with its focus on social psychological processes and its assumptions about the existence of 'stress' and its possible 'management') is perhaps most suited to a grounded theory approach (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed account of

what types of research question are suitable for grounded theory research). Once the researcher has provided an account of the proposed data collection procedures, they need to explain how this data will be analysed. Again, the researcher's decision about what method of analysis to use is constrained by all the other decisions (s)he has made already. In other words, the method of analysis needs to be tailored to the research question and the type of data the researcher will be working with. It is never a good idea to propose to use a particular method of analysis simply because it is the one the researcher has used before and feels most comfortable with! Instead, the researcher needs to explain why, and how, the chosen method of analysis, once it has been applied to the data, will generate insights which constitute an answer to the research question. Once this rationale has been provided, the researcher will need to describe, briefly, how the analysis will unfold. For example, if the chosen method of analysis is interpretative phenomenological analysis (see Chapter 8 for more information about this method), the researcher needs to clarify whether they intend to analyse each interview transcript individually and then attempt to integrate the themes identified, or whether they are planning to build up the analysis by building on the themes identified in earlier interviews throughout the analysis. Of course, decisions about some of the finer details of the analytic approach may change as the researcher encounters and engages with the data, and this is not a problem. Again, as mentioned before, openness to the possibility of changing one's perspective and sensitivity to the data (and the research process as a whole) are, in fact, to be commended in a qualitative researcher. Revising and adjusting one's approach in the light of the evolving research is a good thing as long as such changes do not generate inconsistencies and a lack of epistemological coherence in the

research as a whole. Any changes in approach need to be carefully monitored, documented and reflected upon.

Ethical considerations

Ethical concerns and considerations pertaining to qualitative research have been discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Within the context of a research proposal the researcher needs to address such concerns in two ways. First, the researcher needs to provide information about how they will ensure that the proposed research meets the requirements of ethical research practice. As outlined in Chapter 3 (see pp. 25–27), these include informed consent, the right to withdraw and a guarantee of confidentiality, among others. The best way to cover this information in a research proposal is by addressing ethical concerns in relation to each of the proposed steps in the research process. So, for example, when describing the proposed procedure for the recruitment of participants (e.g. by distributing flyers with information about the study in a nurses' home) the researcher would need to explain what measures they might take in order to avoid being perceived as putting pressure on potential research participants to take part in the study. This could be done by including a reference on the flyer to the fact that it is absolutely fine not to take part in the study. Another way of doing it would be to only distribute the flyers in areas where potential participants would come across them when they are alone (e.g. in nurses' mail boxes) rather than when they are in groups where peer pressure might be applied (e.g. when the flyers are placed on tables in the common room). Another important ethical consideration is to ensure that all necessary permissions to recruit in certain places have been obtained. For example, in order to recruit National Health Service (NHS) nurses from nurses' homes in

the UK, the researcher would need to first obtain ethical clearance from the NHS. In order to cover ethical concerns adequately it is important to consider the possible effects of taking part in the research on the participants in relation to all the stages of the research process. The researcher needs to think about the ethical dimensions of the recruitment procedure, the process of data collection, analysis and dissemination. Often, researchers carefully consider the ethical requirements of the early stages of the research (i.e. recruitment and data collection) but then neglect to consider the potential effects of the analysis and the dissemination of the research findings. However, as indicated in Chapter 4, the way in which somebody's account is analysed (e.g. 'suspiciously' as opposed to 'empathically') potentially does make a difference to their experience of taking part in the research, especially where the research participant has access to the research report and can read about how their data has been analysed. In addition, there may be wider social implications of the results of the research (e.g. where the findings may inform changes in policies or practices) and these, in turn, need to be considered from an ethical standpoint.

The second way in which a research proposal needs to address ethical concerns is by identifying any particular ethical challenges which may be associated with the proposed research. For example, it may be
that the researcher wants to observe young children in a playgroup. In this case, the research raises particular ethical challenges as the research participants are too young to give informed consent by themselves. The researcher needs to find a way of ensuring that both the children and their responsible adults (e.g. parent or teacher) have a choice about whether or

not to take part in the research. Another example would be research that proposes to collect data from internet-based chatrooms or forums; here, the ethical challenge would be to decide to what extent the material posted there is public as opposed to private, and to ensure that no deception is used in order to access such material (e.g. by not posing as a member of a group but then using the information obtained for research purposes). Whatever the particular ethical challenges are, it is important that the researcher identifies these before starting the research and includes a discussion of them in the research proposal. The research proposal is the appropriate place to work through the ethical implications of the proposed research, and to provide information about the safeguards the researcher intends to build into the research in order to protect both the potential participants and themselves from any adverse effects of the research. Of course, not all potential challenges can be anticipated and, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2008) point out, new ethical dilemmas can surface throughout the research process. This means that the researcher needs to stay ethically attuned throughout the research process.

Reflexivity

Chapters 1 and 3 introduced the concept of reflexivity. It was argued that reflexivity is important because it encourages the qualitative researcher to reflect upon the various ways in which (s)he, as a person and as a researcher, is implicated in the research and its findings. This needs to be acknowledged in the research proposal. The researcher needs to say something about their relationship with the research, their expectations of it and their investment in what may be discovered as a result of it. This is perhaps particularly

important if the researcher has a pre-existing relationship with the subject matter (e.g., if the researcher has worked as a nurse before researching nurses' experiences of high levels of stress). It may also be that the researcher is motivated by a desire to improve the lives of those whose experiences (s)he proposes to study, and this, too, would need to be acknowledged. However, it is important to remember that from a qualitative perspective, the researcher's motivations and investments are not 'biases' which need to be removed from the research; rather, they are the conditions which frame, and indeed make possible, the research and which will inevitably shape the research and its findings. Reflexivity issues need to be addressed in the research proposal as the researcher's relationship with the research will inform the way in which they carry out the proposed research. Those who assess the quality of a research proposal need to know something about how the researcher's involvement with the study may influence the research process and outcome. Again, of course, it is not possible for the researcher to anticipate all the possible ways in which they may shape the research; however, the research proposal ought to demonstrate that the researcher has given some serious consideration to reflexivity issues in the proposed research.

Resources and materials

Even the smallest research project requires resources. To begin with, the researcher's time is a universal requirement as no research can take place without the researcher investing some of their time into it. It is easy to underestimate the time it will take to plan and conduct a research project. The process of transcribing recordings of semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions, in particular, takes

many hours and the time required to complete transcription tends to be underestimated by those new to this type of work. The researcher also needs to build in time to deal with unexpected difficulties, problems with recruitment, or any other complications of an ethical, practical or conceptual nature that were not anticipated. One major function of a research proposal is, in fact, to ensure that the researcher has thought through, realistically and sensibly, what exactly will be required of them in the process of conducting the proposed research. Although qualitative research is a creative process whose outcome is not entirely predictable (see Chapter 1), it still requires very careful planning. Being flexible and responsive to developments is not the same as leaving things to chance! In addition to providing a realistic estimate of how much time will be required to carry out the research, the researcher needs to identify any other resources (s)he may need to access in order to complete the research. These could include equipment such as a
digital recording device or a video camera. There could be financial requirements to cover things like travel costs for research participants or indeed for the researcher. The researcher may need to book a room for a focus group discussion or they may need to solicit the help of a technician in order to set up an online questionnaire. Whatever it is that the researcher requires in order to enable them to carry out the research, this needs to be identified and described in the research proposal. After all, the researcher would not want to have to discontinue the research halfway through because (s)he is unable to meet unexpected costs or because (s)he is unable to access necessary resources.

Dissemination

Finally, the researcher needs to think about how the proposed study's findings may be disseminated. In the case of a student project, dissemination usually takes the form of submission of the research report to be assessed by the course tutor. However, qualitative research findings can be disseminated in a number of different ways, and this is something that needs to be considered at some point. It is a good idea to anticipate possible forms of dissemination in the planning stages of the research because dissemination has ethical implications. For example, if the researcher intends to put together an exhibition or make a short film on the basis of their findings (see Chapter 13 for more on the use of visual methods in qualitative research), then this needs to be raised with potential research participants before they give their consent to take part in the study. Even where dissemination takes the form of a conventional research paper to be published in a scientific journal, this needs to be made explicit, especially if the researcher intends to use direct quotations from participants in their report. The researcher should also consider the social impact of the dissemination of their findings and think about which media will be the most suitable for publishing the work. Again, having considered these issues beforehand ensures that the researcher does not have to make important decision 'on the hoof' with potentially very unfortunate consequences. For example, giving interviews about one's research to the press can feel very exciting but reading a journalist's misrepresentation of what one has said afterwards can be truly mortifying! In addition to these ethical considerations, dissemination also has resource implications as some forms of dissemination require access to spaces and materials, and this is something that needs to be anticipated in good time. For all these reasons, it is a good idea to include some discussion of how

the researcher intends to disseminate the findings of the proposed research at the proposal stage.

Conclusion

To conclude, the research proposal is important as a process and as a product. The process of writing the proposal is essential in preparing the researcher for the research. Writing a detailed research proposal makes the researcher move beyond the research as an idea only, and it obliges the researcher to consider, in a systematic fashion, the details of the research, its procedural aspects and its ethical, practical and conceptual implications. So even if no one else ever read the research proposal it would still need to be written. However, most research proposals are read by other people because as a product the research proposal fulfils the important function of convincing others that the proposed research is workable, and that it is conceptually and ethically sound. Obtaining official approval for the research proposal, therefore, should give the researcher confidence in their research plans and increase their commitment to the proposed research.

Discussion questions

1. What is a research proposal and what are its functions?

2. Why should a qualitative researcher spend considerable time and effort preparing a research proposal?
3. What may be some of the theoretical, methodological and ethical problems a researcher may encounter as a result of not having designed a full research proposal?

Further reading

Finlay, L. and Gough, B. (eds) (2003) *Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Sciences*. London: Blackwell.

Punch, K. (2006) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. London: Sage.

Rawson, D. (1999) Planning, conducting and writing up research, in R. Bor and M. Watts (eds) *The Trainee Handbook: A Guide for Counselling and Psychotherapy Trainees*. London: Sage.

Thompson, A.R. and Chambers, E. (2012) Ethical issues in qualitative mental health research, in D. Harper and A.R. Thompson (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Onlinee

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Part 2

Doing research

Part contents

6 Thematic analysis

7 Grounded theory methodology

8 Phenomenological methods

9 Case studies

10 Discursive psychology

11 Foucauldian discourse analysis

12 Narrative analysis

13 Visual methods

Chapter 6

Thematic analysis

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the aims and objectives of thematic analysis
- its status as a theoretically flexible methodology
- the difference between 'inductive' and 'deductive' thematic analysis
- the methodological procedures associated with thematic analysis, including techniques for gathering and analysing data and ways of presenting the findings
- its limitations

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate thematic analysis epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

It makes sense to begin Part 2 of this book with a chapter on thematic analysis. This is because thematic analysis is a method for recognizing and organizing patterns in content and meaning in qualitative data. As such, thematic analysis underpins most other methods of qualitative data analysis. In particular, both grounded theory (see Chapter 7) and phenomenological analysis (see Chapter 8) rely heavily on line-by-line coding of the data in order to identify 'meaning units' (in the form of themes and/or categories of meaning) which structure the data. However, narrative analysis (see Chapter 12) and most visual methodologies (see Chapter 13) also require the researcher to formulate themes which capture the most important patterns of meaning contained within the data. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006: 82) describe thematic analysis

as involving 'a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon [under investigation]', and therefore, as constituting 'a form of pattern recognition within the data'. Being able to systematically work through qualitative data in order to identify common threads of meaning, to group these together into categories of meaning and to then cluster these into higher-order themes is a skill which all qualitative researchers ought to acquire. Thematizing meaning has been described as

a generic skill which forms the basis of much, if not most, qualitative research (e.g. Holloway and Todres 2003; Joffe 2012).

Thematic analysis has only relatively recently been recognized as a qualitative research method in its own right, and there are now a number of clear and comprehensive accounts of how to carry out high quality thematic analysis (see e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006; Joffe 2012). However, there is still some debate as to whether thematic analysis does, in fact, constitute a fully-fledged research method, or whether it is more of a tool or a skill which is used across a range of qualitative methods of data analysis (as suggested by Boyatzis (1998) and Ryan and Bernard (2000), among others). Whatever one's position in relation to this question, it is important to understand that thematic analysis is not tied to a particular theoretical approach to qualitative research (unlike, for example, interpretative phenomenological analysis or discourse analysis). This means that the researcher who uses thematic analysis needs to decide what exactly the themes identified in the analysis represent. Here, the research question and the study's epistemological point of departure come into play. For example, if our research question is concerned with finding out what a group of clients who are about to embark upon a course of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) know and/or think about this type of therapy, then the themes we identify in the data are likely to represent our research participants' beliefs about, and attitudes towards, CBT. By contrast, if our research question is concerned with the way in which self-harm is constructed in the media, then the themes we identify in our analysis of newspaper articles and TV programmes are likely to represent prevalent social

constructions of self-harm. So the theoretical status of a theme is something that the researcher needs to determine; it is not something that the method itself prescribes. Thematic analysis can be used in order to address realist, phenomenological or social constructionist research questions. Choosing thematic analysis as the method of data analysis does not, in itself, commit the researcher to a particular epistemological orientation. This situation has been described as 'theoretical freedom', and it has been taken to mean that thematic analysis is a method which is 'essentially independent of theory and epistemology' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 78). However, I believe that this is perhaps not the best way to put it, as thematic analysis still requires theoretical and epistemological commitments from the researcher; it is just that these are not indicated by the method itself and, therefore, need to be chosen by the researcher. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say, then, that thematic analysis is characterized by theoretical flexibility (rather than 'freedom') and that it is meaningless unless located within an epistemological and theoretical framework (rather than being 'independent of theory and epistemology').

What is a 'theme'?

It is not easy to define what constitutes a theme. It is interesting that the identification of themes underpins so much qualitative research and yet there is not much discussion of the meaning of this term. This may be because the identification of themes is often the starting point of an analysis which ultimately seeks to develop insights into the relationships between themes, their interconnections and implications. Within this context, the identification of themes may appear to be a basic step, requiring little sophistication.

Perhaps there is an assumption that to identify themes is a relatively straightforward undertaking as it involves nothing more than giving a label to something that stands out. However, once we ask ourselves what makes a theme a theme, how we recognize a theme, and how we know where one theme ends and another one begins, things start to get a little more complicated.

Joffe (2012: 209) suggests that '[A] theme refers to a specific pattern of meaning found in the data.' Braun and Clarke (2006: 82) propose that '[A] theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.' Boyatzis (1998: 161, cited in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006: 83) describes a theme as 'a pattern in the information that at a minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon'. All three attempts to define what a theme is include a reference to the presence of a pattern. This suggests that a theme refers to a particular, recognizable configuration of meanings which co-occur in a way that is meaningful and systematic rather than random and arbitrary. For example,
let's imagine that a research participant made the following comments during the course of a semi-structured interview about his experience of finding out that his girlfriend is pregnant with his child:

'When she first told me I felt really excited at the thought of becoming a dad!'

'I am not really sure what to think. After all, I have only just turned 25 and had not thought of myself as a family man yet.'

'It's funny to think that there'll be another human being who will see me as the one who knows everything and who will take care of them. I'd always thought of myself a little irresponsible, kind of footloose and fancy-free . . .'

The researcher might decide to capture the essential meaning of what the participant communicates about his experience in these comments by giving them the theme label 'a new sense of identity'; another possible label might be 'negotiating identities' or 'who am I?'. There is no one correct theme label. However, the important point is that the researcher acknowledges that the research participant's comments suggest that he is grappling with the implications of his girlfriend's pregnancy in terms of his sense of identity. In other words, the recognizable configuration of meanings which recurs throughout the interview involves questions around the participant's identity in the face of the prospect of becoming a father.

As mentioned earlier, what counts as a theme in a particular thematic analysis depends on the research question and the epistemological approach taken by the researcher. Joffe (2012) points out that meanings captured by a theme can be manifest (i.e. directly observable meaning) or latent (i.e. implicit meaning), depending on how the researcher approaches the interpretative task (e.g. 'suspiciously' or 'empathically', see Chapter 4). This means that themes can range from a simple acknowledgement of the issues a research participant has raised (e.g. 'identity' in our example) to an interpretation of what psychological state might underpin the participant's comments (e.g. 'identity confusion – who am I now?'). Joffe recommends that the researcher stipulates clear and explicit criteria for what can and what

cannot be coded within themes. To put it another way, the researcher needs to be clear about what counts as a theme within the context of a particular study.

Suitable research questions for thematic analysis

Earlier in this chapter it was established that thematic analysis can be used to address research questions originating from different epistemological perspectives. However, there are certain types of research question for which thematic analysis is particularly well suited. These include questions about people's conceptualizations or ways of thinking about particular social phenomena. For example, Joffe has used thematic analysis to study the public's conceptualizations of infectious diseases such as AIDS (Joffe 1999), the Ebola virus (Joffe and Haarhoff 2002) and MRSA (methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus) (Joffe et al. 2011). Another suitable research question for thematic analysis is concerned with media representations of social issues. For example, Washer (2004, 2006) has used thematic analysis to examine media representations of diseases such as 'mad cow disease' and SARS. Another example of such work is Braun's (2005) analysis of media representations of female genital cosmetic surgery.

There are two major theoretical frameworks which have been used to theorize the findings from research using thematic analysis (Joffe 2012). These are social phenomenology and social representations theory. *Social phenomenology* is concerned with understanding the social reality which is subjectively experienced by groups of people as they go about their daily life. When used in conjunction with thematic analysis, the themes identified through the analysis capture

the meanings attributed by participants to their experiences and help the researcher make sense of the participants' actions (see e.g. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). *Social representations theory* is interested in the ways in which social phenomena are conceptualized and represented by individuals and by organizations or institutions; it is also concerned with the processes by which such representations change and evolve over time. When used in order to make sense of the themes generated by a thematic analysis, it organizes these into constellations that capture diverse social representations (see e.g. Washer and Joffe 2006). There is, of course, no requirement for the researcher to subscribe to a formal theory when using thematic analysis. The important thing is to be clear about the theoretical status attributed to the themes that are identified; this can be informed by a particular theory (such as social representations theory), or can be informed by the research question and the researcher's epistemological position.

Approaches to thematic analysis

We have already acknowledged that in its identification of themes, thematic analysis can focus on different kinds of meaning; these can be manifest meanings (reflecting the explicit content of what a research participant has said, for example), or latent meanings (e.g. reflecting the interpretation the researcher has made of what has been said by a research participant). This suggests that thematic analysis can adopt an 'empathic' or a 'suspicious' approach to data analysis. In addition, researchers have also differentiated between an inductive and a deductive approach to thematic analysis. An inductive approach (e.g. Boyatzis 1998) works from the bottom up; here, the researcher approaches the data without a

theoretically informed coding frame. The themes that emerge from such an analysis are firmly grounded in the data and do not reflect the researcher's theoretical commitments. By contrast, a deductive approach to thematic analysis (e.g. Crabtree and Miller 1999) utilizes some form of template, usually derived from the relevant literature, in order to code the data and derive themes from it. Some researchers (e.g. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) use a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis whereby an a *priori* template is used to organize the data to begin with but where novel themes are also allowed to emerge from the analysis. Theoretically derived, a *priori* codes and newly emerging themes are then integrated in order to generate a comprehensive thematic description of the data. A final step in such an analysis can involve the development of an explanatory framework which incorporates the major themes identified in the analysis and which makes sense of the phenomenon under investigation.

Although a deductive approach to thematic analysis is by definition theoretically informed and, therefore, highly interpretative (or more 'suspicious', to use the terminology introduced in Chapter 4), it is important to remember that an inductive approach to thematic analysis can also involve a high level of interpretation. This is clearly the case when the themes the researcher identifies aspire to capture latent meanings, and it is also possible in the final phase of an inductive thematic analysis when the researcher makes connections between themes and draws conclusions about the phenomenon under investigation.

How to carry out a thematic analysis

There are now a number of detailed, step-by-step accounts of how to carry out a thematic analysis (e.g. Braun and Clark 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006; Howitt 2010; Joffe 2012). These provide helpful guidance to those who are new to thematic analysis. As we have established, however, there are a number of different ways in which a thematic analysis can be approached, and this means that the researcher needs to be clear about the purpose of their thematic analysis before they can commit themselves to a particular approach. As with all qualitative research methods, the research question is crucial here, and clarity about the research question will help the researcher choose the most appropriate approach to their thematic analysis. In what follows, we shall look at the options available to the researcher and the decisions the researcher will need to make along the way as they develop a thematic analysis which suits their purposes. To assist the decision-making process, the researcher may wish to ask themselves the following questions.

What do I want to know?

We have established that thematic analysis can be used to address different research questions, and that the nature of the research question will have implications for the researcher's approach to thematic analysis. The first thing the researcher needs to do, therefore, is to clearly state the research question. This will ensure that the researcher is clear about whether they want to simply identify themes, whether they want to compare themes, or whether they want to theorize a phenomenon on the basis of themes. For example, if our research question is 'What does university education mean to first-year undergraduate students?', then we may simply want to generate a list of themes which capture the various

meanings given to university education by our participants (who would, of course, need to be first-year undergraduate students). If, however, our research question asks 'What may be the major differences in the ways in which nurses and psychotherapists conceptualize "self-harm"?', then the aim of our analysis would be to compare themes generated from the analysis of interviews and/or focus groups with nurses and psychotherapists, respectively. Alternatively, if our research question aspires to find out 'What makes people decide to buy a new car?', then our thematic analysis would need to generate themes which are relevant to the decision-making process which precedes the purchase of a new car, and it would need to then use these themes to theorize
the decision-making process in some way. This would most likely involve making connections between the themes in order to capture the inner logic, the dynamic, of the decision-making process.

What type of data do I need to collect?

Again, the answer to this question is determined by our research question. Thematic analysis can work with a wide range of materials including transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions, media texts and images, as well as personal diaries, letters, blogs, and even text messages. Any materials that can be analysed for meaning and content constitute suitable data for thematic analysis. Joffe (2012) makes some helpful suggestions regarding data elicitation. She argues that although interviews and focus groups are very popular data collection methods among researchers who use thematic analysis, the disadvantage here is that such methods impose content and structure on people's thinking through the use of an interview agenda. Joffe proposes that it may be

preferable to use what she describes as ‘a more naturalistic inroad into people’s meaning systems concerning the phenomenon under study’ (p. 212). For example, inviting the research participant to engage in free associations to the topic under investigation, or asking them to construct a map of subjects or themes relevant to the topic, is likely to elicit more subjectively relevant material than a series of specific questions about the topic.

The research question usually specifies who the data will need to be collected from because it tends to identify the group of people whose conceptualizations the researcher is interested in. A more difficult issue is how to determine the sample size for a thematic analysis. Clearly, if the research question is concerned with a comparison between the views held by different groups of people (e.g. ‘What may be the major differences in the ways in which nurses and psychotherapists conceptualize “self-harm”?’), then the number of participants in each group will need to be large enough to ensure that the differences identified in the analysis reflect group differences rather than individual variations. It is unusual for qualitative research to be concerned with differences between groups, and thematic analyses which address such questions will need to use much larger samples than would be expected from qualitative research projects in general. This is why it is recommended that thematic analyses which are interested in group-based variation handle their data with the aid of computer packages (see Joffe 2012 for more on this).

How do I code my data?

Once the data has been collected, it needs to be coded. Coding the data is the first step in a thematic analysis. Usually, the researcher will start by familiarizing him- or herself with the data by reading and re-reading the text several times. This is particularly important where the researcher has not transcribed the data themselves as the transcription process provides the researcher with a great opportunity to immerse themselves in the data. On the basis of their initial encounter with the data, the researcher will develop some ideas about the nature of the data and its relevance in relation to the research question. It is a good idea to make a note of these ideas before the more systematic process of coding begins, as these initial ideas are likely to influence the researcher's choice of codes in one way or another. Coding the data involves working through the text, ideally line-by-line, in order to identify meaning units, and labelling these with a code that captures the meaning identified. The choice of codes depends on whether the thematic analysis takes an inductive or a deductive approach. In the former case, the code tries simply to capture the meaning contained within the segment, whereas in the latter case the code identifies a meaning unit that contains a feature which is of particular interest to the researcher. For example, in an inductive analysis of accounts of nurses' experiences of working in intensive care, the researcher may code a participant's comment that 'Sometimes I feel that it all gets too much and I want to leave the room and lie down' as 'desire to withdraw and rest'. An example of a more deductive code might be where a researcher is interested in how people categorize different types of TV programmes, and codes a participant's observation that 'These TV programmes are fun to watch but I never remember much about them afterwards' as 'Pure entertainment'. The difference here is

that in the deductive analysis the researcher is not actually interested in the participants' experiences or views as such, but rather in specifically how participants classify the programmes they watch. Thus, the code 'pure entertainment' is relevant to the researcher within this context. By contrast, the inductive analysis does not predetermine which aspects of the participant's account the researcher is particularly interested in; here, the code 'desire to withdraw and rest' emerges from the participant's account itself. In other words, in an inductive thematic analysis, the coding frame itself emerges from the data, whereas a deductive thematic analysis approaches the data with a pre-existing coding frame.

It is important to remember that codes are not the same as themes. Codes capture basic units of meaning in a descriptive fashion. The same segment of text can be given more than one code, just as more than one unit of meaning can be contained within a segment. A thematic analysis of, say, an interview transcript, is likely to generate a large number of codes. It is only when the researcher pays attention to potential patterns across the codes and reflects on the underlying meaning of what has been said that actual themes can be identified. Sometimes the researcher will introduce a second level of coding (before moving to identify themes) which involves the integration of several descriptive codes into higher-level codes (sometimes described as 'categories'). Themes capture clusters of codes, and they always constitute a higher level of analysis than coding does. There will always be far fewer themes than there are codes. Langdridge (2004: 267–70) provides a helpful discussion on the role of coding in qualitative analysis. He draws our attention to the fact that although interpretation is involved in all aspects of qualitative

analysis, higher-level codes and themes tend to be more interpretative than lower-level, descriptive codes.

How do I interpret the themes?

As noted earlier, according to Braun and Clarke (2006: 82), '[A] theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set'. Joffe (2012: 209) adds to this that themes ought to 'highlight the most salient constellations of meanings present in the data'. The use of the terms 'important' and 'salient' in these two quotations suggests that the identification of themes involves decisions about what is 'important' and what is 'salient'. This means that the researcher needs to adopt a set of criteria which help them determine what is and what is not worth thematizing. Usually, these criteria are informed by the research question. For example, if the research question is concerned with how students evaluate their experiences (e.g. 'How do undergraduate students evaluate their first week at university?'), then the researcher would probably want to construct themes around the evaluative dimensions invoked by the students in their accounts. The researcher may come up with themes such as 'opportunities for making new friends', 'implications for self-esteem' or 'opportunities to learn something new'. However, it would not be meaningful, within the context of this study, to end up with themes which simply identify the different types of activities the students engaged in during their first week (e.g. 'freshers' ball', 'book fair', 'societies fair', etc.).

It is also important to take care not to construct themes which simply reflect the researcher's interview questions. For

example, a researcher may ask the interviewee questions about how they felt about an experience, what their attitudes towards it were and how they made a decision about what to do. If the researcher's themes are then labelled 'feelings', 'attitudes' and 'decisions', they have not, in fact, conducted an analysis of the data. Instead, they have classified the interviewee's responses under the topics raised in the researcher's questions, and this does not tell us anything useful at all. After all, themes are supposed to capture the essence of relevant meanings contained within the codes and to identify relevant patterns across the codes. Themes ought to allow the researcher to tell a story about what is going on in the data. They are interpretative in that they make connections between codes, link codes in a meaningful way and produce insights into the relationships between them.

As Braun and Clarke remind us, even inductive themes never simply 'emerge' from data; rather, the researcher actively constructs themes. Braun and Clarke (2006: 80) cite Ely et al. (1997: 205–6) who observe that, '[I]f themes "reside" anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them.' Connections and relationships between codes and themes can be represented in the form of thematic maps which look a little bit like mind-maps or spider diagrams (see e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006).

The final step in the analysis involves a review of the themes that have been identified with a view to constructing an explanatory framework on the basis of the most important themes. Reviewing themes means checking whether some could be further integrated into higher-order themes or whether some themes may not be relevant to the research

question after all, and making further connections between themes. This phase of the research requires the researcher to move continually between their evolving thematic map and the raw data, as reviewing themes always also involves reviewing data extracts. Even at this late stage it is possible to re-code segments of text, to reallocate extracts to themes and even to change one's mind about the core themes which structure the data. As the frequency of the appearance of a code does not in itself determine its significance, the researcher's decisions about what is and what is not important can evolve throughout the analysis. As Joffe (2012: 217) points out, a single idiosyncratic comment may express what is generally taken for granted and not spelled out by participants, or it may
refer to something that most participants find difficult to voice. As such, repeated scrutiny of the raw data in the light of the emerging thematic map can help the researcher spot potentially highly significant units of meaning which may have been missed in the initial coding. Ultimately, the final stage in the analysis is the most interpretative one as it constitutes an attempt to both capture and account for the thematic patterns in the data, and ideally also to theorize them. We shall explore further what this may involve in the next section.

What can I conclude from my analysis?

The aim of any qualitative analysis is to generate insights which constitute at least a partial answer to the research question which motivated the research in the first place. It follows that the types of conclusion that can be drawn from an analysis, and the complexity of the insights generated, will reflect the complexity of the research question. If, for

example, our research question was concerned with group differences in conceptualizations, then our thematic analysis would at least need to be able to draw some conclusions about the presence or absence of any such differences. The analysis may simply identify the presence of differences in the groups' conceptualizations and then describe the nature of such differences in terms of the themes that characterize them. For example, one group of participants may think about a political party in terms of the charisma of its leader and the scandals surrounding members of the leader's inner circle, while the other group may conceptualize the party in terms of its election manifesto and its proposed policies. The analysis may go further than this, though, and attempt to also explain the observed differences in conceptualizations by making connections between the two groups' expressed views about the political party and other aspects of their experience such as their social identifications, their aspirations and their everyday concerns. It may be, for example, that the differences in conceptualization can be explained on the basis of the participants' perceived social distance from the politicians associated with the political party. It may be that those who perceive the politicians as socially far removed from themselves, as living in a different world with different values and concerns, will conceptualize them as yet another set of celebrity figures who are interesting only in terms of their scandalous behaviour. By contrast, those who position themselves as socially closer may be more concerned with evaluating to what extent they do or do not agree with the party's policies. Thematic analyses can illuminate possible reasons behind people's declared beliefs and attitudes because such analyses can identify and thematize the meanings people assign to social phenomena. As such, thematic analyses can usefully complement findings from survey-based research

which tends to identify differences in people's beliefs, attitudes and intentions without being able to account for such differences (see Joffe 2012: 214–15 for an example of this).

Braun and Clarke (2006) make the important point that a thematic analysis needs to be grounded in the data but also go some way beyond the surface level of the data by generating an understanding of what is going on in the data. A thematic analysis does more than summarize and classify what research participants have told the researcher. It should also attempt to make sense of what they have said and why they might have said it. Braun and Clarke (2006: 94) recommend that the researcher drives the interpretative phase of the analysis forward by asking themselves the following questions: 'What does this theme mean?', 'What are the assumptions underpinning it?', 'What are the implications of this theme?', 'What conditions are likely to have given rise to it?', 'Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way (as opposed to other ways)?' and 'What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic?'.

An example of a thematic analysis

In her doctoral research into the role of performance feedback in self-assessment among nurses in South Australia, Jennifer Fereday developed a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). As such, her study constitutes an excellent example of how a thematic analysis can benefit from the strengths of both data-driven and theory-driven coding. The research question which underpinned the research was concerned with the way in which nurses use performance feedback in their appraisal of their own

competence. More specifically, the research set out to obtain a better understanding of three facets of this process:

1. The sources and processes of performance feedback used by nursing clinicians to self-assess their level of competence.
2. The criteria applied by nursing clinicians to classify feedback utility and credibility.
3. How the criteria were formulated and structured in interpretation.
   (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006: 81)

The data used in the analysis were gathered from a total of 10 focus group discussions with nurses and with clinical managers; 16 relevant policies and procedural documents were also included in the analysis. The researcher used Boyatzis' (1998) guide to data-driven inductive thematic analysis as well as Crabtree and Miller's (1999) model of the use of *a priori* template codes. The aim of such a combined analysis was to explore in detail the three facets of the process of self-assessment identified as being of interest to the researcher while at the same time allowing themes to emerge directly from the data.

The analysis began with the development of a code manual. The code manual contains codes which are informed by the concerns of the research question, relevant literature and the researcher's theoretical orientation (in this case, Schutz's (1967) social phenomenology which emphasizes the importance of safeguarding the subjective meaning of experience). Six broad code categories were identified as relevant and were included in the coding template. These

were ‘motives’, ‘social relationships’, ‘the meaning of social action’, ‘systems of relevance’, ‘ideal types’, and ‘common sense’. For each of these broad categories, a number of lower-level codes was identified. For example, ‘social relationships’ was broken down into three possible types of relationship (‘We-relation’, ‘Thou-relation’, and ‘They-relation’) which were based on Schutz’s (1967) conceptualization of social relationships. As such, they are very much theory-driven codes. The next step in the analysis involved testing out the usefulness and applicability of the codes. This was done by coding two of the documents (both of these were performance appraisal documents from health care organizations), and reviewing the analysis. In this case, no modifications to the template were required. Next, the researcher familiarized herself with the entire data set, reading and re-reading it, as well as summarizing key points and identifying initial potential themes. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006: 86) suggest that this step in the analysis ‘reflected the initial processing of the information by the researcher and provided the opportunity to sense and take note of potential themes in the raw data’.

The next stage in the analysis involved the systematic coding of each segment of the data, working through the texts line-by-line. The researcher used the codes from the predetermined template as preliminary codes but at the same time she assigned newly emerging, inductive codes to segments of data that contained units of meaning which could not be appropriately captured by the codes from the coding manual. These additional codes were either entirely new or constituted developments or expansions of existing codes. Next, the researcher reviewed all the codes, looking for connections between them and paying attention to any

patterns in the data. For example, differences between the experiences described by more and less experienced nurses began to become apparent. At this point, the researcher could begin to identify and label themes, then cluster themes and eventually come up with three higher-order themes which captured the key dimensions and dynamics which characterize nurses' experience of using performance feedback in self-assessment. For example, the theme 'familiarity' emerged as a fundamental dimension along which the nurses organized their experience. Finally, the analysis concluded with an interpretative phase during which the researcher produced an explanatory framework which drew on the themes and the linkages between them in order to capture the inner workings of the phenomenon of performance feedback. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006: 90–1) neatly summarize the findings of this thematic analysis as follows:

In summary, from this process of analysis, the credibility of the feedback message was found to be linked to the level of familiarity shared by the nursing clinician and the source of feedback. Familiarity in this study involved a person who had frequent contact with the nurse, demonstrated an understanding of the situational context within which the feedback originated, and was respected for his or her clinical expertise and/or experiential knowledge. The findings indicated that the type of social relationship between the source and the recipient of performance feedback was a significant criterion for credibility and subsequent utility of the feedback message. A high level of familiarity between the feedback source and the recipient was found to be potentially detrimental to the integrity of the feedback message and, in turn, the utility of the message for performance improvement.

Limitations of thematic analysis

As we saw earlier in this chapter, a thematic analysis is only meaningful if the researcher is clear about what the themes that they have identified actually represent. In order to do this, the researcher needs to
make decisions about the epistemological orientation of their study. While not necessarily a limitation, the fact that the choice of thematic analysis as one's tool for data analysis does not in itself provide the researcher with a clear theoretical basis for their research means that the researcher needs to do a lot of conceptual work before they can embark upon the research itself. At the same time, thematic analysis is often represented as a relatively 'easy-to-use' qualitative method; for example, Braun and Clarke (2006: 94) suggest that '[I]t is relatively easy to conduct a good thematic analysis on qualitative data, even when you are still learning qualitative techniques.' This combination of an 'easy-to-use' reputation together with its lack of a definitive theoretical base can lead researchers to make the mistake of conducting a thematic analysis without locating it theoretically and epistemologically. The result is a 'shopping list' of 'themes' which do not represent anything in particular, and which often reflect the topics included in the researcher's interview agenda. Insights gained on the basis of such an analysis are of necessity very limited. Another potential limitation arises in relation to a deductive approach to thematic analysis. Here, the researcher may be so committed to the *a priori* codes identified on the basis of existing literature and theory that they do not allow new insights to emerge from the data. Such a preoccupation with checking out the applicability and validity of existing concepts at the expense of letting the data speak for itself does not sit well with the ethos of qualitative

research (see Chapter 1); indeed, it could be argued that such an approach to thematic analysis is akin to content analysis and, therefore, not really a qualitative method (in the 'big Q' sense of the term, see Chapter 1, p. 9) at all. Joffe (2012: 219) reminds us that 'good qualitative work seeks detailed complex interpretations of socially and historically located phenomena'; even thematic analysis, despite its apparent simplicity, aspires to produce insights which make sense of social psychological phenomena through an analytic narrative rather than, as Braun and Clarke (2006: 94) put it, to simply present 'a selection of extracts with analytic comment which simply or primarily paraphrases their content' (see Braun and Clarke 2006: 94–6 for a helpful discussion of how to avoid common pitfalls and how to achieve quality when conducting a thematic analysis, including a 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis).

Three epistemological questions

Let us now turn to the three epistemological questions introduced at the end of Chapter 1 (pp. 11–12). The purpose of these questions was to clarify, in relation to each of the eight qualitative approaches discussed in this book, what their epistemological basis and their methodological requirements might be. It was argued that in order to be able to evaluate a piece of research in a meaningful way, and to compare methodological approaches with one another, we need to assess to what extent a piece of research has met its own objectives. To do that, we need to be clear about the type of knowledge the research set out to produce. The three epistemological questions can help us with this. In what follows, we shall reflect on the kind of knowledge thematic analysis aims to produce (question 1), the kinds of

assumptions thematic analysis makes about the world (question 2), and how it positions the researcher (question 3).

What kind of knowledge does thematic analysis aim to produce?

Thematic analysis produces knowledge that takes the form of themes, built up from descriptive codes, which capture and make sense of the meanings which characterize the phenomenon under investigation. As the phenomenon under investigation can vary widely between studies, the themes identified on the basis of a thematic analysis can represent anything from research participants' perceptions of something, to the ways the media represent an event. This means that the kind of knowledge thematic analysis aims to produce depends on the research question. For example, if the research question seeks to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the print media represent 'the threat of terrorism' at a particular point in time, by conducting a thematic analysis of newspaper coverage of the topic at that time, then the knowledge the thematic analysis seeks to produce would be social constructionist knowledge, and the study would adopt a relativist epistemological orientation. By contrast, if the research question was concerned with research participants' experiences of being diagnosed with a serious health condition, then the themes identified on the basis of a thematic analysis would most probably reflect the meanings attributed to the experience by the research participants. As such, the research would be phenomenological in orientation. Finally, if the researcher wanted to know how much people know about a particular subject, a thematic analysis of focus group discussions with relevant social groups would allow the researcher to capture the extent and the content of their

knowledge in relevant themes and then compare differences in knowledge between groups. Such an analysis would be based upon a realist orientation. Again, we see how important it is that the researcher is absolutely clear about the nature of the research question that drives their research, and about the epistemological implications of the formulation of the research question.

What kinds of assumptions does thematic analysis make about the world?

Again, the assumptions thematic analysis makes about the world, and therefore its ontological position, depend entirely upon the research question. Since the research question determines what the themes identified in a thematic analysis are supposed to represent (e.g. whether they represent individuals' perceptions, media constructions or social representations held by particular groups in society, etc.), we cannot identify an ontological position which is characteristic of thematic analysis in general. As ontology is concerned with the question 'What is there to know?', it is the research question (rather than the method) which provides an answer to our question about the researcher's assumptions about the world. For example, a research question about the media's construction of an event presupposes that there is such a thing as a 'construction' and that this is of interest, presumable because the media's constructions of meaning have consequences for people. Such a research question would indicate an idealist orientation as it presupposes that ideas (here, in the form of 'constructions') have an important role to play. By contrast, a research question that is concerned with establishing how much, and what, people know about a phenomenon presupposes that there is such a thing as

'knowledge' and that one can have more or less of it. Presumably it is also being assumed that it is possible to assess to what extent this knowledge is accurate. Such a research question would be located within a realist (materialist) ontology. These examples demonstrate that it is possible for a researcher who uses thematic analysis to subscribe to a variety of ontological positions, depending upon what it is they are planning their thematic analysis to tell them something about. However, it is important to acknowledge that most thematic analyses address research questions about subjective perceptions or social representations of one sort or another, and are therefore most likely to adopt a relativist epistemology and an idealist ontology.

How does thematic analysis conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

In line with thematic analysis' inherent flexibility, the role of the researcher can take different forms in a thematic analysis. What form it takes depends on whether the researcher is primarily interested in manifest meanings (reflecting the explicit content of what a research participant has said, for example), or latent meanings (e.g. reflecting the interpretation the researcher has made of what has been said by a research participant). In the former case, the researcher would need to adopt an 'empathic' approach to the interpretation of the data, attempting to refrain from letting their own preconceptions and preferred theories shape the analysis, while the latter case requires a more 'suspicious' approach whereby the researcher's knowledge and expertise would impact upon the analysis more strongly (see Chapter 4). Again, as in response to the two previous epistemological questions, the position of

the researcher is not fixed by the choice of thematic analysis as a research method. Rather, it is determined by the research question and the status of the themes in the analysis. Depending on the aims of the research, the thematic analyst could take any of the available positions, including that of the 'detective', 'counsellor' or 'architect' (see Chapter 2).

Conclusion

Our reflections on the three epistemological questions reinforce the importance of locating a particular thematic analysis epistemologically and theoretically. They reinforce our earlier argument that the theoretical flexibility that characterizes thematic analysis does not simply constitute a freedom from theory; rather, it bestows upon the researcher the responsibility to choose their theoretical position and to be clear about how this informs the interpretation of the data. Far from being an 'easy' method, thematic analysis requires a good understanding of the role of the research question and its implications for the analysis (e.g. whether inductive or deductive, whether we are looking for manifest or latent themes, whether the themes represent subjective perceptions or social representations, and so on). A good thematic analysis, therefore, is the product of a combination of theoretical knowledge and understanding, as well as the ability to systematically yet creatively thematize and interpret data. It is certainly not an 'easy option'!

Interactive exercises

1. To obtain a sense of what is involved in an inductive thematic analysis, locate the 'Letters to the Editor' page of a national newspaper. Select at least three letters written by readers of the newspaper in response to the same topic. For example, this might be readers' views on an important matter such as the decision about whether or not to build a third runway at Heathrow Airport in London. The aim of your thematic analysis is to identify the most important dimensions along which readers organize their comments on the matter. Work through each of the letters, line-by-line, identifying meaning units and labelling these with a code that captures the meaning identified. Then read through all the codes and think about ways in which some of these may be integrated so as to give rise to higher-level codes (or categories). Next, start thinking about possible themes which might help you pull together your codes and categories into an analytic narrative. Try to formulate an answer to the research question 'What are the most important dimensions along which readers organize their comments on the matter?'.
2. To obtain a sense of what is involved in a deductive thematic analysis, you will be using the higher-level codes identified in your inductive analysis of the three readers' letters in order to

derive initial codes for another round of analysis. Obtain more data by selecting another three letters on another topic which is different but not too dissimilar from the one used in the inductive analysis (e.g. readers' views on whether or not the government ought to reduce VAT in order to stimulate growth in the economy). Again, work through each of the letters, line-by-line, identifying meaning units and labelling these with a code that captures the meaning identified. This time, however, you will be using the codes from the inductive analysis. Only create new codes when the existing codes do not fit. Review all the codes once you have completed coding and try to develop a thematic map which is capable of accommodating all the codes. Reflect on the experience of trying to use existing codes to code the three letters and also on the differences between the dimensions identified as relevant to the first topic and those that characterize people's thinking in relation to the second. Do you feel that having access to preliminary codes (from the inductive analysis) helped or hindered your second analysis?

Further reading

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998) *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3: 77–101.

Crabtree, B. and Miller, W. (1999) A template approach to text analysis: developing and using codebooks, in B. Crabtree and W. Miller (eds) *Doing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Fereday, J. and Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006) Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1): 80–92.

Joffe, H. (2012) Thematic analysis, in D. Harper and A.R. Thompson (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Snapshot Box 6.1

Does thematic analysis constitute a qualitative research method in its own right?

There is still some debate about whether thematic analysis constitutes a distinct research method (as proposed by Braun and Clarke 2006 and Joffe 2012) or whether it simply describes the process of thematizing data which is

part and parcel of a number of other qualitative methods (as argued by Boyatzis 1998 and Ryan and Bernard 2000). Since thematic analysis is a method for recognizing and organizing patterns in qualitative data, it could be argued that some form of thematic analysis is
involved in most other methods of qualitative data analysis. Indeed, Holloway and Todres (2003) observe that thematizing meaning is a generic skill for qualitative researchers. In addition, since thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and, therefore, compatible with a wide range of epistemological positions, it is difficult to specify in general terms what exactly thematic analysis is and does. Systematically working through qualitative data in order to identify common threads of meaning, grouping them together into categories of meaning and then clustering these into higher-order themes in itself does not constitute a method of analysis; the theoretical meaning and analytic status of categories and themes need to be determined, and it is that which makes interpretation possible. Since thematic analysis in itself does not provide the researcher with even basic theoretical concepts, it could be argued that it does not constitute a qualitative research method in its own right.

In their highly influential paper on thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006: 77) acknowledge that '[T]hematic analysis is a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged' qualitative research method; however, they argue that it ought to be recognized as a qualitative method in its own right. They hope that their paper will

help to clarify the similarities and differences between thematic analysis and other qualitative approaches, and encourage researchers to conduct high-quality thematic analysis that is theoretically and methodologically sound. It is for you to decide which side you might want to take in this ongoing debate about the status of thematic analysis. In order to do this, you could read more about the different positions in the following publications.

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998) *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3: 77–101.

Holloway, I. and Todres, L. (2003) The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence, *Qualitative Research*, 3: 345–57.

Joffe, H. (2012) Thematic analysis, in D. Harper and A.R. Thompson (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Ryan, G.W. and Bernard, H.R. (2000) Data management and analysis methods, in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 7

Grounded theory methodology

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the aims and objectives of grounded theory methodology
- the basic principles that underpin grounded theory methodology
- the methodological procedures associated with grounded theory, including techniques for gathering and analysing data and ways of presenting the findings
- the different versions of grounded theory that are available and the debates that have given rise to their emergence
- grounded theory's limitations

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate grounded theory epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

Grounded theory was originally developed by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. They were unhappy about the way in which existing theories dominated sociological research. They argued that researchers needed a method that would allow them to move from data to theory, so that new theories could emerge. Such theories would be specific to the context in which they had been developed. They would be 'grounded' in the data from which they had emerged rather than rely on analytical constructs, categories or variables from pre-existing theories. Grounded theory, therefore, was designed to open up a space for the development of new, contextualized theories.

Since the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, the grounded theory method has undergone a number of revisions. Most significantly, Glaser and Strauss themselves parted company and proposed different ways in which grounded theory ought to be practised (see Snapshot Box 7.1 at the end of this chapter). In this chapter, I introduce the basic principles of grounded theory. This is followed by an illustration of the application of the method to the study of nurse–patient interaction. Having thus

outlined the basic process of grounded theory, I identify some of the differences between the various versions of the grounded theory method. I then go on to draw attention to the limitations of grounded theory as a qualitative method for psychological research. The chapter concludes by examining what grounded theory may have to say in response to the three epistemological questions identified at the end of Chapter 1.

Basic principles of grounded theory

Grounded theory involves the progressive identification and integration of *categories of meaning* from data. It is both the process of category identification and integration (as *method*) and its product (as *theory*). Grounded theory *as method* provides us with guidelines on how to identify categories, how to make links between categories and how to establish relationships between them. Grounded theory *as theory* is the end-product of this process; it provides us with an explanatory framework with which to understand the phenomenon under investigation. To identify, refine and integrate categories, and ultimately to develop theory, grounded theory researchers use a number of key strategies, including *constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling* and *theoretical coding*. Let us take a closer look at the major analytical constructs, or *building blocks*, of the grounded theory method.

Categories

These designate the grouping together of instances (events, processes, occurrences) that share central features or characteristics with one another. Categories can be at a low

level of abstraction, in which case they function as *descriptive labels* (or *concepts*; see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 61). For example, references to 'anxiety', 'anger' and 'pity' can be grouped together under the category heading of 'emotions'. As grounded theory analysis progresses, the researcher is able to identify categories at a higher level of abstraction. These categories are *analytic* rather than descriptive. They interpret, rather than simply label, instances of phenomena. For example, references to diverse activities such as getting drunk, jogging and writing poetry could be categorized as 'escape' if they appear to share the objective of distracting the individual from thinking about a problem. Both descriptive and analytic categories are based upon the identification of 'relations of similarity and difference' (see Dey 1999: 63); however, they function at different levels of abstraction. Category identification in grounded theory is very different from content analysis, with which it should never be confused. Content analysis makes use of categories that are defined *before* data analysis commences and which are designed to be mutually exclusive. This is to say, the same data cannot be allocated to more than one category. By contrast, categories in grounded theory *emerge from the data*, they are not mutually exclusive and they evolve throughout the research process.

Coding

This is the process by which categories are identified. In the early stages of analysis, coding is largely descriptive. Here, descriptive labels are attached to discrete instances of phenomena. New, low-level categories emerge frequently as a result. As coding progresses, the researcher is able to identify higher-level categories that systematically integrate low-level

categories into meaningful units. In other words, analytical categories are introduced. Because grounded theory aims to develop *new*, *context-specific* theories, category labels should not be derived from existing theoretical formulations but should be grounded in the data instead. Ideally, category labels should be *in vivo* – that is, they should utilize words or phrases used by the participants in the study. This helps the researcher to avoid importing existing theory into the analysis. *Theoretical coding* involves the application of a *coding paradigm* to the data. A coding paradigm sensitizes the researcher to particular ways in which categories may be linked with one another. Different versions of grounded theory subscribe to different coding paradigms. These will be discussed in more detail below (see also Snapshot Box 7.1).

Constant comparative analysis

This ensures that the coding process maintains its momentum by moving back and forth between the identification of similarities among and differences between emerging categories. Having identified a common feature that unites instances of a phenomenon, the researcher needs to refocus on differences *within* a category in order to be able to identify any emerging *subcategories*. The earlier example of 'emotion' as a category may be expanded to illustrate this process. I suggested that references to 'anxiety', 'anger' and 'pity' could give rise to the category 'emotion'. Further instances of this category could be 'joy', 'jealousy' and 'hate'. Comparing the various instances of emotion allows us to construct subcategories of emotion, such as emotions that require an object (e.g. hate and jealousy) and those that do not (e.g. joy and anxiety). Constant comparative analysis ensures that the researcher does not merely build up categories but

also breaks them down again into smaller units of meaning. In this way, the full complexity and diversity of the data can be recognized, and any homogenizing impulse can be counteracted. The ultimate objective of constant comparative analysis is to link and integrate categories in such a way that all instances of variation are captured by the emerging theory.

Negative case analysis

This ensures that the researcher continues to develop the emerging theory in the light of the evidence. Having identified a category, or a linkage between categories, grounded theory researchers need to look for 'negative cases' – that is, instances that do not fit. The identification of such instances allows the researcher to qualify and elaborate the emerging theory, adding depth and density to it, so that it is able to capture the full complexity of the data on which it is based.

Theoretical sensitivity

This is what moves the researcher from a descriptive to an analytic level. In grounded theory, the researcher *interacts* with the data. That is, (s)he asks questions of the data, which are in turn modified by the emerging answers. Each emerging category, idea, concept or linkage informs a new look at the data to elaborate or modify the original construct. The researcher engages with the data by asking questions, making comparisons and looking for opposites. This may involve going back to source to collect further data. Data collection and coding are both part of the process of grounded theory analysis.

Theoretical sampling

This involves collecting further data in the light of categories that have emerged from earlier stages of data analysis. Theoretical sampling means checking emerging theory against reality by sampling incidents that may challenge or elaborate its developing claims. While the earlier stages of grounded theory require maximum openness and flexibility to identify a wide range of predominantly descriptive categories, theoretical sampling is concerned with the refinement and, ultimately, *saturation* (see below) of existing, and increasingly analytic, categories.

Theoretical saturation

Ideally, the process of data collection and data analysis in grounded theory continues until theoretical saturation has been achieved. In other words, the researcher continues to sample and code data until no new categories can be identified, and until new instances of variation for existing categories have ceased to emerge. At this point, a set of categories and subcategories captures the bulk of the available data. However, theoretical saturation functions as a goal rather than a reality. This is because even though we may (and ought to) strive for saturation of our categories, modification of categories or changes in perspective are always possible. Glaser and Strauss (1967: 40) draw attention to the way in which grounded theory is always provisional:

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 one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory.

(cited in Dey 1999: 117)

Memo-writing

This is an important part of the grounded theory method. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher maintains a written record of theory development. This means writing definitions of categories and justifying labels chosen for them, tracing their emergent relationships with one another, and keeping a record of the progressive integration of higher- and lower-level categories. Memos will also show up changes of direction in the analytic process and emerging perspectives, as well as provide reflections on the adequacy of the *research question* (see below). As a result, memos provide information about the research process itself as well as about the substantive findings of the study. Memos can be long or short, abstract or concrete, integrative (of earlier memos or ideas) or original, use words or diagrams (e.g. flowcharts). All memos, however, should be dated, contain a heading and state which sections of the data they were inspired by.

Research process

Grounded theory is unlike most other research methods in that it merges the processes of data collection and analysis. The researcher moves back and forth between the two in an attempt to 'ground' the analysis in the data. The aim of this movement is *theoretical saturation* (see above). As a result,

grounded theory does not provide the researcher with a series of steps, which, if followed correctly, will take him or her from the formulation of the research question through data collection to analysis and, finally, to the production of a research report. Instead, grounded theory encourages the researcher to continuously review earlier stages of the research and, if necessary, to change direction. Even the research question is no permanent fixture in grounded theory. Simply serving to identify the phenomenon we wish to study at the outset, the research question becomes progressively focused throughout the research process. Alternatively, it can change altogether in the light of emerging categories (see Morse's study of nurse–patient interaction below). Having drawn attention to the integrated and cyclical nature of the grounded theory method, I shall nevertheless attempt to provide an outline of what is involved in a typical grounded theory study. This outline is not meant to serve as a blueprint; however, without any such guidelines, it may be difficult to get started on grounded theory research.

The research question

Grounded theory researchers need an initial research question to focus their attention upon the particular phenomenon they wish to investigate (see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 37–40). The initial research question should serve to identify, but not make assumptions about, the phenomenon of interest. This is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. The process of labelling itself imports assumptions about a phenomenon (see Chapters 10 and 11 for an in-depth discussion of this process); for example, if we ask 'How do women manage a pregnancy complicated by chronic illness?' (see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 38), we assume that women 'manage' their

pregnancies (as opposed to being 'subjected' to them, for example) and that chronic illness constitutes a 'complication' in relation to pregnancy. We cannot ask questions without making assumptions. However, we can attempt to remain at a descriptive level and use our question simply to identify the phenomenon (e.g. 'How do women with chronic illness experience pregnancy?') rather than to offer an explanatory account that requires testing against reality (e.g. 'To what extent does social support improve the ability of women with chronic illness to cope with a pregnancy?').

The initial research question in grounded theory should be open-ended and should not be compatible with simple 'yes/ no' answers. It should identify the phenomenon of interest without making (too many) assumptions about it. It should never employ constructs derived from existing theories. It is also recommended that the question orientates the researcher towards action and process (e.g. '*How* do people do *x*?') rather than states and conditions (e.g. '*What* do people want?' or '*Why* do people do *x*?') (see Strauss and Corbin 1990: 38). As the research progresses, the researcher is able to focus the research question more narrowly. This process is facilitated by *theoretical sampling* and *theoretical sensitivity* (see above). By the time *theoretical saturation* has been achieved, the initial research question can have changed almost beyond recognition.

Data collection

Grounded theory is compatible with a wide range of data collection techniques. Semi-structured interviewing, participant observation, focus groups, even diaries can generate data for grounded theory. In

addition, existing texts and documents can also be subjected to grounded theory analysis. However, it is important to differentiate between the full implementation of the method, which requires the researcher to move back and forth between data collection and analysis, and an abbreviated version that involves the coding of data only.

In the *full version*, the researcher collects some data, explores the data through initial open coding, establishes tentative linkages between categories, and then returns to the field to collect further data. Data collection is progressively focused and informed by the emerging theory (see *Theoretical sampling* above). In this version, the researcher is able to *triangulate*; that is, (s)he can draw on different data sources and use different methods of data collection. For example, in a study of eating habits, initial coding of a transcript of a group discussion among office workers may lead to the identification of the category 'context' with the subcategories 'work' and 'leisure'. This may lead the researcher to carry out a semi-structured interview with a professional cook to further explore the relevance of context to the experience of eating. The full version of grounded theory allows the researcher to push outwards, to seek out manifestations of categories, negative cases and opposites, until category development is dense, detailed and differentiated. This gives the researcher confidence that theoretical saturation is being approached.

The *abbreviated version* of grounded theory, by contrast, works with the original data only. Here, interview transcripts or other documents are analysed following the principles of grounded theory (i.e. the processes of *coding* and *constant comparative analysis*); however, *theoretical sensitivity*,

theoretical saturation and *negative case analysis* can only be implemented *within* the texts that are being analysed. The researcher does not have the opportunity to leave the confines of the original data set to broaden and refine the analysis. Consequently, the abbreviated version of grounded theory should never be our first choice; it should only be used where time or resource constraints prevent the implementation of the full version of grounded theory (see also Henwood and Pidgeon 1995; Pidgeon and Henwood 2004 for a discussion of smaller-scale grounded theory studies).

Data analysis

Coding constitutes the most basic as well as the most fundamental process in grounded theory. Coding can be carried out line-by-line, sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph, page-by-page, section-by-section, and so on. The smaller the unit of analysis (e.g. one line of text), the more numerous the descriptive categories that emerge initially. Later stages of analysis will integrate a lot of these into higher-level analytic categories. Line-by-line analysis ensures that our analysis is truly grounded and that higher-level categories and, later on, theoretical formulations, actually emerge from the data, rather than being imposed upon it. If we code larger chunks of text, such as a whole page, our attention may be captured by one particularly striking occurrence. As a result, less obvious but perhaps equally important instances of categories, whose true significance has yet to emerge, can be missed. If there is sufficient time available, line-by-line coding should always be carried out. This is particularly important when the *abbreviated version* of grounded theory is used; here, the depth of analysis generated by line-by-line coding is needed

to compensate for the loss of breadth that accompanies the researcher's dependence on the original data set.

There are differences in the ways in which grounded theory researchers approach the coding process. For most grounded theorists, initial open coding involves the generation of largely descriptive labels for occurrences or phenomena. Such labels give rise to low-level categories. To establish linkages between such categories and to integrate them into higher-order analytic categories, we can use a *coding paradigm*. A coding paradigm sensitizes the researcher to particular ways in which categories may be linked with one another. It helps us to arrange our categories in a meaningful and hierarchical way, with some categories constituting the 'core' and others the 'periphery'. It is here that grounded theory researchers disagree with one another. Some (e.g. Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990) propose the use of a coding paradigm that explicitly focuses upon, and thus alerts the researcher to, manifestations of 'process' and 'change' in the data. This is done by asking certain questions of the data. These include questions about the context within which a category is embedded, the interactional strategies used by participants to manage the category, and the consequences of such interactional strategies. Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to this process as 'axial coding'. Others (e.g. Glaser 1978, 1992) caution against the use of a coding paradigm that presupposes the relevance of particular constructs (such as 'process' or 'change') to the data. Instead, they argue that any kind of coding paradigm should only be used when it is indicated by the data. Glaser (1978) identifies a wide range of *theoretical codes* that could potentially come into play when low-level categories are integrated. However, according to

this view, the data themselves are the best source of relevant theoretical codes.

The research report

Qualitative research can be written up in a variety of ways; qualitative researchers are much less constrained by convention than quantitative researchers when it comes to the presentation of their work. A qualitative research report should contain information about the rationale of the study (including references to relevant literature), about how it was carried out (including both data collection and analysis), what was found and what these findings may mean (including their implications for theory and practice). As long as the report contains this information, it does not matter precisely how, and in what format, it is presented. The author of a qualitative research report should strive for clarity first and foremost. For those who are new to qualitative research, however, it may feel safer to stick to the conventional research report format. In the remainder of this section, I present some guidelines for writing up grounded theory research using the standard subheadings of 'Introduction', 'Method', 'Results', 'Discussion' and 'References and appendices'.

Introduction

The introductory chapter (or section) of the report should present a rationale for the study to be reported. Such a rationale can be informed by theoretical or practical concerns. For example, the author may argue that a particular phenomenon has not been explained convincingly in the literature, and that his or her study was designed to fill this gap. Alternatively, the author may identify a recent social

phenomenon that has not been investigated. Or there may be a large research literature about the phenomenon but none of the studies reported asked the type of question that the author wants to ask about it. This is often the case when most of the studies reported have used quantitative methods, which meant that certain questions (e.g. about the quality of experience, about the negotiation of meanings) could not be addressed satisfactorily by the research. Since grounded theory research aims to develop new, contextualized theories, a review of existing research has to be undertaken with caution. It is important that the researcher maintains a certain distance from such literature; the grounded theory study reported must not be seen as an extension of, or a test or, an existing theory. Some grounded theorists even recommend that the researcher does not review relevant literature until *after* the research has been completed. However, it could be argued that this is impossible, since most researchers are already working within a discipline (e.g. psychology, nursing studies, social work) and are already familiar with the major theories in the field. A systematic review of the literature is unlikely to 'contaminate' their grounded theory study within such a context. It may, however, help them to formulate a useful research question that has not been asked before in quite the same way.

Method

In this section, the researcher describes exactly what they did and why. This means including information about data collection techniques, choice of contexts and participants, and about how data were coded and how categories were integrated. If the researcher chose the *full version* of the grounded theory method, (s)he needs to provide an account of how the cyclical process of data collection and analysis

progressed throughout the research. If the *abbreviated version* was used, the researcher needs to explain why this was done. The method section should also contain ethical considerations and, where appropriate, a discussion of *reflexivity*.

Results

This is likely to be the longest section of the report. Within the context of a thesis, the results of the study can be presented in a number of consecutive chapters. The presentation of the findings of a grounded theory study are best organized around the key categories identified. If there is a core category at the centre of the phenomenon under investigation and with which all other categories have some kind of relationship, this should be discussed first. If there is no one core category, the major categories should be discussed in sequence. It is also a good idea to include a visual representation of the major categories and their relationships with one another. This can take the form of a flowchart or a table (for helpful illustrations of how categories can be presented diagrammatically, see Morse 1992a).

The results section of the report can be divided by subheadings that refer to the major categories identified. Under each heading, the relevant category and its subcategories are introduced and defined. This is where data can be used to support analytical points made. For example, quotations from participants can illustrate the use of a particular category in a particular context. It is important, however, to use data only to illustrate, but never to substitute for, analysis. Following the introduction and discussion of each category, a further section (or chapter) can be devoted to

a detailed examination of the relationships between categories. This is also where emerging theoretical formulations are spelled out and explored. Alternatively, the introduction of categories and a discussion of their relationships with one another can be merged; however, this is a more challenging way to write up grounded theory clearly and systematically.

Discussion

Here, the author addresses the theoretical and practical implications of the study. What has the study contributed to our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? What may be the practical applications of our findings? We may also want to reflect upon the focus of our study. Was our initial research question the right question to ask? Why may we have got it wrong? What does this tell us about our assumptions about the phenomenon? At this point, we can raise further issues in relation to both *personal* and *epistemological reflexivity* (see Chapter 1). This section is also the place where we discuss our findings in relation to the existing literature. To what extent does our research challenge or support existing theories? What can our work contribute to theoretical developments in the field? What kind of research ought to be done in the future to build upon our study? And how may our participants benefit from the research to which they have contributed?

References and appendices

All research reports should include a list of references, including all authors referred to in the report. There may also be appendices containing additional data supporting the

analysis presented in the report. These should be clearly labelled and identified at relevant points in the report itself. However, there should be nothing in the appendices that is essential to the reader's comprehension of the report. Authors cannot assume that appendices will necessarily be read.

In *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, Charmaz (2006) offers detailed guidance to help researchers navigate the grounded theory research process. The book provides helpful examples of different types of coding and memo-writing, and demonstrates how the key components of the grounded theory process (gathering data, coding, memo-writing, theoretical sampling, saturation, sorting) contribute to the construction of theory. However, as Morse (2009) points out, grounded theory is not something that is 'performed' by different researchers in exactly the same way; every researcher will need to tailor the approach to suit their particular research purpose. This means that every researcher will generate their own version of grounded theory methodology in the process of conducting the research. And this, of course, is entirely in keeping with the spirit of grounded theory!

An example of grounded theory

This section focuses on 'Negotiating commitment and involvement in the nurse–patient relationship', by Janice Morse (1992b). Morse's initial research question was: 'What is the role of gift-giving in the patient–nurse relationship?' Morse had noticed that patients frequently offered nurses gifts in response to the care they had received. She was interested in exploring the role gift-giving played in the development of the relationship between patient and nurse. Morse and her

research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews with nurses. During the initial stages of data analysis, it became clear that gift-giving was a way of negotiating a certain type of relationship. It played a symbolic role that could potentially be played by other actions. This led Morse to broaden the focus of the study and to ask: 'How does the nurse–patient/patient–nurse relationship develop?' Theoretical sampling allowed Morse and her research assistants to obtain data that shed light on the development of nurse–patient relationships in more general terms. They conducted further interviews, this time with nurses who had themselves been patients. All interviews were transcribed and coded.

Morse used a version of Strauss and Corbin's *coding paradigm*, which meant that she explored the categories she had identified in terms of 'process' (i.e. experiences of nurses and patients over the course of
the relationship) and 'change' (i.e. factors and circumstances that impact upon the nurse–patient interaction). 'Negotiating the relationship' emerged as the core category. Other categories included 'types of relationship', which were subdivided into 'mutual' and 'unilateral'. 'Mutual relationships' were characterized by mutual interest and investment in the relationship between nurse and patient, whereas 'unilateral relationships' involved a degree of mismatch between the participants' willingness to develop the relationship. 'Mutual relationships' in turn contained four subcategories: 'clinical', 'therapeutic', 'connected' and 'over-involved'. Morse identified six dimensions according to which the four types of 'mutual relationships' could be differentiated. These included time spent together (e.g. long-term vs transitory), the purpose of the interaction (e.g.

perfunctory vs supportive), the patient's needs (e.g. minor vs extensive), the patient's trust (e.g. basic vs complete), the patient's role (e.g. patient vs person) and nursing commitment (e.g. professional vs personal). Morse presents the types of relationship and their six dimensions in table format.

Morse's study develops an 'explanatory model for describing the various types of relationship that occur' between nurses and their patients (Morse 1992b: 334). Gift-giving, which had originally been the focus (and the inspiration) of the study, ended up being just one among a number of strategies used by patients for increasing involvement in the nurse–patient relationship. It was part of the process of negotiating a mutual relationship that had moved beyond its clinical remit and into a realm of connectedness between nurse and patient. Grounded theory as a method was able to accommodate a shift in the focus of the study. It allowed Morse to identify different types of nurse–patient relationship, their characteristics, and the strategies participants use to negotiate these relationships.

Versions of grounded theory

When *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was published in 1967 (Glaser and Strauss), it introduced qualitative researchers in the social sciences to a new methodology. Once researchers adopted it for their own purposes and grounded theory studies began to be published, it became clear that the new methodology could be interpreted and applied in a number of different ways. As time went by, even the creators of grounded theory, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, began to disagree about the nature of the method and how it ought to be practised (see Snapshot Box 7.1). As a result, a

number of versions of the grounded theory method have emerged. Currently, three main versions dominate the field (McCallin 2004). These include the 'classical' (Glaserian) version, Strauss and Corbin's more structured approach, and Charmaz's (2006) constructivist version. Although all of these are still referred to as 'grounded theory', some (e.g. Glaser 1992) have suggested that this label should be reserved for the original formulation by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and that more recent versions and developments ought to find new, and more appropriate, names for themselves. However, others (e.g. Dey 1999: 44) argue that 'later difficulties and disagreements over grounded theory can be traced to ambiguities in the original presentation'. This suggests that there is, in fact, no *one* original and unambiguous version of the methodology that alone is entitled to the label 'grounded theory'.

There are three major issues around which debates have evolved in grounded theory research, and around which the different approaches to grounded theory methodology have evolved. They concern the *role of induction* in grounded theory, *discovery versus construction*, and a *focus on social processes versus individual experience*.

In the remainder of this section, I aim to identify the major debates in grounded theory research and to differentiate between the various versions of the grounded theory method that have emerged around them.

The role of induction in grounded theory

The grounded theory method was developed to allow new, contextualized theories to emerge directly from data. It was a

reaction against the pervasiveness of hypothesis-testing and the application of existing theories to new data. Grounded theory was designed to minimize the imposition of the researcher's own categories of meaning upon the data during the research process. However, with the production of detailed, step-by-step guides to the method (e.g. Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998), grounded theory was becoming more prescriptive. The inclusion of a specific coding paradigm, for instance, ensures that the researcher will be looking for the manifestation of particular patterns in the data. This adds a deductive element to grounded theory; instead of taking the data themselves as our starting point to determine which categories may emerge, a coding paradigm identifies a set of dimensions of interest and explores
the data in the light of these. Here, through the use of the coding paradigm, the researcher is sensitized to those aspects of the data that are considered to be essential to our understanding of social phenomena. For example, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) axial coding paradigm is designed to sensitize the researcher to the role of 'process': 'unless the analyst is made keenly aware of the need to identify process, to build it into the analysis, it is often omitted or done in a very narrow or limited fashion' (p. 143). Similarly, Strauss and Corbin recommend the use of a 'conditional matrix' to introduce higher-level constructs such as class, gender, race and power into the analysis.

Those who subscribe to the earlier, less prescriptive version of grounded theory are concerned that such a deductive element undermines the original purpose of grounded theory (i.e. the *emergence* of theory from data) by imposing researcher-defined categories, or 'pet codes' (Glaser 1992). As Melia (1996: 376) puts it: 'I always have a nagging doubt

that the procedures are getting in the way; the technical tail is beginning to wag the theoretical dog.' These researchers argue that, to maintain its creative potential, grounded theory must retain the openness of its original formulation. According to this view, the grounded theory method needs to be flexible enough to respond to the data. Highly prescriptive procedures and coding frames encourage analytic rigidity and are not compatible with such flexibility.

Discovery versus construction

In 1967, Glaser and Strauss described grounded theory as involving 'the discovery of theory from data' (p. 1). The use of the term 'discovery' suggests that the researcher uncovers something that is already there. Similarly, the concept of 'emergence' (of categories, of theory) also plays down the creative role of the researcher in the research process. Here, the researcher is like a midwife, who delivers the fully formed baby. It has been argued, however, that such a view of the research process in grounded theory is heavily influenced by a positivist epistemology and not compatible with 'big Q' qualitative methodology (see Chapter 1). This is because the suggestion that categories and theories can simply 'emerge' from data, and that it is possible for a researcher to avoid the imposition of categories of meaning onto the data, reflects the belief that phenomena create their own representations that are directly perceived by observers. Charmaz (1990, 2000, 2002, 2006) introduced a *social constructionist* version of grounded theory that argues that categories and theories do not *emerge* from the data, but are *constructed* by the researcher through an interaction with the data. According to this version, 'The researcher creates an explication, organisation and presentation *of* the data rather than

discovering order *within* the data. The discovery process consists of discovering the ideas the *researcher* has about the data after interacting with it' (Charmaz 1990: 1169, original emphasis).

Here, it is acknowledged that the researcher's decisions, the questions that (s)he is asking of the data, the way (s)he is using the method, as well as his or her (personal, philosophical, theoretical, methodological) background shape the research process and, ultimately, the findings. As a result, the theory produced constitutes one particular reading of the data rather than the only truth about the data. Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) substitute the term *theory generation* for *discovery* to capture the constructive element in the process of theory development. See also Clarke (2003, 2005, 2006) for more on constructionism in grounded theory.

A focus on social processes versus individual experience

Originally, grounded theory was developed to allow researchers in the social sciences to study, and theorize, localized social processes, such as chronic illness management, the socialization of nurses or the dying trajectory, within particular settings (e.g. the hospital, the family). The aim of the emerging theories was to clarify and explain such social processes and their consequences. These processes could be social psychological or social structural in nature. In order to identify and explicate relevant processes and their consequences, researchers engaged in the full cyclical interpretative inquiry (i.e. the *full version*). More recently, researchers have used grounded theory as a method of data analysis only (i.e. the *abbreviated version*). Here, interview transcripts have been subjected to grounded

theory-inspired coding in order to produce a systematic representation of the participant's experience and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (e.g. chronic pain, relationship break-ups, undergoing gender reassignment) through the identification of categories of meaning and experience.

This use of grounded theory shares some features with phenomenological research (see Chapter 8). Thus, while a focus on social processes takes a more contextualized and dynamic approach, whereby the
researcher attempts to identify and map social processes and relationships and their consequences for participants, a focus on participants' individual experiences is more psychological in that the researcher is concerned with the structure of the internal world of the participant (e.g. their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, memories) rather than its social context, causes or consequences. The former approach takes a view 'from the outside in', whereas the latter proceeds 'from the inside out' (see Charmaz 1995: 30–1). The kind of theory generated on the basis of the abbreviated, 'from the inside out' approach to grounded theory might look a little like a cognitive behavioural formulation whereby an individual's beliefs and assumptions are shown to generate certain emotions which then inform that individual's behavourial choices. It is, of course, possible to combine the two perspectives ('inside out' and 'outside in') by attempting to capture the lived experience of participants *and* to explain its quality in terms of wider social processes and their consequences. It could be argued that this would indeed be required in order to gain a full understanding of social psychological phenomena.

Limitations of grounded theory as a method for psychological research

As is the case with all research methods, grounded theory does have a number of limitations. The most widely raised criticism of the grounded theory method concerns its epistemological roots. It has been argued that grounded theory subscribes to a positivist epistemology and that it sidesteps questions of reflexivity. For researchers in psychology, another shortcoming of grounded theory is its preoccupation with uncovering social processes, which limits its applicability to more phenomenological research questions. These two limitations will be discussed in turn.

The problem of induction, or 'What grounds grounded theory?'

The original purpose of grounded theory was to allow new theories to *emerge* from data. In other words, grounded theory works with *induction*, whereby observations give rise to new ideas. This was meant to liberate the researcher from the straitjacket of *hypothetico-deductive* research. However, one of the problems associated with induction is that it pays insufficient attention to the role of the researcher. It is assumed that the data speaks for itself. However, as critics of *positivism* have argued convincingly, all observations are made from a particular perspective, that is, they are standpoint-specific. Whatever emerges from a field through observation depends on the observer's position within it. In the same way, whatever emerges from the analysis of a set of data is theoretically informed because all analysis is necessarily guided by the questions asked by the researcher. As Dey (1999: 104) puts it:

Even if we accept the (doubtful) proposition that categories are discovered, what we discover will depend in some degree on what we are looking for – just as Columbus could hardly have 'discovered' America if he had not been looking for the 'Indies' in the first place.

Thus, grounded theory has been criticized for not addressing questions of *reflexivity* satisfactorily.

Stanley and Wise (1983: 152) have argued that as long as it does not address the question of 'What grounds grounded theory?', the grounded theory method remains a form of inductivist positivism. *Social constructionist* versions of grounded theory (e.g. Charmaz 1990, 2006) address these concerns and attempt to develop reflexive grounded theory. Here, it is recognized that categories can never 'capture the essence' of a concept in its entirety (see Dey 1999: 66) and that categories do not simply emerge from the data because they do not exist before the process of categorization; rather, they are constructed by the researcher during the research process.

Pidgeon and Henwood (1997) recommend that grounded theory researchers document, carefully and in detail, each phase of the research process. Such documentation increases reflexivity throughout the research process and demonstrates the ways in which the researcher's assumptions, values, sampling decisions, analytic technique, interpretations of context, and so on, have shaped the research. However, social constructionist versions of grounded theory are a recent development. While they acknowledge the epistemological limitations of a purely inductivist version, it is not yet clear whether a social constructionist approach to grounded theory

requires more than a recognition of the active role of the researcher in the research process. It could be argued that social constructionist versions of grounded theory research can adopt one of two possible positions. The first one is a moderate social constructionist position which does not abandon grounded theory's aspiration to better understand what is going on (in the world, between people, and/or inside people's minds) but which acknowledges that a 'bird's-eye' view of social reality does not exist and that, therefore, the researcher's own assumptions and expectations will inevitably shape the theory that they develop on the basis of their research. This position is similar to the epistemological position adopted by hermeneutic approaches to phenomenological research (see Chapter 8). The second position constitutes a more radical perspective whereby the researcher forsakes the search for even an approximation to the 'truth' of what is 'really going on' and instead focuses on the social constructions mobilized by both the research participants and the researcher in their accounts of social processes and experiences. It could be argued that such a social constructionist perspective would have to theorize the role of language in the construction of categories, which in turn would mean engaging with the notion of 'discourse' (see Chapters 10 and 11). Such an engagement, however, may transform the method to such an extent that it ceases to be (a version of) grounded theory.

Suitability for psychological research

Originally, grounded theory was designed to study social processes 'from the bottom up'. That is, the method allowed researchers to trace how actions had consequences and how patterns of social interaction combined to give rise to

particular, identifiable social processes. The theories generated by grounded theory research helped to explicate basic social processes (see Dey 1999: 63). It is clear that grounded theory was designed with sociological research questions in mind. Indeed, Glaser and Strauss were themselves sociologists, and much of their own grounded theory research was concerned with medical sociology.

In recent years, grounded theory has been adopted as a qualitative research method for psychological research and it now features as a key method in psychology methods textbooks (e.g. Smith et al. 1995; Hayes 1997; Murray and Chamberlain 1999; Howitt 2010; Frost 2011). However, its suitability as a qualitative research method for psychological research may be questioned. It could be argued that, when applied to questions about the nature of experience, as opposed to the unfolding of social processes, the grounded theory method is reduced to a technique for systematic categorization. That is, studies concerned with capturing the meanings that a particular experience holds for an individual tend to use one-off interviews with participants, transcribe them and code the transcript using the principles of the grounded theory method. The result is a systematic map of concepts and categories used by the respondents to make sense of their experience. While such a map may provide us with a better understanding of the structure of our participants' experiences, it does not, in fact, constitute a *theory*. In other words, such mapping of experiences is a *descriptive* rather than an *explanatory* exercise and, as such, is not geared towards the development of theory. It could be argued that research questions about the nature of experience are more suitably addressed using phenomenological research methods (see Chapter 8). Grounded theory techniques

(preferably the *full version*) could then be reserved for the study of social psychological processes. (See also Charmaz and Henwood 2008: 251–4 for a critical discussion of descriptive versions of grounded theory methodology.)

Three epistemological questions

To conclude this chapter on grounded theory, let us take a look at what kind of knowledge this methodology aims to produce, the assumptions it makes about the world it studies, and the way in which it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the process of knowledge production.

What kind of knowledge does grounded theory aim to produce?

Grounded theory was designed to identify and explicate contextualized social processes. Its techniques for data-gathering and analysis are designed to allow concepts and categories to *emerge* from the data. The researcher is encouraged to approach the data without preconceptions or pet theories. Imposition of meanings onto the data is to be avoided at all costs. The aim of grounded theory analysis is to produce theories that are truly *grounded* in the data; that is, theories that do not depend on external concepts that are brought to the data by the researcher. As Glaser (1999: 840) puts it, '[G]rounded theory *is what is*, not what should, could or ought to be' (original emphasis). Grounded theory, therefore, has a realist orientation. The kind of knowledge grounded theory aims to produce is knowledge of processes that reside in the data and which can emerge from the data (with a little help from the researcher). Categorization and

theorizing are simply ways in which these processes are systematically presented to a readership by the researcher.
The processes identified by the researcher, however, are assumed to take place irrespective of whether or not they are documented by the researcher. In other words, potential knowledge is 'out there' and can be captured by the researcher. In this sense, grounded theory takes a positivist approach to knowledge production. However, as we have seen, grounded theory's positivist tendencies have been challenged by those who are attempting to develop a social constructionist version of the method.

What kinds of assumptions does grounded theory make about the world?

Grounded theorists are interested in the ways in which human actors negotiate and manage social situations, and how their actions contribute to the unfolding of social processes. Grounded theory assumes that social events and processes have an objective reality in the sense that they take place irrespective of the researcher and that they can be observed and documented by the researcher. This suggests a realist ontology. However, grounded theory also assumes that social realities are negotiated by human actors and that participants' interpretations of events shape their consequences. Here, grounded theory subscribes to a symbolic interactionist perspective. This means that 'the world' that is studied by grounded theorists is very much a product of human participation and negotiation. It is a changing world, which means that the methods used for studying it must be sensitive to its dynamic properties. This is what grounded theory attempts to do by focusing on 'process' and 'change'.

How does grounded theory conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

In grounded theory, the researcher acts as a witness. (S)he observes carefully what is going on, takes detailed notes of proceedings, and questions participants in order to better understand what they are doing and why. The researcher takes care not to import his or her own assumptions and expectations into the analysis; the aim is to develop theories that do not move beyond the data. The researcher's role is to use his or her skills to represent, in a systematic and accessible fashion, a clear picture of what is going on in the slice of social reality they have chosen to study. Here, it is the researcher's skills, his or her ability to collect and analyse the data, which is seen to determine the outcome of the research. The researcher's identity and standpoint must remain secondary. Social constructionist versions of grounded theory take a different view of the role of the researcher in the research process. Here, the researcher is more than a witness; (s)he actively constructs a particular understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. From a social constructionist perspective, grounded theory does not capture social reality; instead, it is itself a social construction of reality (see Charmaz 1990: 1165).

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the basic principles of the grounded theory method. Charmaz and Henwood (2008:

241) sum up the defining features of the process of grounded theory as follows:

We gather data, compare them, remain open to all possible theoretical understandings of the data, and develop tentative interpretations about these data through our codes and nascent categories. Then we go back to the field and gather more data to check and refine our categories.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the apparent simplicity of the logic underpinning grounded theory, over the years a number of different versions have emerged. Depending on our research question, our time constraints and resources, we can choose between the *full* and the *abbreviated* versions of grounded theory. We can use grounded theory to *theorize contextualized social processes* or to *map individuals' categories of experience*. Finally, we can take a *realist* or a *social constructionist* approach to grounded theory research. Whichever version we choose to use, it is important that we communicate clearly to our readership the approach we have adopted and why. Grounded theory continues to evolve and it is likely that further varieties of the grounded theory method will emerge. Some of these may be more suitable for psychological research than others. I want to close this chapter by letting Pidgeon and Henwood (1997: 255) remind us that grounded theory, in whatever guise, provides us with a set of procedures, which 'are ways of putting into practice the requirement to actively engage in close and detailed analysis of your

research materials, so that they can both stimulate and discipline the theoretical imagination'.

Interactive exercises

1. Work with a newspaper article about an event or situation (e.g. a report of a public disturbance or a criminal act). To begin with, read the article and write a brief summary of what you believe the article has told you. Then follow the guidelines provided in this chapter to code the article, line-by-line. Integrate low-level (descriptive) categories into higher-level (analytical) categories. Having completed the exercise, compare your initial summary of the article with the results of your coding exercise. What does the coding tell us that a simple reading of the article does not? What is its 'added value'?
2. Formulate a research question suitable for grounded theory using the guidelines provided in this chapter. Make sure that the question can be addressed by conducting research within your own environment and that it is not ethically sensitive (e.g. 'How do psychology students choose topics for final year research projects?'). Construct a brief interview agenda that will help you to begin investigating your research question

and conduct a semi-structured interview with a friend or colleague. Transcribe and code the interview. On the basis of your initial findings, where would you have to go next in order to pursue your research question? Identify potential data sources and directions of inquiry.

Further reading

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. (eds) (2007) *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage.

Charmaz, C. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

Dey, I. (1999) *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Academic Press.

Dey, I. (2004) Grounded theory, in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium and D. Silverman (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage.

Henwood, K.L. and Pidgeon, N.F. (2006) Grounded theory, in G. Breakwell, S. Hammond, C. Fife-Shaw and J. Smith (eds) *Research Methods in Psychology*, 3rd edn. London: Sage.

Pidgeon, N. and Henwood, K. (1997) Using grounded theory in psychological research, in N. Hayes (ed.) *Doing Qualitative Analysis in Psychology*. Hove: Psychology Press.

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Snapshot Box 7.1

Grounded theory or full conceptual description? The debate between Glaser and Strauss

Having co-authored *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss went on to disagree about the nature of grounded theory. In 1992, Glaser published *Emergence vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. This book was written in response to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Glaser felt that Strauss and Corbin's book presented a version of grounded theory that was too prescriptive. He argued that the method outlined in Strauss and Corbin's book was not, in fact, grounded theory at all. Instead, he proposed that what Strauss and Corbin had described was a different method altogether, a method that did not facilitate the emergence of theory from data but rather a method that produced 'full scale conceptual forced description' (Glaser 1992: 61–2).

Glaser's unhappiness with Strauss and Corbin's revision of grounded theory is evident. He described Strauss and Corbin's techniques as 'fractured, detailed, cumbersome and over-self-conscious' (Glaser 1992: 60), and he argued that they interfere with, rather than facilitate, the process of discovery. Glaser disagreed with Strauss and Corbin's (1990: 38) definition of the research question as 'a statement which identifies the phenomenon to be studied'. Instead, he proposed that the focus of the research emerges in the early stages of the research itself. Glaser also disagreed with Strauss and Corbin's coding paradigm, particularly axial coding. Glaser argued that Strauss and Corbin's approach to coding introduces preconceptions into the analysis that are incompatible with the spirit of grounded theory. As Glaser (1992: 123) put it, 'If you torture the data enough it will give up! The data is not allowed to speak for itself, as in grounded theory, and to be heard from infrequently it has to scream. Forcing by preconception constantly derails it from relevance.'

Furthermore, while Glaser proposed that verification (of relationships between categories, of emerging theories) is not part of the grounded theory method, Strauss and Corbin maintain that verificational work is built into the research process itself. Related to this disagreement is Glaser's purely inductive approach to grounded theory, which contrasts with Strauss and Corbin's incorporation of some deductive analysis and their acknowledgement of the role of existing theories in sensitizing grounded theory

researchers. It is clear that there are major differences between the two versions of grounded theory advocated by Glaser and by Strauss and Corbin, respectively. But do they constitute entirely different method(ologie)s, which ought to be referred to by different names, as Glaser would have it, or is Strauss and Corbin's version merely a manifestation of the natural evolution of grounded theory, as Strauss and Corbin suggest? Is grounded theory a research method with clearly defined and agreed upon procedures, or is it rather a set of methods based on an 'approach to inquiry with several key strategies for conducting inquiry' (see Charmaz 2006)? To make up your mind, you may wish to follow up the debate in the following publications:

Charmaz, C. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

Dey, I. (1999) *Grounding Grounded Theory: Guidelines for Qualitative Inquiry*. London: Academic Press.

Glaser, B.G. (1992) *Emergence vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press.

Melia, K.M. (1996) Rediscovering Glaser, *Qualitative Health Research* (Special Issue: *Advances in Grounded Theory*), 6(3): 368–78.

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 8

Phenomenological methods

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- phenomenology as a way of thinking about human experience
- the aims and objectives of phenomenology as a research methodology
- the difference between 'descriptive' and 'interpretative' phenomenology
- the basic principles that underpin interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)
- the methodological procedures associated with IPA, including techniques for gathering and analysing data, integrating analyses of individual cases, producing an interpretation and writing up the research

☑ IPA's limitations

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate IPA epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology, as formulated by Husserl in the early twentieth century, is concerned with the world as it presents itself to us as humans. Its aim was to return to things themselves, as they appear to us as perceivers, and to set aside, or *bracket*, that which we (think) we already know about them. In other words, phenomenology is interested in the world as it is experienced by human beings within particular contexts and at particular times, rather than in abstract statements about the nature of the world in general. Phenomenology is concerned with the *phenomena* that appear in our consciousness as we engage with the world around us.

According to a phenomenological perspective, it makes no sense to think of the world of objects and subjects as separate from our experience of it. This is because all objects and subjects must present themselves to us *as something*, and their manifestation as this or that something constitutes their reality at any one time. The appearance of an object as a perceptual

phenomenon varies depending on the perceiver's location and context, angle of perception and, importantly, the perceiver's mental orientation (e.g. desires, wishes, judgements, emotions, aims and purposes). This is referred to as *intentionality*. Intentionality allows objects to appear as phenomena. This means that 'self and world are inseparable components of meaning' (Moustakas 1994: 28). Here, meaning is not something that is added on to perception as an afterthought; instead, perception is always intentional and therefore constitutive of experience itself. This means that, from a phenomenological perspective, it is not at all surprising that different people can, and do, perceive and experience (what appears to be) the 'same' environment in radically different ways. For example, for the health and safety officer the office environment constitutes a potential source of hazards and dangers. For her, the pile of dissertations left on the floor of the office represents a potential source of falls and back injuries, as staff may trip over them or move them in a way that damages their backs. For the lecturer, by contrast, the pile of dissertations constitutes work and it represents a certain number of hours that will be spent reading and marking them. For the students, the dissertations embody their thoughts and feelings and they constitute a manifestation of their knowledge and skills, and, as such, a potential source of success or failure. From a phenomenological point of view, the pile of dissertations in and of itself means nothing; in fact, it does not exist as 'a pile of dissertations' until it has been perceived with intentionality.

The phenomenological method

The phenomenological method of deriving knowledge forms a central part of transcendental phenomenology. Husserl suggested that it was possible to transcend presuppositions and biases and to experience a state of pre-reflective consciousness, which allows us to describe phenomena as they present themselves to us. Husserl identified a series of steps that would take the philosopher from a fresh perception of familiar phenomena to the extraction of the *essences* that give the phenomena their unique character. Knowledge derived in this way would be free from the common-sense notions, scientific explanations and other interpretations or abstractions that characterize most other forms of understanding. It would be a knowledge of the world as it appears to us in our engagement with it.

The phenomenological method of gaining understanding involves three distinct phases of contemplation: *epoché*, *phenomenological reduction* and *imaginative variation* (for a detailed account of these, see Moustakas 1994). *Epoché* requires the suspension of presuppositions and assumptions, judgements and interpretations to allow ourselves to become fully aware of what is actually before us. In *phenomenological reduction* we describe the phenomenon that presents itself to us in its totality. This includes physical features such as shape, size, colour and texture, as well as experiential features such as the thoughts and feelings that appear in our consciousness as we attend to the phenomenon. Through phenomenological reduction, we identify the constituents of our experience of the phenomenon. In other words, we become aware of what makes the experience what it is. *Imaginative variation* involves an attempt to access the structural components of the phenomenon. That is, while phenomenological reduction is concerned with 'what' is

experienced (i.e. its texture), imaginative variation asks 'how' this experience is made possible (i.e. its structure). The aim of imaginative variation is to identify the conditions associated with the phenomenon and without which it would not be what it is. This could involve dimensions of time, space or social relationships. Finally, textural and structural descriptions are integrated to arrive at an understanding of the *essence* of the phenomenon.

Phenomenology and psychology

Even though transcendental phenomenology was conceived as a philosophical system of thought, its methodological recommendations have proved to be of interest to researchers in the social sciences in
general and in psychology in particular. This is because phenomenology focuses upon the content of consciousness and the individual's experience of the world. As Kvale (1996b: 53) put it:

Phenomenology is interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subjects' perspectives of their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects' consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings.

Empirical phenomenological research in psychology was pioneered and applied extensively at Duquesne University in the USA (see Van Kaam 1959; Giorgi 1970, 1994; Giorgi et al. 1975). Topics of phenomenological investigation included 'feeling understood' (Van Kaam 1959), 'learning' (Giorgi 1975, 1985), 'being victimized' (Fischer and Wertz 1979),

'anger' (Stevick 1971) and many other phenomena of human experience. In fact, any human experience can be subjected to phenomenological analysis. This is another reason why this approach appeals to psychological researchers. However, there are differences in focus and emphasis between *transcendental phenomenology* as a philosophy and the use of the phenomenological method in psychology.

Spinelli (1989) pointed out that phenomenological psychology is more concerned with the diversity and variability of human experience than with the identification of essences in Husserl's sense. In addition, few, if any, phenomenological researchers in psychology would claim that it is possible to suspend all presuppositions and biases in one's contemplation of a phenomenon. Rather, the attempt to *bracket* the phenomenon allows the researcher to engage in a critical examination of his or her customary ways of knowing (about) it (see the discussions on reflexivity in Chapters 1 and 3 pp. 10–25). Following the philosopher Martin Heidegger who was Husserl's student and who developed phenomenological thought in highly influential ways, many researchers embrace a hermeneutic version of phenomenology according to which interpretation, and the awareness (and analysis) of what the researcher brings to the text, constitute an integral part of phenomenological analysis. Finally, it is important to differentiate between phenomenological contemplation of an object or event as it presents itself to the researcher, and phenomenological analysis of an account of a particular experience as presented by a research participant. The former requires introspective attention to one's own experience, whereas the latter involves an attempt to 'get inside' someone else's experience on the basis of their description of it. In phenomenological

psychological research, the research participant's account becomes the phenomenon with which the researcher engages.

In this chapter I introduce the two major approaches to phenomenological research in psychology – the descriptive and the interpretative. Within these broad categories there are a number of different methods for collecting and analysing data (see Langdridge 2007; Giorgi and Giorgi 2008; see also Giorgi 1992; Lopez and Willis 2004; Finlay 2009 for comparisons between the descriptive and interpretative approaches to phenomenological research). This chapter provides a brief characterization of each approach and identifies key differences between them. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to a more detailed account of one of the interpretative phenomenological methods, interpretative phenomenological analysis (e.g. Smith et al. 2009). The chapter outlines the methodological procedures associated with interpretative phenomenological analysis and describes an example of a published interpretative phenomenological analysis study. This is followed by a critical appraisal of interpretative phenomenological analysis in particular and of phenomenological methods in general. The chapter closes with a discussion of phenomenological research in relation to the three epistemological questions.

Descriptive phenomenology

Descriptive phenomenology remains firmly within the tradition of transcendental phenomenology by positing that perception can be more or less infused with ideas and judgements. Although descriptive phenomenologists acknowledge that interpretation plays an important role in the ways in which people perceive and experience the world, they

believe that it is possible to minimize interpretation and to focus on 'that which lies before one in phenomenological purity' (Husserl 1931: 262). This means that for Husserl, and for descriptive phenomenologists, 'description is primary and that interpretation is a special type of description' (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008: 167). Descriptive phenomenology requires the researcher to adopt a phenomenological attitude in which (s)he brackets all past knowledge (both lay or everyday knowledge as well as expert knowledge and theories) about the phenomenon under investigation. The
researcher attempts to be truly present to the phenomenon as it manifests itself in a particular instance (e.g. a research participant's account of it). The focus of the research is the phenomenon as it is experienced by the research participant rather than the phenomenon as a material reality. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003a, 2003b) provide detailed guidelines for descriptive phenomenological research. In summary, their version of descriptive phenomenology involves the following steps (see also Giorgi and Giorgi 2008: 170, Box 10.1):

1. Obtain a concrete description of the phenomenon of interest.
2. Adopt the phenomenological attitude towards the phenomenon.
3. Read the entire description to gain an impression of the whole.
4. Re-read the description and identify 'meaning units' that capture different aspects or dimensions of the whole.
5. Identify and make explicit the psychological significance of each meaning unit.

6. Articulate the general structure of the experience of the phenomenon.

There are several versions of descriptive phenomenology, all of which share the focus on description although they differ in the extent to which they foreground particular dimensions of experience (e.g. psychological or existential). Some of the most widely cited sources include Colaizzi (1978), Moustakas (1994) and Ashworth (2003). Langdridge (2007: Chapter 6) also provides a detailed account of how to conduct descriptive phenomenological research.

Interpretative phenomenology

Interpretative phenomenology also aims to gain a better understanding of the nature and quality of phenomena as they present themselves. However, this version of phenomenology does not separate description and interpretation; instead, it draws on insights from the hermeneutic tradition and argues that all description constitutes a form of interpretation. As Van Manen (1990: 180, cited in Giorgi and Giorgi 2008: 168) puts it:

the (phenomenological) 'facts' of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process.

Similarly, understanding cannot take place without us making some preliminary assumptions about the meaning of what we are trying to understand. There is a circularity built into the process of meaning-making that is referred to as the

'hermeneutic circle' (Schleiermacher 1998). This means that 'parts can only be understood from an understanding of the whole, but that the whole can only be understood from an understanding of the parts' (Schmidt 2006: 4). On the most basic level, this can be demonstrated in relation to understanding a simple sentence. We cannot understand the whole sentence until we have made sense of the parts (i.e. the words) that make up the whole (the sentence). However, at the same time, we cannot make sense of a word's specific meaning until we have understood the sentence as a whole. This means that understanding requires a circular movement from presupposition to interpretation and back again. Our presuppositions are tested in the light of the evolving meaning of what we are trying to understand. Therefore, instead of attempting to bracket presuppositions and assumptions about the world, the interpretative phenomenological researcher works with, and uses, them in an attempt to advance understanding. As a result, the insights generated by such research are very much a product of the relationship between the researcher and the data. However, it is important to understand that this does not mean that the research is 'biased'; rather, it means that knowledge is only possible through the application of initial categories of meaning which the researcher then modifies through the process of interacting with the data.

As with descriptive phenomenology, there are several versions of this approach including Packer and Addison (1989), Van Manen (1990) and Smith (Smith et al. 2009). Again, Langdridge (2007: Chapter 7) provides a detailed account of how to conduct interpretative phenomenological research.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

IPA is a version of the phenomenological method that accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to research participants' life worlds. Even though it aims to explore the research participant's experience from his or her perspective, it recognizes that such an exploration must necessarily implicate the researcher's own view of the world as well as the nature of the interaction between researcher and participant. As a result, the phenomenological analysis produced by the researcher is always an *interpretation* of the participant's experience.

IPA shares the aims of other, more descriptive, phenomenological approaches to data analysis in that it wishes to capture the quality and texture of individual experience. However, it recognizes that such experience is never directly accessible to the researcher. Its founder, Jonathan Smith (1997: 189), characterizes IPA as 'an attempt to unravel the meanings contained in . . . accounts through a process of interpretative engagement with the texts and transcripts'. As a result, the researcher is engaged in a 'double hermeneutic' as (s)he 'is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them' (Smith et al. 2009: 3). Such interpretative engagement is facilitated by a series of steps that allows the researcher to identify themes and integrate them into meaningful clusters, first within and then across cases.

The systematic nature of its analytic procedure and the provision of ever more detailed descriptions of the analytic process (e.g. Smith 1991, 1999; Flowers et al. 1997, 1998; Jarman et al. 1997; Osborn and Smith 1998; Smith et al.

1999, 2009) have meant that IPA has become an increasingly attractive research method for psychologists (for reviews of studies see Reid et al. 2005; Brocki and Wearden 2006; Smith 2011). In the next section, I introduce the basic methodological procedures associated with IPA, together with a worked example. This is followed by an illustration of the method's application to the study of nine women's experiences of chronic pain (Osborn and Smith 1998).

Doing IPA

IPA works with transcripts of semi-structured interviews. Smith (1995b) provides guidance on how to conduct interviews that will generate data suitable for phenomenological analysis. In general, interviewing for IPA shares the principles and practices associated with semi-structured interviewing as introduced in Chapter 3. Since phenomenological research requires the researcher to enter the life world of the research participant, it is extremely important that the questions posed to the participant are open-ended and non-directive. Their sole purpose is to provide participants with an opportunity to share their personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation with the researcher. Focused and/or specific questions should be used to pick up on something a participant has already said, encouraging them to elaborate, rather than to check whether they agree or disagree with particular claims or statements offered by the researcher. Even though semi-structured interviews are the most widely used method of data collection in phenomenological research, it is also possible to ask participants to produce accounts of their experiences through alternative means, such as the use of diaries (audio, video or written) or various forms of writing.

Whatever type of data collection method is used, IPA works with texts generated by participants. These are analysed one by one. IPA takes an *idiographic* approach whereby insights produced as a result of intensive and detailed engagement with individual cases (e.g. transcripts, texts) are integrated only in the later stages of the research (see also Chapter 9).

Analysis of an individual case

The first stage of analysis in IPA involves the reading and re-reading of the text. At this stage, the researcher produces wide-ranging and unfocused *notes* that reflect the initial thoughts and observations (s)he may wish to record in response to the text. These could include associations, questions, summary statements, comments on language use, absences, descriptive labels, and so on. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that it may be helpful at this stage to include 'descriptive comments' (which capture the participant's subjective experience), 'linguistic comments' (which are concerned with the use of language by the participant and its potential significance) and 'conceptual comments' (which focus on the context of the participant's experience and which tentatively identify more abstract notions which may help the researcher make sense of the participant's account). Smith et al. (2009: 83–90) provide a detailed account of what is involved in
producing each of these types of comment. However, they acknowledge that the three types are not intended to be overly prescriptive and that they constitute analytic tools which the researcher may (or may not) find useful. Notes produced at this stage constitute the most open form of annotation; they are a way of documenting the ideas that come up for the researcher upon his or her initial encounter with the text.

These notes are recorded in the (right or left, depending on the researcher's preference) margin of the text.

The second stage of analysis requires the researcher to identify and label emergent *themes* that characterize each section of the text. These are recorded in the other margin. Theme titles are conceptual and they should capture something about the essential quality of what is represented by the text. Psychological terminology may be used at this stage. It is important to remember that phenomenological research is interested in the nature, quality and meaning of experience, and therefore theme labels ought to capture the experiential quality of what is being described. For example, themes that emerged from an interview with a chronic pain sufferer included 'loss', 'social comparison' and 'sense of self' (Smith et al. 1999).

The third stage involves an attempt to introduce structure into the analysis. The researcher lists the themes identified in Stage 2 and thinks about them in relation to one another. Some of the themes will form natural clusters of concepts that share meanings or references, whereas others will be characterized by hierarchical relationships with one another. For example, themes such as 'childhood memories', 'going to school' and 'relationship with mother' could form a 'childhood' cluster, while 'attending Spanish classes', 'watching Spanish movies' and 'practising Flamenco' would be subordinate to 'interest in Spain'. Smith et al. (2009: 92–9) identify a number of ways of looking for connections between emergent themes which can help the researcher to construct meaningful clusters. These include abstraction (putting 'like with like', thus creating a higher-level theme), subsumption (realizing that an emergent theme can subsume other

emergent themes), polarization (identifying emergent themes which constitute opposite ends of a continuum), numeration (noting the frequency with which emergent themes appear) and function (identifying the functions of emergent themes within the account). Again, Smith et al. (2009: 99) emphasize that these analytic strategies are meant to be helpful suggestions rather than prescriptions, and advise the researcher to 'use ones that work for you and the material you have'. For example, it is quite possible that a single utterance can play a pivotal role in the analysis, although it is not repeated (see Smith 2011), demonstrating that 'numeration' does not necessarily tell us something about the significance of a theme.

Clusters of themes need to be given labels that capture their essence. These could be *in vivo* terms used by the respondents themselves, brief quotations or descriptive labels. For instance, our cluster comprising 'childhood memories', 'going to school' and 'relationship with mother' could be called 'when I was little' (*in vivo*/quote) or 'early years' (descriptive). Again, at this stage it is important to remember that the analytic focus of IPA is the participants' experiences and their attempt to make sense of these (Smith et al. 2009: 79). Themes generated by the analysis should capture these dimensions (i.e. of experience and interpretation) rather than simply being a 'shopping list' of topics mentioned by the participants. It is also important to ensure that clusters of themes identified at this stage make sense in relation to the original data. This means that the researcher needs to move back and forth between the list of themes (s)he attempts to structure and the text that generated the themes in the first place. The connections between themes identified on paper need to be reflected in the detail of the respondent's account.

The fourth stage of analysis involves the production of a summary table of the structured themes, together with quotations that illustrate each theme. The summary table should only include those themes that capture something about the quality of the participant's experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This means that some of the themes generated during Stage 2 will have to be excluded. These may be themes that are not well represented within the text or which are marginal to the phenomenon. The researcher's decision about which themes should be retained and which should be abandoned is inevitably influenced by his or her interests and orientation. The summary table needs to include the cluster labels together with their subordinate theme labels, brief quotations and references to where relevant extracts may be found in the interview transcript (i.e. page and line numbers). A summary table could look like this:

Cluster label 1

• theme label	quote/ keyword (*in vivo*)	page and line numbers
• theme label	quote/keyword (*in vivo*)	page and line numbers
• theme label	quote/keyword (*in vivo*)	page and line numbers

Cluster label 2

• theme label brief quote/ keyword (*in vivo*) page and line numbers

• theme label brief quote/keyword (*in vivo*) page and line numbers

• theme label brief quote/keyword (*in vivo*) page and line numbers

• theme label brief quote/keyword (*in vivo*) page and line numbers

Cluster label 3

• theme label brief quote/ keyword (*in vivo*) page and line numbers

• theme label brief quote/keyword (*in vivo*) page and line numbers

The numbers of clusters and themes identified can vary widely and depend entirely on the text being analysed. Some clusters consist of many themes, whereas others are much more narrowly focused. At the same time, there may be very many quotations that support a particular theme, while others are less frequently invoked in the text. The summary table

should reflect the meanings that structure the participant's account rather than the researcher's expectations of what constitutes an acceptable number of clusters and themes.

Worked example

To obtain a sense of how to approach a text from an interpretative phenomenological perspective, let us look at a short extract from a young man's diary. The diary was written to document a process of change that he underwent over a period of time. The phenomenon of interest was, therefore, the experience of change and transformation. Here is what he writes:

1. I am on a train, or that's how I feel. Excited, alive, elated and a little
2. out of control; on the edge of control, like riding on a wave. Also
3. hungry, for experiences and impressions and seemingly insatiable.
4. I thought about manic states and how people say they feel like Napoleon –
5. and I thought, no, I don't want to rule the world, I just want to eat it!
6. The other day, I read something interesting about different stages in life.
7. It said that in one's youth, everything is still possible; opportunities arise
8. and can be taken up. Later in life, one learns to accept the place one has

9. arrived at and makes the most of it. That sounds about right to me.
10. I don't want to plan ahead or commit myself to anything in the long term,
11. because I want to be able to respond to new opportunities and challenges
12. which I expect to encounter. For me, there has to be movement all the time;
13. I feel that I am moving forward and changing. I need to feel free to change;
14. not to be pulled along by change but to move with it. Freedom and control
15. together – the freedom to respond to events and influences so as to change
16. in a way which is acceptable to me.

Stage 1: The researcher's initial encounter with the text

Upon initial reading, as the researcher I was struck by the way in which the author uses powerful metaphoric images to communicate his feelings ('I am on a train', 'riding on a wave', 'hungry', 'Napoleon'). However, while the first part of the diary entry (lines 1–5) employs lively and colourful language, the remainder is written in a calmer style, using more abstract or conceptual terminology (e.g. 'stages in life', 'opportunities and challenges', 'freedom and control'). The author attempts to make sense of his experiences by reference to psychological concepts such as psychopathology ('manic states') and lifespan development
('stages in life'). The closing part of the diary entry grapples with the relationship between freedom and control. The

author wants to experience movement and change without losing control. He wants to 'move with change'. This invokes the image of a surfer and echoes the metaphor deployed earlier in the text ('riding on a wave', line 2).

Stage 2: Identification of themes

Following the initial open engagement with the text, the researcher moves on to a more systematic reading. The aim is to capture what is represented in the text through thematic labels. Working through the text line-by-line, I was able to identify the following themes:

1. Strong feelings (of arousal, of hunger, of excitement, of movement) [lines 1–3].
2. Psychopathology ('manic states') [line 4].
3. Hunger (for stimulation, experiences, impressions, for the world) [lines 3–5].
4. Life stages ('youth' vs 'later in life') [lines 6–9].
5. Need for movement and change ('For me, there has to be movement all the time') [lines 12–13].
6. Need for freedom ('I don't want to plan ahead or commit myself', 'I need to feel free to change') [lines 10–12 and line 13].
7. Control/agency ('a little out of control; on the edge of control', 'Freedom and control together . . .') [line 2 and lines 14–16].

Stage 3: Clustering of themes

Some of the themes identified in Stage 2 of the analysis share reference points and some of them constitute different manifestations of a particular condition or state. For example, themes 2 and 4 invoke psychological concepts, while themes 5 and 6 refer to a variety of needs. An examination of the seven themes in relation to one another allowed me to construct three clusters of themes. These capture the main categories of meaning that the author is using in his account of change and transformation. They are as follows:

- Cluster 1: Psychological states (themes 1, 2 and 4).
- Cluster 2: Needs (themes 3, 5 and 6).
- Cluster 3: Control (theme 7).

Stage 4: Production of a summary table

Finally, to obtain a clear and systematic overview of the themes that constitute clusters, together with keywords and the locations of relevant quotations, the researcher produces a summary table. The summary table for my analysis of the young man's diary entry about transformation and change looks like this:

Cluster 1: Psychological states

• Psychopathology	'manic states'	line 4
• Life stages	'youth' vs 'later in life'	lines 6–9
• Strong feelings	'excited, alive, elated . . . hungry'	lines 1–3

Cluster 2: Needs

• Hunger	'insatiable'	lines 3–5
• Movement	'there has to be movement'	lines 12–13
• Freedom	'I need to feel free to change'	lines 10–13

Cluster 3: Control

• Loss of control	'out of control; on the edge of control'	line 2
• Freedom and control	'freedom and control together'	lines 14–16

Integration of cases

There are two ways in which the researcher may approach integration. Having produced summary tables for each individual participant, the researcher may attempt to integrate these into an inclusive list of master themes that reflects the experiences of the group of participants as a whole. Data collection for IPA is usually based on *purposive sampling*, whereby participants are selected according to criteria of relevance to the research question. This means that the group of participants is *homogeneous* to the extent that they share the experience of a particular condition, event or situation (e.g. suffering from chronic pain, becoming a mother, having been victimized), which they are asked to describe to the researcher. It therefore makes sense to look across the entire corpus of data (i.e. all cases) to obtain a more generalized understanding of the phenomenon. As in Stage 3 above, it is

important that the process of integration is carried out in a cyclical manner, whereby any emerging higher-order themes are checked against the transcripts. Integrative themes need to be grounded in the data just as much as lower-level conceptual themes are.

An alternative strategy for the integration of cases involves the use of the summary table for the first participant in the analysis of subsequent cases. Here, the original list of themes is used to code the other interviews, adding or elaborating themes in the process. Again, a cyclical movement is required so that themes that emerge in later transcripts can be checked against earlier transcripts. This allows the researcher to see whether newly emerging themes are merely new manifestations of old themes or whether they do, in fact, introduce genuinely new meanings or concepts. As a result of this process, a progressively integrated list of themes develops over time until, with the analysis of the final transcript, it reaches completion.

Irrespective of the approach used, integration should generate a list of master themes that captures the quality of the participants' shared experience of the phenomenon under investigation, and which, therefore, also tells us something about the *essence* of the phenomenon itself. The list of master themes should include the labels of superordinate themes and their constituent themes, together with identifiers that indicate which of the participants invoked them and where they did so (page and line numbers). A list of master themes could look like this:

Master theme 1

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos

Master theme 2

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos

• Constituent theme page/line nos page/line nos page/line nos

• Constituent theme page/line nos page/line nos page/line nos

Master theme 3

Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3

• Constituent theme page/line nos page/line nos page/line nos

• Constituent theme page/line nos page/line nos page/line nos

• Constituent theme page/line nos page/line nos page/line nos

• Constituent theme page/line nos pageyline nos page/line nos

Again, the numbers of master themes and constituent themes identified in any one study vary and should reflect the data from which they are derived. The researcher cannot know beforehand how many
master themes will be identified through the analysis. However, it is important to ensure that analysis continues until the point at which full integration of themes has been achieved. In other words, IPA is not complete until that which is shared between participants has been identified and captured in superordinate themes (master themes). This means that, even though we do not know exactly how many

themes we will generate, we must not stop until all subordinate themes have either been integrated into or dropped from the analysis.

Interpretation

Much research using IPA stops with the construction of the table of master themes. However, more recently researchers have begun to move beyond this and have completed their analysis with a more explicit interpretation of the themes identified in the research. This may involve drawing upon existing theoretical constructs and formulations (see Larkin et al. 2006). Eatough and Smith (2008) advocate the adoption of two distinct levels of interpretation (see also Smith 2004). The first one, a more descriptive, empathic level, aims to allow the researcher to enter the participant's world, whereas the second critically interrogates the participant's account in order to gain further insight into its nature, meaning and origin. The second level of interpretation, therefore, takes the researcher beyond the participant's own words and understanding(s). Clearly, this second level is more tentative and speculative than the first, and should not be held too rigidly. While higher levels of interpretation enrich the research by generating new insights and understanding, they also give rise to ethical issues around the imposition of meaning and giving/denying voice to research participants (see Larkin et al. 2006; Willig 2012a for a fuller discussion of the ethics of interpretation).

Writing up

Following an introduction to the substantive area of research and the specific research question (Introduction), the report

needs to provide an account of the methodological rationale and process associated with IPA (Method). This is followed by a presentation of the themes identified in the analysis together with illustrative quotations from participants (Analysis/Results). The Analysis/Results section of the report may be structured around master themes. Each theme is introduced and its various manifestations are discussed. Quotations from participants are included to illustrate the ways in which themes are mobilized. Relationships between themes should also be addressed. The presentation of the results can be supported by the inclusion of a table of themes or a diagram showing the relationships between themes. Either way, the presentation of results should be organized around the themes that emerged from the analysis. The aim of this section is to provide a convincing account of the nature and quality of the participants' experience of the phenomenon under investigation. It is important to be clear about the distinction between participants' comments and the researcher's interpretation of those comments. *Reflexivity* issues should be addressed within this context. Finally, the Discussion section of an IPA report considers the themes identified in the analysis in relation to the existing literature in the field. Implications for future research and theoretical developments are addressed. Phenomenological research can also inform recommendations for improved practice, particularly in the areas of health and counselling psychology.

An example of IPA

This example is taken from 'The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain' by Osborn and Smith (1998).

Aims

The aim of this study was to explore the experience of chronic pain as it is mediated by the personal meanings that sufferers attribute to it. The experience of chronic lower back pain is not a simple product of organic pathology, and psychological factors appear to play a crucial role in determining a sufferer's levels of distress and disability. In this study, IPA was chosen as a suitable method to 'explore explicitly the psychological processes that determine and maintain the dynamic relationship between the participant's chronic pain, distress and disability' (Osborn and Smith 1998: 67).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with nine female patients at a hospital outpatient back clinic were carried out and transcribed. The women were aged 25–55 years, they had suffered from chronic back pain for at least five years, and their pain experiences were characterized by high levels of distress and disability. The interview schedule was constructed with the aim of letting the participant tell her own pain story and to allow her to give expression to the psychological experience of her chronic pain.

Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed, one by one, in accordance with the principles of IPA. Each transcript was read and re-read before themes were identified. These were tentatively organized and then explored in more detail. Each theme's relation to other themes was also examined, and interrelationships between them were established. Finally, themes were integrated across transcripts in order to identify

shared themes that captured the essence of the participants' experience of chronic pain.

The researchers were interested in the psychological experience of chronic pain, which meant that the psychological content of the pain experience constituted the analytical focus of the study. This is where the researchers' *interpretative* engagement with the texts becomes apparent. Their research interests led them to ask certain kinds of question, which took the analytic process in a particular direction. This shows that IPA does not claim to produce a definitive, or 'true', reading of participants' accounts; instead, the results of such analysis are necessarily 'a co-construction between participant and analyst in that [they emerge] from the analyst's engagement with the data in the form of the participant's account' (Osborn and Smith 1998: 67).

Findings

Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis: 'searching for an explanation', 'comparing this self with other selves', 'not being believed' and 'withdrawing from others'. 'Searching for an explanation' refers to participants' motivation to understand and explain their situation. The need to know why they were suffering together with the absence of a meaningful explanation for their pain was experienced as frustrating and bewildering. This search for meaning pervaded the women's accounts and reappears throughout, thus forming a part of all other themes. 'Comparing this self with other selves' captures participants' tendency to engage in social comparisons with past and future selves as well as with other people. Participants made favourable as well as unfavourable comparisons. They talked about their losses (of

mobility, of activity, of social life, etc.) by invoking what they used to be able to do (comparison with past selves) and by highlighting what other people are capable of doing (comparison with others). They also compared themselves with those who were even more unfortunate than themselves (e.g. the terminally ill, the severely disabled) to emphasize their existing strengths; however, these comparisons were often experienced as counterproductive as they made participants worry about their own future prognosis. The uncertainty and ambiguity associated with lower back pain and the participants' frustrated 'search for an explanation' meant that social comparisons tended to emphasize loss and grief. 'Not being believed' refers to participants' concern about other people's views of their illness status. Participants were aware that, since it is invisible and without a clear clinical diagnosis, chronic pain may be perceived as 'not real' or as a form of 'malingering'. As a result, participants experienced guilt and shame in relation to their disability. They also felt the need to show signs of being in pain (e.g. through appearance and demeanour) so as to be believed. 'Withdrawing from others' was a consequence of participants' fear of rejection and awkwardness in social settings. Not wishing to be perceived as 'a burden' or 'boring' in company, participants chose to withdraw from social involvement and to stay at home.

Discussion

The authors suggest that participants' failure to relieve their feelings of uncertainty and confusion was partly the result of their application of a purely medical model that does not provide a clear explanation for the occurrence of chronic lower back pain. Participants would be helped by gaining

access to an explanation that allowed them to establish a basis for taking therapeutic action, to retain a sense of control over their pain and to gain a sense of legitimacy in relation to their suffering and disability. The use of social comparison and its association with a pervasive sense of loss and grief indicates that participants had not
developed a positive self-concept in the face of chronic illness. Instead, they were preoccupied with their past, idealized selves and with what they had lost through their illness. To repair the disruption to their sense of self, participants would need to be able to make sense of it within the context of their life story. Participants' inability to make sense of their pain led to feelings of guilt and shame in relation to their claims to illness status and the adoption of the sick role. To assert legitimacy for their suffering, participants felt obliged to appear ill by displaying signs of distress and disability. In addition, they withdrew from social engagement with others in order to avoid misunderstanding and rejection. The authors conclude that chronic pain patients could benefit if the themes that emerged from this study were addressed within the context of chronic pain management programmes. They propose that patients and their loved ones may be helped 'to understand their condition in less self-persecutory ways and realise greater benefits in the longer term through better adjustment and accommodation' (Osborn and Smith 1998: 80). However, they acknowledge that issues around guilt, shame and denial may also require substantial psychotherapeutic input.

Limitations of IPA

IPA is concerned with experiences and meanings. It looks at phenomena from the point of view of those who experience

them. Its aim is to capture an experience and to unravel its meaning(s). To this end, it provides researchers with clear and systematic guidelines, which allow them to identify and progressively integrate themes. Ideally, upon completion, it will have generated a table of master themes that captures (something of) the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The introduction of IPA into psychology has made phenomenological methodology accessible to those who do not have a philosophical background. Smith and his colleagues take care to provide detailed descriptions of both the theoretical underpinnings and the analytic process associated with IPA (e.g. Smith et al. 2009) which means that those new to the method are encouraged to use it in their own research. Like all forms of phenomenological research, it does suffer from several conceptual and practical limitations. These concern the role of language, the suitability of accounts, and explanation versus description. These limitations will be discussed in turn.

The role of language

Phenomenological analysis works with texts. Data collection techniques used include semi-structured interviews, diaries and other forms of accounts such as descriptions of events or situations. Here, language is the means by which participants (attempt to) communicate their experiences to the researcher. In so far as phenomenological research is interested in the actual experience itself, the use of such data collection methods presupposes that language provides participants with the necessary tools to capture that experience. In other words, phenomenological analysis relies upon the representational validity of language. However, as will be discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, it can be argued that language constructs,

rather than describes, reality. That is, the words we choose to describe a particular experience always construct a particular version of that experience. The same event can be described in many different ways. This means that language can never simply give expression to experience. Instead, it adds meanings that reside in the words themselves and, therefore, makes direct access to someone else's experience impossible. From this point of view, an interview transcript or a diary entry tells us more about the ways in which an individual *talks about* a particular experience within a particular context, than about the *experience itself* (see Chapter 10). Alternatively, it may be that the availability of a particular way of talking about an issue also provides the categories of experience, and that, as a result, language *precedes* and therefore *shapes* experience (see Chapter 11). From this perspective, language does not constitute the means by which we express something we think or feel; rather, language prescribes what we *can* think and feel. Either way, the conceptualization of language in much phenomenological research can be criticized for not engaging sufficiently with its constitutive role (see also Willig 2007 for more on this).

Suitability of accounts

Phenomenology is concerned with the texture of experience. The aim of phenomenological analysis is to explore the quality of experience and to obtain a better understanding of *what it is like* to live a particular moment or situation. In its original formulation, transcendental phenomenology attempted to bracket
abstract (scientific, common-sense and conventional) knowledge about a phenomenon in order to better understand the essence of the phenomenon as it revealed itself in a

particular experience. Even though IPA is more modest in its aims, it also attempts to capture the experiences and meanings associated with a phenomenon rather than to identify people's opinions about it. But while phenomenology as philosophy works with introspection, whereby the philosopher explores his or her own experiences through phenomenological meditation, phenomenology as social scientific research method relies upon participants' descriptions of their experiences. This raises difficult questions. To what extent do participants' accounts constitute suitable material for phenomenological analysis? How successfully are participants able to communicate the rich texture of their experience to the researcher? And how many people are able to use language in such a way as to capture the subtleties and nuances of their physical and emotional experiences?

For example, Moustakas (1994: 177) reports that, in a phenomenological study of coronary artery bypass surgery, participants were asked to provide 'vivid, accurate and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with your experience'. It could be argued that such descriptions are very difficult to produce, particularly for participants who are not used to expressing their thoughts, feelings and perceptions in words. Similarly, in a study of the phenomenology of patients' experience of care in an accident and emergency department (Lemon and Taylor 1997), patients who had sustained head injuries, suffered convulsions or taken drugs were excluded from the study. Again, this demonstrates that phenomenological research methods are not suitable for the study of the experiences of those who may not be able to articulate them in the sophisticated manner required by the

method. This limits the applicability of the phenomenological method (but see Chapter 13 and Appendix 2 for examples of attempts to get around this problem by using visual methodologies).

Explanation versus description

Phenomenological research, including IPA, focuses upon *perceptions*. It aims to gain a better understanding of how the world appears to participants, of how participants perceive and experience the world, from their own perspectives. Here, 'the important reality is what people perceive it to be' (Kvale 1996b: 52). Phenomenological research is concerned with *how* the world presents itself to people as they engage with it in particular contexts and with particular intentions. It does not make claims about the nature of the world itself. In fact, from a phenomenological point of view, it does not make sense to conceive of 'the world' and 'the person' as separate entities. Instead, there is only 'experience of the world' based upon a relational unit of self/world (see also O'Connor and Hallam 2000). As a result, while it is able to generate detailed, rich descriptions of participants' experiences of situations and events, such research does not tend to further our understanding of *why* such experiences take place and *why* there may be differences between individuals' phenomenological representations. That is, phenomenological research *describes and documents* the lived experience of participants but it does not attempt to *explain* it.

It could be argued that an exclusive focus on appearances, without regard for their cause or origin, limits our understanding of phenomena. Much of what human beings perceive is not a direct reflection of the conditions that give

rise to the perception. Our visual perception of the stars in the sky at night, for instance, does not reflect the ideal standpoint of geometric projection (see Holzkamp 1983). The same applies to social and psychological perceptions and experiences such as pain, love or prejudice. If we want to move beyond sharing an experience with our participants, and understand their experiences well enough to explain them, we need to be aware of the conditions that gave rise to these experiences in the first place. Such conditions can lie far beyond the moment and location of the experience itself. They may be found in past events, histories or the social and material structures within which we live our lives (see also Willig 1999a).

Is there a place for cognition in phenomenology?

Smith (1996: 263) argues that IPA is concerned with *cognition* because it is concerned with understanding 'what the particular respondent thinks or believes about the topic under discussion'. He proposes that IPA is compatible with a social cognition paradigm because it subscribes to 'a belief in, and concern with, the chain of connection between verbal report, cognition and physical state' (Smith et al. 1999: 219). In other words, Smith's version of the phenomenological method implies a Cartesian conceptualization of the individual as the owner of a set of cognitions (ideas, beliefs, expectations, etc.), which (s)he uses to make sense of the world and to act in the world.

From this perspective, an understanding of a person's cognitive register should allow us to make sense of his or her experiences and actions. However, it could be argued that an emphasis on cognition is not, in fact, compatible with some

aspects of phenomenological thought. This is because phenomenologists challenge the subject/object distinction implied by cognitive theory. They aim to transcend the separation between 'the knower' and 'the known', between 'person' and 'world'. Phenomenology is concerned with knowledge that is non-propositional; in other words, its objective is to capture the way in which the world presents itself to the individual in an immediate (unmediated) sense, including 'vague feelings, pleasures, tastes, hunches, moods and ideas on the margin of consciousness' (O'Connor and Hallam 2000: 245). These precognitive aspects of experience are seen as central precisely because they are inarticulate and unfocused. Smith et al. (2009: 188) stress that IPA is particularly interested in 'experiences where the individual is prompted to contemplate, take stock, worry, and try to make sense of what is happening'. Indeed, a recent review of IPA studies has found that 'illness experience' has been the most popular topic for such studies (Smith, 2011). IPA research is, therefore, particularly concerned with obtaining a better understanding of how research participants interpret and make sense of significant experiences, and it could be argued that this has encouraged a focus on cognition. At the same time, Smith et al. (2009) draw attention to the fact that there are different levels of reflection, some of which are more emotionally inflected than others (e.g. 'hot cognition', see Smith and Eatough 2006), and that, therefore, a more differentiated conceptualization of cognition would be helpful. The meaning and use of the term 'cognition' in phenomenology require further exploration.

Three epistemological questions

To conclude this chapter, let us look at IPA's position in relation to our three epistemological questions about the kind of knowledge it produces, the assumptions it makes about the world it studies, and the role of the researcher in the research process.

What kind of knowledge does IPA aim to produce?

IPA aims to gain an understanding of how participants view and experience their world. Although it acknowledges that it is impossible to obtain direct, unmediated access to someone else's personal world, IPA researchers are urged to engage with participants' accounts in such a way as to encourage an insider perspective. The objective of the analysis is to obtain an insight into another person's thoughts and beliefs in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. IPA starts from the assumption that people's accounts tell us something about their private thoughts and feelings, and that these in turn are implicated in people's experiences. It aims to produce knowledge of what and how people think about the phenomenon under investigation. In this, it could be said to take a *realist* approach to knowledge production. At the same time, however, IPA recognizes that a researcher's understanding of participants' thoughts is necessarily influenced by his or her own ways of thinking, assumptions and conceptions. However, these are not seen as 'biases' to be eliminated; instead, they are seen as a necessary precondition for making sense of another person's experience. In other words, understanding requires interpretation. Here, IPA is influenced by *hermeneutic* versions of phenomenology, such as Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (see Moran 2000: Chapter 8). The knowledge produced by it is, therefore, also

reflexive in so far as it acknowledges its dependence on the researcher's own standpoint.

What kinds of assumptions does IPA make about the world?

IPA is concerned with the ways in which individuals perceive the world. It is interested in participants' subjective experience of the world rather than the objective nature of this (social or material) world. It also assumes that individuals can experience the same 'objective' conditions (e.g. a particular disease process or a social event) in radically different ways. This is because experience is mediated by the thoughts and beliefs, expectations and judgements that the individual brings to it. In other words, people attribute meanings to events that then shape their experiences of these events. IPA does not share the positivist view that the external world directly determines our perception of it. In fact, IPA does not make any
claims about the external world. It does not ask whether participants' accounts of what happened to them may be 'true' or 'false' or to what extent their perception of an event corresponds to an external 'reality'. What matters to IPA is how participants *experience* the situation or event. In this sense, it subscribes to a *relativist ontology*. However, at the same time, it recognizes that the meanings people ascribe to events are the product of interactions between actors in the social world. This means that people's interpretations are not entirely idiosyncratic and free-floating; instead, they are bound up with social interactions and processes that are shared between social actors. As such IPA is grounded in a *symbolic interactionist* perspective.

How does IPA conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

IPA acknowledges that any insights gained from the analysis of a text are necessarily the product of *interpretation*. Although the aim of IPA is to better understand the participant's psychological world, researchers accept that such understanding can only be gained through the researcher's engagement with and interpretation of the participant's account. This means that the researcher is necessarily implicated in the analysis. As a result, the analysis is both *phenomenological* (i.e. it aims to represent the participant's view of the world) and *interpretative* (i.e. it is dependent on the researcher's own conceptions and standpoint). In this sense, IPA requires a *reflexive* attitude from the researcher. However, it does not *theorize* reflexivity. In other words, it recognizes the importance of the researcher's perspective but it does not actually tell us how to incorporate this insight into the research process and it does not show us how exactly the researcher's own conceptions are implicated in a particular piece of analysis. Thus, although IPA research does not claim privileged, or direct, access to participants' meanings and experiences, the terminology used in the presentation of its findings invokes a sense of discovery rather than of construction: themes are said to *emerge* and categories are *identified* in a way that resonates with grounded theory methodology rather than social constructionism (see also Snapshot Box 8.1).

Conclusion

It is important to bear in mind that IPA is but one version of phenomenological research methodology, which in turn grew out of a rich tradition of philosophical thought. Phenomenology as philosophy is itself by no means a unified system; there are diverse strands of phenomenology, including existentialist, transcendental and hermeneutic varieties (see Spinelli 1989; Moran 2000; Schmidt 2006). Each of these makes different assumptions about issues, such as the role of language and interpretation, the nature of being and human action. As a result, to describe an approach as *phenomenology* or as *phenomenological* means different things to different people. It is, therefore, important to be specific about which version of phenomenological thought one is referring to. IPA constitutes one way in which phenomenological ideas have inspired research practice. There are, however, many others. Nevertheless, I want to close by drawing attention to what unifies, rather than what separates, empirical phenomenological research. To this end, Kvale (1996b: 38–9) reminds us that 'A phenomenological perspective includes a focus on the life world, an openness to the experiences of the subject, a primacy of precise description, attempts to bracket foreknowledge, and a search for invariant essential meanings in the description.'

Interactive exercises

1. Select an everyday activity (e.g. a bus journey or eating a meal). When you engage in it the next time, adopt the phenomenological attitude and see how this changes your experience of the activity and what you can learn from this about your experience. Remember that the phenomenological attitude requires you to put aside, as far as possible, your knowledge, assumptions and expectations (e.g. do not think about what you know about the calorific value of the food you are eating or how it has been obtained and cooked, and focus instead upon the flavour and texture of it). It also
   means staying in the present as far as possible and trying not to project yourself forward in time (e.g. do not think about the end of your bus journey and what you are going to do when you get there). Be warned that adopting the phenomenological attitude can turn your experience of an everyday activity from something mundane and routine into something unsettling and potentially disturbing.
2. Select an experience you have had recently (e.g. an enjoyable evening out with a friend or a disappointing visit to the theatre). Describe the experience phenomenologically. You can either do this in writing or you can record and then transcribe a verbal account of it. Remember that a phenomenological account needs to stay close to the quality and texture of the experience. This means focusing on what was going on inside of

you as you underwent the experience rather than on what you know about it (e.g. if two hours in the theatre felt like an eternity then, phenomenologically, this is what matters). Having produced the account, read and re-read it line-by-line. Ask yourself what makes the experience what it is? What is its essence (e.g. What is the essence of boredom in the theatre?)? Which features of the experience need to be present to make it what it is (e.g. What makes time with your friend enjoyable – is it the food you had? The wine you drank? The way your eyes met?)? Which are redundant?

Further reading

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Langdridge, D. (2007) *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method*. London: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Larkin, M., Watts, S. and Clifton, E. (2006) Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3: 102–20.

Osborn, M. and Smith, J.A. (1998) The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: an interpretative

phenomenological analysis, *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 3: 65–83.

Smith, J. and Willig, C. (2012) A conversation with Professor Jonathan Smith, in C. Willig, *Qualitative Interpretation and Analysis in Psychology*, Appendix 3. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Smith, J.A., Jarman, M. and Osborn, M. (1999) Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis, in M. Murray and K. Chamberlain (eds) *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods*. London: Sage.

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Snapshot 8.1

What's new? The relationship between IPA and grounded theory

IPA is a relatively recently developed, and still evolving, approach to qualitative research in psychology. IPA is increasingly being used as a qualitative method, particularly in health psychology research (see Smith et al.

1999; Smith, 2011) and, more recently, also in counselling and clinical psychology.

IPA and (the abbreviated version of) grounded theory share many features. Both aim to produce something like a cognitive map that represents a person's or a group's view of the world. Both proceed by systematically working through a text in order to identify themes or categories that are progressively integrated until higher-order units (core categories, master themes) are established that capture the essence or nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Both start with individual cases, which are then integrated to obtain a composite picture that tells us more about the phenomenon than any individual case would have been able to. Finally, both methods use categorization in order to achieve systematic data reduction, which, it is hoped, will produce some form of general understanding or insight into the fundamental process (grounded theory) or essence (IPA) that characterizes the phenomenon of interest.

Smith himself has repeatedly acknowledged the affinity between IPA and grounded theory. For example, in his writings about IPA, he recommends the use of analytic techniques 'commonly associated with grounded theory' (Smith 1999: 232; see also Smith 1997: 193) and he directs readers to grounded theory literature for guidance because it 'adopts a broadly similar perspective' (Smith 1995b: 18). In addition, IPA shares much of its analytic

terminology with grounded theory; it talks about *themes* and *categories* that *emerge* through analysis, and it works with concepts such as *saturation, negative case analysis*, *analytic induction* and *memo-writing*. In line with grounded theory, IPA is conceptualized as a *cyclical process* that involves the *constant comparison* of data and their codes, leading to a continuous process of assignment and reassignment of data to evolving categories.

So what is it that IPA offers the researcher that grounded theory cannot provide? Why should psychologists choose to use IPA when they have access to grounded theory, which is, after all, a more established and better-known qualitative method? There are two possible answers to this question. First, while grounded theory was developed to allow researchers to study basic social processes, IPA was designed to gain insight into individual participants' psychological worlds. In other words, IPA is a specifically psychological research method. Even though, more recently, grounded theory has been used to produce systematic representations of participants' experiences (especially the abbreviated version, see Chapter 7), it could be argued that it is better suited to address sociological research questions. This is because grounded theory aims to identify and explicate contextualized social processes that *account for phenomena*. By contrast, IPA is concerned with gaining a better understanding of the quality and texture of individual experiences; that is, it is interested in the *nature or essence of phenomena*. Smith et al. (2009: 202) explain that while both grounded theory

and IPA adopt an inductivist approach to knowledge generation, 'an IPA study is likely to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of a small number of participants' whereas 'a grounded theory study of the same broad topic is likely to wish to push towards a more conceptual explanatory level'. So, for example, a researcher who is interested in the phenomenon of 'anger' could choose to study the topic by asking, 'What are the main experiential features of being angry?' and use IPA to address this research question; alternatively, they could ask, 'What factors influence how people manage being angry?', and this would call for a grounded theory approach (Smith et al. 2009: 45). Thus, although IPA and grounded theory methodology share some significant features, they lend themselves to different research questions, and they generate different types of insight.

The second reason why psychological researchers may prefer to use IPA is that grounded theory is now associated with so many debates and controversies as to make its application something of a challenge. There are now several versions of grounded theory (e.g. full vs abbreviated, Straussian vs Glaserian, realist vs social constructionist) that suggest different directions for grounded theory research. The researcher needs to engage with these debates before (s)he can choose the version of grounded theory that is most appropriate to his or her research question. By contrast, IPA is a new and developing approach that leaves more room for creativity and freedom to explore on the part of the researcher who

uses it. However, researchers should never choose a method simply because it is more accessible; the method chosen needs to be appropriate to the research question. If the research question calls for grounded theory, then the researcher will have to bite the bullet and familiarize themselves with the literature around the different versions of the theory.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 9

Case studies

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the defining features of case study research
- its aims and objectives
- types of case study design
- the methodological procedures associated with case study research, including techniques for gathering and analysing data and ways of presenting the findings
- the role of theory in case study research
- recent developments involving phenomenological and psychosocial case study research
- limitations of case study research

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate case study research epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

The case study is not itself a research method. Instead, it constitutes an approach to the study of singular entities, which may involve the use of a wide range of diverse methods of data collection and analysis. The case study is, therefore, not characterized by the methods used to collect and analyse data, but rather by its focus upon a particular unit of analysis: the *case*. A case can be an organization, a city, a group of people, a community, a patient, a school, an intervention, even a nation state or an empire. It can be a situation, an incident or an experience. Bromley (1986: 8) describes cases as 'natural occurrences with definable
boundaries'. The case study involves an in-depth, intensive and sharply focused exploration of such an occurrence. Case studies have a long and varied history. They have been used in many different disciplines, including sociology, political theory, history, social anthropology, education and psychoanalysis. Case studies can make use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. However, despite such diversity, it is possible to identify a number of defining features of case study research. These include:

1. *An idiographic perspective*. Here, researchers are concerned with the particular rather than the general. The aim is to understand an individual case, in its particularity. This can be contrasted with a nomothetic approach, which aims to identify general laws of human behaviour by averaging out individual variation (for a more detailed discussion of idiography, see Smith et al. 1995).
2. *Attention to contextual data*. Case study research takes a holistic approach, in that it considers the case within its context. This means that the researcher pays attention to the ways in which the various dimensions of the case relate to or interact with its environment. Thus, while particular cases need to be identified as the focus of the study, they cannot be considered in isolation (for a discussion of the role of the 'ecological context' in psychological case studies, see Bromley 1986: 25).
3. *Triangulation*. Case studies integrate information from diverse sources to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This may involve the use of a range of data collection and analysis techniques within the framework of one case study. Triangulation enriches case study research because it allows the researcher to approach the case from a number of different perspectives. This in turn facilitates an appreciation of the various dimensions of the case as well as its embeddedness within its various (social, physical, symbolic, psychological) contexts.

4. *A temporal element*. Case studies involve the investigation of occurrences over a period of time. According to Yin (1994: 16), '[E]stablishing the how and why of a complex human situation is a classic example of the use of case studies.' Case studies are concerned with processes that take place over time. This means that a focus on change and development is an important feature of case studies.
5. *A concern with theory*. Case studies facilitate theory generation. The detailed exploration of a particular case can generate insights into social or psychological processes, which in turn can give rise to theoretical formulations and hypotheses. Freud's psychoanalytic case studies constitute a clear example of the relationship between case studies and theory development. Hamel (1993: 29) goes as far as to claim that '[A]ll theories are initially based on a particular case or object'. In addition, case studies can also be used to test existing theories or to clarify or extend such theories, for example, by looking at deviant or extreme cases.

In this chapter, I focus on case studies that are concerned with psychological phenomena and that use qualitative research methods to investigate them. For the purposes of this chapter, I adopt Bromley's (1986: ix) definition of the term 'case study', which suggests that: '[T]o the psychologist it means the study of an individual person, usually in a problematic situation, over a relatively short period of time.'

In the remainder of the chapter, I provide an overview of a range of qualitative research methods that are compatible with

case study research. This is followed by a discussion of the different types of case study design that are available to the qualitative researcher. These include *intrinsic* versus *instrumental* case studies, *single*- versus *multiple*-case studies, and *descriptive* versus *explanatory* case studies. I then address procedural issues associated with case study research, including selection of cases, selection of methods for data collection and analysis, the role of theory, writing up and ethics. Ulric Neisser's (1981) case study of 'John Dean's memory' will provide an illustration of case study research in psychology. This is followed by a brief account of recent developments in case study research. Having discussed some of the limitations of case studies as an approach to research in psychology, the chapter concludes by addressing the three epistemological questions in relation to case studies.

Research methods for psychological case studies

Since the case study is not itself a research method, researchers need to select methods of data collection and analysis that will generate material suitable for case studies. Many methods can be used in case study research. Some of these are well-known qualitative techniques, such as *semi-structured interviewing*, *participant observation* and *diaries*, and these are discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Data for case studies can also be generated on the basis of *personal* (e.g. letters, notes, photographs) or *official* (e.g. case notes, clinical notes,
appraisal reports) *documents*. The data can be analysed in a number of different ways, including grounded theory (see Chapter 7) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (see Chapter 8). Alternatively, various forms of text interpretation, including thematic coding and global analysis,

can also be used (for a detailed account of such techniques, see Flick 1998). In addition, Smith (1993) identifies two further methods, the Twenty Statements Test and repertory grids, as suitable analytic techniques for case study research. Although these methods can be used qualitatively, they do not constitute what has been referred to as 'big Q' methodology (see Chapter 1). This is because they work with preconceived categories, which are then filled with content specific to the case under investigation. However, they are idiographic in that they focus upon the individual case without reference to a comparison group. Let us take a brief look at the Twenty Statements Test and repertory grids.

Twenty Statements Test

In the Twenty Statements Test (Gordon 1968), the participant is asked to give 20 answers to the question, 'Who or what are you?' Each answer begins with the words 'I am . . .'. The participant's response can be explored in terms of content (e.g. what types of categories are deployed) or sequence (e.g. which aspects of self are mentioned first/last, etc.). In addition, the test can be repeated at different points in time to identify changes in self-perception.

Repertory grids

The repertory grid (Kelly 1955) is designed to elicit from the participant the constructs (s)he uses to make sense of the social world. To do this, the participant is asked to generate about 10 elements (e.g. roles for the self or others, activities, careers) which (s)he then compares with one another. For example, if the elements are 'self as friend', 'self as lover', 'self as parent', 'self as worker', and so on, the participant

would be asked in what way any two of them are similar and how they are different from a third (e.g. 'self as friend' and 'self as lover' may be described as 'warm' and contrasted with 'self as worker', which is described as 'businesslike'). Each comparison generates a construct – that is, terms of reference that the person uses to think about his or her social roles (e.g. warm vs businesslike). This process of comparison continues until the participant finds it difficult to generate new constructs. Finally, the participant rates each element in relation to each construct (e.g. 'self as friend' and 'self as lover' as 'warm' but not 'businesslike', 'self as parent' as 'warm' and 'businesslike' and 'self as worker' as 'not warm' but 'businesslike', and so on). When the grid is completed, it provides a visual display of patterns and associations between elements and constructs. This in turn provides insight into the ways in which the participant construes personal meanings to make sense of the social world. (For more information on how to use repertory grids, see Bannister and Fransella 1986; Banister et al. 1994: Chapter 5; Smith 1995a.)

Types of design for case study research

Individual cases may be studied for different reasons. A researcher may focus on a particular case because it is interesting in its own right or because it is seen as representative of a particular kind of situation. (S)he may wish to explore a single case in as much depth as possible, or may seek to compare a number of cases with one another in order to arrive at a more general understanding of a phenomenon. The researcher's investigation of the case may be purely exploratory or it may be designed to test an existing theory. In addition, it may be predominantly descriptive or it may aim to generate explanations for occurrences. There are a

number of different designs for case study research, each of which allows the researcher to address different sorts of question in relation to the case(s) under investigation. These include *intrinsic* versus *instrumental* case studies, *single*- versus *multiple*-case studies and *descriptive* versus *explanatory* case studies. In addition, Chamberlain et al. (2004) distinguish between *naturalist* and *pragmatic* approaches to case study research. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Intrinsic versus instrumental case studies

Intrinsic case studies represent nothing but themselves. The cases in intrinsic case studies are chosen because they are interesting in their own right. The researcher wants to know about them in particular,
rather than about a more general problem or phenomenon. Cases for intrinsic case studies can be said to be pre-specified in the sense that their intrinsic interest pre-exists the research. For example, patients with rare diseases or clients with unusual problems would constitute suitable cases for intrinsic case studies. By contrast, in *instrumental case studies* the cases constitute exemplars of a more general phenomenon. They are selected to provide the researcher with an opportunity to study the phenomenon of interest. Here, the research question identifies a phenomenon (e.g. bereavement, fame, recovery from illness) and the cases are selected in order to explore 'how the phenomenon exists within a particular case' (Stake 1994: 242). In this design, individuals who are experiencing the phenomenon of interest (e.g. the bereaved, the famous, the recovering patient) constitute suitable cases for analysis (for more information on intrinsic and instrumental case studies, see Stake 1994, 1995).

Single- versus multiple-case studies

Case studies can consist of a detailed exploration of a single case or they can involve the comparison of a series of cases. Yin (1994) identifies three reasons for choosing a single-case design. First, the case may constitute a critical test for a well-formulated theory. Second, it may represent a unique or extreme case that is of intrinsic interest to the researcher. Third, the case in question may be revelatory in the sense that it was previously inaccessible. *Single-case studies* are, therefore, either of intrinsic interest to the researcher or they provide an opportunity to test the applicability of existing theories to real-world data. The *multiple-case study* design, by contrast, provides the researcher with an opportunity to generate new theories. Here, theoretical formulations are developed and refined on the basis of the comparative analysis of a series of cases. Analysis of the first case leads the researcher to formulate tentative hypotheses, which can then be explored in the light of subsequent cases. With each new case, the emerging theory is modified in order to be able to account for all instances associated with the phenomenon under investigation. Smith (1997: 193–4) likens this process to that of analytic induction (see also Flick 1998: 230–1). Multiple-case studies are, therefore, instrumental in nature (for a detailed discussion of multiple-case studies, see Yin 1994: 44–51).

Descriptive versus explanatory case studies

Even though all case studies should include descriptions of the cases under investigation, some case studies remain purely descriptive, whereas others aim to be explanatory. *Descriptive case studies* are concerned with providing a

detailed description of the phenomenon within its context. Here, the case is not explored in terms of existing theoretical formulations; instead, it is hoped that the detail provided by the description will generate new insights into, and a better understanding of, the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. By contrast, *explanatory case studies* aim to generate explanations for the occurrences with which they are concerned. Here, descriptions of what is going on are accompanied by attempts to deploy explanatory concepts within the account. The explanatory case study 'goes beyond mere narrative or description' (Bromley 1986: 32). However, it is important to bear in mind that accuracy in matters of detail and the provision of sufficient evidence are of paramount importance in both descriptive and explanatory case study research (for a detailed discussion of types of case study, see Yin 1993: Chapter 1).

Naturalist versus pragmatic case studies

Chamberlain et al. (2004) distinguish between *naturalist* and *pragmatic* approaches. Naturalistic case study research (e.g. Stake 1995) is carried out in naturalistic, real-world contexts and focuses on a single case as the unit of analysis. The researcher approaches the case with an open mind and without previously defined hypotheses, allowing patterns, propositions and formulations to emerge from the data. By contrast, pragmatic case study research (e.g. Yin 1994) is more focused, beginning with a well-defined research question that guides data collection and analysis. It works with a set of propositions that identify key areas of interest and which function as (tentative and flexible) hypotheses. These are tested and revised during the course of the research. Both the selection of relevant data sources and analytic

techniques are driven by the research questions and the propositions. The aim of pragmatic case study research is to produce a set of revised propositions (see Chamberlain et al. 2004 for more information about how to conduct pragmatic case study research).

Procedural issues

Case study research can take different forms. We have seen that case studies can employ a range of different methods of data collection and analysis, and a number of different types of design for case study research have been identified. The case study researcher needs to make a series of decisions about what (the unit of analysis, the case), how (methods of data collection and analysis) and why (intrinsic interest or theoretical reasons) (s)he is to conduct the research. While case study research allows the researcher to make his or her own decisions about these matters, there are a number of procedural issues that need to be addressed by all case study research. It is important to remember that the freedom and diversity associated with case studies do not mean that such research requires less planning and preparation. In fact, the opposite is likely to be the case. To ensure that the researcher maintains clarity of design and appropriateness of methods throughout, the case study needs to be carefully arranged. Bromley (1986: 14) argues that, 'in order to be useful it has to be restricted in scope and sharply focused'. *Selection of cases*, *methods of data collection and analysis*, *the role of theory*, *strategies for writing up* and *ethical concerns* need to be considered if the research is to generate new insights into, and/or improve our understanding of, a particular phenomenon or occurrence.

Selection of cases

Stake (1994: 236) suggests that a '[C]ase study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied.' While not all case study researchers would agree with this statement (e.g. Yin 1994: 17), it does draw attention to the importance of the selection of the appropriate unit of analysis, that is *the case*. Hamel (1993: 41–4) differentiates between 'the object of study' and 'the case'. The object of study constitutes the phenomenon of interest to the researcher (e.g. recovery from heart surgery, divorce, being promoted), whereas the case is its concrete manifestation (e.g. the heart surgery patient, the divorcee, the person who gained promotion).

Hamel argues that the case should be selected to understand better the object of study. This conceptualization presupposes an *instrumental case study* design whereby the case constitutes an exemplar of a more general phenomenon. Here, the aim of selection of cases is to identify 'the ideal case to grasp the object of study' (Hamel 1993: 43). In *intrinsic case studies*, the case does not represent a more general phenomenon. Instead, it is chosen as a result of its intrinsic interest to the researcher. However, in both intrinsic and instrumental designs, the researcher needs to establish the boundaries of the case study and its terms of reference. This can be difficult.

Bromley (1986) draws attention to the fact that cases always exist within a context and that, therefore, the boundaries of a case study are always somewhat arbitrary. He provides the following example to illustrate his point: 'A case-study which, for one Investigator, concerns the rehabilitation of a

particular drug addict, for another concerns a particular neighbourhood where narcotics are available' (Bromley 1986: 4). In addition, contexts can be social, economic, historical, biological, and so on. This means that the case can be explored in terms of a wide range of both proximal (i.e. immediate) and distal (i.e. remote) factors. To be able to establish the boundaries of the case study, the researcher needs to clearly identify its terms of reference. That is, (s)he needs to be explicit about what it is (about the case) that (s)he is interested in. The same case can be discussed in relation to a number of different situations and concerns. For example, a serial killer may be described in terms of his psychopathology, his childhood experiences and early development, his social location and relationships, or his subjective perceptions and worldview. It is important to remember that case studies are of necessity partial accounts of a person in a situation; they can never capture the individual in his or her entirety.

Selection of methods of data collection and analysis

The research methods to be used in a particular case study should be selected in the light of the research question that motivated the study. For example, if the researcher is interested in the ways in which an individual experiences a particular life event, then a combination of *semi-structured interviewing* and *diaries* would be an appropriate method of data collection. The data could be analysed in a variety of ways, including IPA and grounded theory. If, however, the researcher wishes to establish an individual's educational trajectory in order to try to understand better his or her choice of career later in life, (s)he would have to

consult documents such as school reports and assessments as well as the individual's own account of their educational experiences. It would also be a good idea to conduct semi-structured interviews with the individual's former teachers and, if possible, also peers. Analysis of such data could include a search for recurrent *themes* (e.g. in teacher's reports) as well as grounded theory. Case study research should always involve a certain amount of *triangulation*. Since case studies concern themselves with the complex relationship between the contextual and temporal dimensions of an event or phenomenon, it is unlikely that the use of a single data collection method would generate data that do justice to this complexity. Flick (1998: 230) points out that triangulation is a way of 'enriching and completing knowledge and [towards] transgressing the (always limited) epistemological potentials of the individual method'. This makes triangulation an ideal way of approaching case study research, which should, ideally, throw light on the ways in which bounded, yet integrated, systems function over time (see Stake 1994).

The role of theory

The role of theory in case study research is twofold. First, case studies are based upon what has been referred to as 'initial theory' (Hamel 1993: 44) or 'study propositions' (Yin 1994: 21), which direct the researcher's attention to what is to be examined within the framework of the study. In other words, the researcher's selection of a case and the questions (s)he chooses to ask about it are theoretical in that they identify particular concepts as relevant. For example, we may ask questions about the effects of childhood experiences upon choices made later in life, or we may wish to explore the

ways in which social relationships influence people's experience of particular life events. Other concepts of interest may be psychological symptoms, social beliefs or personal expectations. The methods chosen to collect and analyse data for the case study are those which are capable of obtaining meaningful information about these concepts. This means that theory features in the design of the case study itself. Yin (1994: 28) suggests that the design of a case study 'embodies a "theory" of what is being studied'. In order to be clear and explicit about their theoretical bases, Yin (1994: 29) proposes that all case studies should be preceded by statements about what is to be explored, the purpose of the exploration and the criteria by which it will be judged.

Second, case studies have implications for theory development. They can be designed to test an existing theory or they can constitute the starting point for the generation of a new theory. When used to test existing theory, case studies can advance knowledge through *falsification* (see Chapter 1). A single case that demonstrates an occurrence that is not compatible with existing theoretical predictions would be sufficient to question the applicability of the theory. In this way, single-case studies can function in the same way as experiments – namely, to establish the limits of generalizability (see also Bromley 1986: 286–96; Yin 1994: Chapters 1 and 2). As Stake (1994: 245) puts it:

Case study is part of scientific method, but its purpose is not limited to the advance of science. Whereas single or a few cases are poor representation of a population of cases and poor grounds for advancing grand generalization, a single case as negative example can establish limits to grand generalization. For example, we lose confidence in the

generalization that a child of separated parents is better off placed with the mother when we find a single instance of resultant injury.

When used to generate new theory, case studies can facilitate conceptual refinement of emerging theoretical formulations or they can lead to the discovery of new insights and interpretations. For example, the researcher's immersion in the detail and specificity of an *intrinsic case study* can give rise to the formulation of an entirely new hypothesis about the processes involved in the case. Alternatively, a *multiple-case study* of an instrumental nature allows the researcher to consider a series of cases in relation to one another in order to develop a conceptual framework that accounts for them all. Bromley (1986) compares this process to the emergence of case law in jurisprudence. Case study researchers hold different views about the extent to which and the ways in which case study research allows for generalizability of its findings. These arguments are taken up in Snapshot Box 9.1 at the end of this chapter.

Writing up

Like most qualitative research, case studies can be written up in a variety of ways. There is no standard format for the presentation of a psychological case study. The length, structure and style of the report will be influenced by the methods used in the case study and by the findings generated by the research. In line with all qualitative research reports, the case study report should include some information about the
participant(s), a clear and detailed account of the methods used to collect and analyse the data, and a discussion of the

implications of the findings. In addition, such a report should identify the purpose of the study and its terms of reference. It is important to acknowledge that the case study was carried out in response to a particular concern or question on the part of the researcher. It can only provide a partial understanding of how and why certain individuals experience and behave as they do, within a particular situation. The case study report can never claim to 'sum up' a person or to paint a 'complete picture' of a person. Again, in line with most qualitative research, it is difficult to think of the analysis and writing-up phases of case study research as separate activities. Instead, '[C]ase content evolves in the act of writing itself' (Stake 1994: 240).

Researchers disagree about the extent to which case study research ought to move beyond detailed descriptions of the case and provide explanations for its occurrence. Some (e.g. Bromley 1986; Hamel 1993) argue that case studies ought to transcend the information that characterizes a case and introduce explanatory concepts to account for it. From this point of view, the case study report presents a 'rational and empirical argument which explains the behaviour of the person under investigation' (Bromley 1986: 37) on the basis of abstract concepts (e.g. social roles, family dynamics, cognitive structures, etc.). Others (e.g. Stake 1994) caution against too strong a desire to theorize because this may divert attention from the particulars of the case. Instead, they recommend that the case study researcher remains close to the details of the case, emphasizing its uniqueness and particularity. The aim here is 'to describe the case in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings, and draw their own conclusions' (Stake 1994: 243). Whichever approach is taken,

it is important to differentiate, clearly and explicitly, between description (of events, of what participants said, of the social context) and the researcher's interpretation of these (of their causes and consequences, of their implications, of their meanings) (see also Smith et al. 1999: 227–8; and Chapter 4 for more on this).

Ethics

Case studies are concerned with the details of individual participants' life events. This means that case study research needs to be particularly sensitive to issues around confidentiality and anonymity. If the circumstances of a participant's life event are such that readers of the case report would be able to identify them, then the researcher needs to take care to introduce modifications or adjustments to the material that prevent such identification. Bromley (1986: 309) suggests that it is possible to make alterations in such a way that the particular case is rendered unrecognizable, while preserving the case study's form and content. In addition, agreements should be reached with participants about the limits of accessibility to records, documents and other materials prior to data collection. Furthermore, it is good practice to supply participants with drafts of how their cases are being written up and to take note of their feedback.

Some case study researchers (e.g. Smith 1995a) take a more interactive approach to their work with participants and involve them in an ongoing discussion of the meanings and implications of emerging interpretations. It has been suggested that such a procedure can generate therapeutic gain through reflection for the participant (Smith 1993: 263–4). Perhaps more than any other type of research, case studies

require us to take note of Stake's (1994: 244) observation that 'Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict.'

An example of case study research

In 'John Dean's memory: a case study', Ulric Neisser (1981) presents a detailed analysis of a number of documents to throw light on the ways in which John Dean remembers a series of events that took place at the White House. John Dean, who used to be a counsel to former US President Richard Nixon, testified before the Watergate Committee of the United States Senate in June 1973. The Committee's investigation took place to establish whether or not high-ranking government officials had been involved in the cover-up of a politically motivated burglary. Neisser was interested in the extent to which Dean's testimony matched up with the transcripts of tape-recordings of conversations in the White House, which emerged after Dean's interrogation had taken place. This case study was, therefore, *instrumental* in the sense that John Dean's testimony serves as an exemplar of a more general phenomenon (i.e. the workings of memory). While Neisser acknowledges that it is not possible to do full justice to John Dean's testimony within the terms of reference of a cognitively oriented case study, he proposes that the exploration of memory within
a real-life context of some complexity can expand our understanding of some of the mechanisms involved in the psychology of memory. This case study is, therefore, 'a psychological study aimed at clarifying the nature of memory for conversations' (Neisser 1981: 4). It is an *explanatory*, *single case study*.

Neisser uses two sources of data for his study: (1) the official transcripts of two important meetings in the President's Oval Office, which took place on 15 September 1972 and on 21 March 1973, respectively, and (2) transcripts of the Committee's cross-examination of John Dean about both of these meetings. Neisser compares the transcript of each meeting with Dean's account of the meeting during cross-examination. The purpose of these comparisons is to establish how Dean remembers the conversations that took place between himself, the President and White House aide Robert Haldeman.

Comparison between the transcript of the meeting of 15 September 1972 and Dean's account of the meeting almost one year later shows that, during his testimony, Dean reports contributions to the conversation by Nixon, Haldeman and himself, which none of them had, in fact, made. These contributions are largely self-serving in the sense that they express others' respect and recognition for Dean (e.g. a warm and cordial reception, praise for his work) and his own modesty and foresight (e.g. a reluctance to take credit, a warning about future developments in the case). Neisser suggests that Dean's testimony of the meeting of 15 September describes a conversation that Dean *wishes* had taken place rather than the one that did, in fact, take place. However, at the same time, Neisser points out that Dean's recollection of the conversation is basically accurate in that it demonstrates that President Nixon was fully aware of the cover-up of the burglary and that he approved of it. Thus, while Dean's recollection was faulty, both in terms of the words used by participants in the conversation as well as their gist, his testimony was characterized by what Neisser (1981: 13) refers to as 'a deeper level of truth'.

Comparison between the transcript of the meeting of 21 March 1973 and Dean's account of it during cross-examination tells a different story. Now Dean produces a generally accurate recollection of his conversation with President Nixon. Neisser suggests that this is because on 21 March Dean was able to present the President with a verbal report while the President listened, interjecting the occasional remarks or questions. This meant that Dean had had an opportunity to rehearse his contribution to the conversation, both before and after the meeting itself. In addition, this meeting, unlike the meeting on 15 September, had fulfilled Dean's hopes in that he had been given the opportunity to say what he wanted to say while President Nixon listened to him. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, in his testimony, Dean barely referred to the second half of the 21 March meeting during which Haldeman joined Dean and the President. Important statements made during that second half of the meeting were remembered by Dean but they were attributed to another conversation altogether. Neisser argues that Dean's memory of 21 March is dominated by his own performance and that other memories of what took place during that meeting were shifted or forgotten as a result.

On the basis of his case study, Neisser is able to identify a process of recollection that he calls 'repisodic'. He argues that, in addition to episodic memory (i.e. retrieval of autobiographical events) and semantic memory (i.e. facts, word meanings, general knowledge), it may be useful to think of memory as being 'repisodic' in that it is based upon a series of similar events that were nevertheless remembered as one representative episode. In Neisser's (1981: 20) words, 'what seems to be an episode actually represents a repetition'. 'Repisodes' embody the common characteristics of a series of

events. This means that what people say about such 'repisodes' is true at a deeper level even though it is not faithful to any one particular occasion. John Dean's testimony provides an illustration of how 'repisodic memory' occurs within the circumstances of a particular historical event, which ultimately led to the resignation of President Nixon.

Recent developments

In recent years qualitative researchers have revisited the case study. This has come about as a result of two developments. First, researchers with an interest in phenomenological methods have been debating to what extent phenomenological research ought to concern itself with individual experience (e.g. one woman's experience of multiple sclerosis – Finlay 2003) as opposed to shared experiences which can tell the researcher something about the essence of a phenomenon (e.g. the experience of learning something – Colaizzi 1971). While the latter approach is perhaps more in tune with the philosophical origins of phenomenological research, qualitative psychologists are often interested in individuals and thus 'seek out idiographic meanings in an attempt to understand the individual which may or may not offer general insights' (Finlay 2009: 9). From this point of view, a case study design that allows the researcher to explore
in detail one individual's experience within its particular context using phenomenological methods would be entirely compatible with the aims of such research. Indeed, Smith et al. remind the reader that they have been advocating the case study design for research using IPA (see also Smith 2004) and write that they 'hope to see increasing numbers of case studies conducted' (2009: 38).

The second point of departure for a resurgence of interest in the case study has been a desire to gain a deeper understanding of what motivates people, especially at an unconscious level, and to move beyond qualitative research which describes but does not explain research participants' experiences and behaviours. Here, the case study design mirrors the clinical case study with its intense focus upon the individual psyche's inner workings. Kvale (2003) presents a comprehensive comparison between 'the psychoanalytic interview' and qualitative research, demonstrating just how much overlap there is between a qualitative case study and a clinical case study. He cites Freud who argues that the psychoanalytical interview was more than a treatment method alone, since it was also 'a procedure for the investigation of mental processes which are almost inaccessible in any other way' ([1923] 1964: 235, in Kvale 2003: 21–2). A recently developed approach to qualitative research, often referred to as 'the psychosocial approach' (e.g. Frosh and Saville Young 2008; Frosh 2010) uses a case study design in order to make links between what a research participant is saying and doing, and their emotional investments in this. Such research requires the researcher to engage intensively with the data generated by one individual participant in order to identify the underlying emotional dynamics which may have given rise to their account of their experience. Here, it is very much the individual participant as 'a case' who is of interest to the researcher. As might be expected, most research within this tradition is informed by psychoanalytic theory, although there are important differences between researchers in terms of their specific theoretical orientation (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Frosh and Baraitser 2008; see Frosh 2010: Chapter 7 for a discussion of some of these differences). However, all versions of this approach to case study research

adopt a somewhat 'suspicious' approach to interpretation (see Chapter 4).

Limitations of case study research

Psychological case studies can be used to address a wide range of questions about the experiences and behaviours of individuals in particular situations. The different types of design available (i.e. *intrinsic* versus *instrumental*, *single* versus *multiple*, *explanatory* versus *descriptive*) allow the case study researcher to select the one that is most appropriate to the purpose of the study and its terms of reference. This means that case study research constitutes a versatile approach to qualitative investigation. It also means that rather different kinds of studies can be described as case studies. As a result, it is not always easy to be sure whether a series of related studies constitute case study research proper or whether they are no more than a collection of studies concerned with similar questions. For example, having identified a particular discursive construction, interpretative repertoire or discursive strategy within a text, discourse analysts (see Chapters 10 and 11) may explore other texts in order to find out whether the same devices are deployed there, too. Similarly, conversation analysis (e.g. Drew 1995; Heritage 1997) works with large amounts of data, drawn from a series of related conversations (e.g. telephone conversations or instances of doctor–patient communication) in order to identify consistent patterns and recurrent features of talk-in-interaction (e.g. turn-taking, closure, repair, etc.). In a sense, such research could be described as multiple-case studies. However, researchers using discourse or conversation analytic methods do not tend to see themselves as case study researchers. Thus, there is a lack of clarity in relation to what

does and what does not constitute case study research. In addition, there are a number of problems that may arise when conducting case studies. These concern *epistemological* and *ethical* difficulties.

Epistemological difficulties

Triangulation

Case studies rely upon the use of *triangulation*. However, as Silverman (1993) pointed out, triangulation of methods may lead to a neglect of the role of context in the constitution of meaning. In triangulation, the researcher is using different methods of data analysis to arrive at a better understanding of what is 'really going on'. In the process, (s)he integrates insights gained from the different analytic approaches. As a result, in an attempt to resolve tensions or contradictions, the researcher may lose sight of context-specific
aspects of the data. In addition, it is possible that some of the methods of analysis chosen by a researcher are not, in fact, epistemologically compatible. For example, a combination of realist and relativist methods of analysis of a participant's account of a particular event cannot generate meaningful insights. This is because the two approaches imply different conceptualizations of the status of the text (see Chapter 2). In one case, the account may be assumed to give expression to the participant's mental processes (e.g. thoughts, memories, perceptions), while in the other, it may be seen to demonstrate the deployment of discursive resources in the pursuit of a particular social objective. It is very important that methods of data collection and analysis used in triangulation are appropriate to the research question asked (i.e. the purpose of the study) as well as epistemologically compatible with one

another. Ideally, the research question posed should be clear and focused enough to ensure that the methods chosen to answer it are, in fact, compatible (see Chapter 15 for further discussion of pluralism in qualitative research).

Generalizability

The extent to which case study research lends itself to *generalization* is a matter of debate (see also Snapshot Box 9.1). While *intrinsic case studies* are explored on account of their particularity, an *instrumental case study design* does appear to aspire to a wider applicability of findings. Similarly, *multiple-case studies* are carried out to generate insights that expand our understanding of a particular phenomenon as it manifests itself across cases. Early case studies, such as Le Play's family monographs (see Hamel 1993: 5–13) or the Chicago School's life histories (see Yin 1994: 21–5), conceived of 'the case' as a micro-social unit that could tell the researcher something about the context in which it occurred (e.g. society, the city, the neighbourhood). It has also been suggested (e.g. Giddens 1984, cited in Hamel 1993) that case studies of the same phenomenon carried out in sufficient numbers can give rise to statements about general trends and the typicality of occurrences. This implies that case study research is capable of a certain 'movement from the local to the global' (Hamel 1993: 34). It means that, for many case study researchers, 'the case' represents something beyond itself. But what does it represent? To what extent can the analysis of a small number of cases tell us something about a more general phenomenon? It is clear that cases in a multiple-case study do not constitute a representative sample in the same way that participants in a survey or experiment represent a particular population. As a result, generalizations

from case study research can never apply to other, as yet unexplored, cases, in any direct sense. However, case studies can be used to develop or refine theory, and this means that case study research can give rise to explanations that *potentially* apply to new cases. Case study researchers need to be very careful about the way in which they generalize from their work.

Ethical difficulties

Case study research often requires active involvement on the part of the participant. The participant is asked to talk or write about a particular aspect of their experience (a life event, a situation) in depth. Being interviewed, writing a diary or taking part in tests that involve self-reflection are likely to stimulate thoughts and feelings in the participant, which (s)he may not have experienced otherwise. Although this may have positive and even therapeutic effects (see Smith 1993: 263–4), it is also possible that it could affect the participant in less desirable ways. For example, it may draw attention to beliefs and values whose precise content and implications the participant had been largely unaware of. It may prompt the participant to remember events that (s)he would rather have kept out of consciousness. It may highlight contradictions between the participant's attitudes and behaviours, which (s)he now feels compelled to, but at the same time unable to, resolve. It may bring to light feelings of resentment and regret, which, once recognized and labelled, come to dominate the participant's thoughts. In other words, taking part in case study research has the potential to bring about significant changes in the participant, not all of which are necessarily positive. The researcher needs to take responsibility for the effects that the study is having on the

participant. However, the researcher is not always able to deal with such unintended consequences. In such cases, the participant needs to be made aware of other forms of support (e.g. counselling services, support groups, sources of information).

Furthermore, taking part in interactive case study research can engender changes in the participant that have implications for the validity of the study. In interactive case studies, the participant is actively involved in data analysis. In practice, this usually means that the researcher presents his or her emerging interpretations to the participant to obtain feedback. This is sometimes referred to as *respondent validation* (Silverman 1993: 156). Here, the participant comments upon, elaborates, challenges or validates the analysis. While such participant involvement undoubtedly has both methodological and ethical benefits, it can give rise to problems. The researcher, especially when (s)he is also a psychologist, is likely to be attributed expert status by the participant. As a result, the researcher's interpretations of the case material, especially when they are couched in psychological terminology, may be perceived by the participant as information to be understood and absorbed, rather than as interpretative suggestions to be evaluated and challenged. This means that the process of consultation during the interactive case study can miss its purpose by taking on a didactic quality. As a consequence, we do not know whether the participant's endorsement of the researcher's interpretation of the data constitutes genuine validation or simply a form of acquiescence.

Three epistemological questions

Before we close, let us think about the epistemological basis of case study research. What kind of knowledge do case studies produce? What sorts of assumptions do case study researchers need to make about the world when they approach a case? And how does such research position the researcher? Each of these questions allows us to throw some light upon the epistemological arguments that underpin case study research.

What kind of knowledge do case studies aim to produce?

Case studies are concerned with '[E]stablishing the how and why of a complex human situation' (Yin 1994: 16). They use a variety of methods of data collection and analysis in order to obtain rich and detailed information about a particular occurrence, its context and its consequences. Case study research requires the researcher to produce an accurate and comprehensive description of the characteristics of the case, within the study's terms of reference, in order to generate new insights into the phenomenon under investigation. This means that case studies are basically *realist* in orientation. They aim to improve our understanding of 'what is going on' in a particular situation. Where case studies are concerned with individuals' thoughts and feelings, they assume that it is possible to gain access to these through participants' accounts. Methods used to analyse such accounts (e.g. grounded theory, interpretative phenomenology) are based on the assumption that there is a relationship between what people say about their experiences and the nature of such experiences. Case studies take a close look at individual cases so as to understand better their internal dynamics. Cases are conceptualized as functioning systems (see Stake 1994: 236), which means that they are seen to have an existence that is

independent of the researcher's view or interpretation of it. However, Radley and Chamberlain (2001: 321) argue that 'cases are made, not found', and that researchers would do well to pay attention to both their own and their participants' contribution to the construction of a 'case' as a case.

What kinds of assumptions does case study research make about the world?

Case study research takes an *idiographic* approach. Case studies focus upon the particular. They start with careful and detailed descriptions of individual cases in all their particularity before they move on to a cautious engagement with theory development or generalization. This means that case study research is based upon the assumption that the world is a complex place where even general laws or common patterns of experience or behaviour are never expressed in predictable or uniform ways. Such a position resonates with a *critical realist* view of the world. Even general trends always manifest themselves in particular ways. Each case is unique even where it shares characteristics with other cases. In addition, case study research takes a *holistic* perspective. This means that a case can only be understood within its (physical, social, cultural, symbolic, psychological, etc.) context. The meanings of the various characteristics of the case depend on their relationship with others as well as the context(s) within which they manifest themselves. Thus, case study research perceives the world as an integrated system that does not allow us to study parts of it in isolation.

How does case study research conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

The task of the researcher in case study research is to provide an accurate and detailed account of the case. (S)he is expected to look closely and carefully at the evidence to produce a report that captures the characteristics of the case, within the terms of reference of the study. Even though case studies are generally expected to move beyond description and to provide insights that transcend the information that has been collected about a case, they do rely upon the collection of case material. Whether *descriptive* or *explanatory*, the case study relies upon accuracy in matters of detail and the provision of sufficient evidence in support of the researcher's interpretations. This means that the role of the researcher is that of a *witness* or a *reporter*. (S)he remains close to the scene in an attempt to observe events carefully and accurately as they unfold. And (s)he is expected to be an objective and neutral observer whose attempt to explain or interpret events should not interfere with his or her recording of observations. Even though case study research acknowledges the importance of theory in both the design and conduct of case studies, such studies are expected to tell us more about the case than about the researcher.

Conclusion

We have seen that the case study is an extremely versatile method of research. In fact, it may be suggested that the case study is not really a research method at all, but an approach to the study of singular entities that makes use of a wide range of methods of data collection and analysis. It is possible to characterize case study research by reference

to its idiographic perspective, its attention to context, its use of triangulation, its inclusion of a temporal element and its concern with theory. Despite such common ground, case studies can take many different forms, including *intrinsic* versus *instrumental, single* versus *multiple*, and *descriptive* versus *explanatory* designs. This diversity can make it difficult to conceive of case study research as a unified approach to qualitative research. It also means that case studies cannot necessarily be compared with one another in a meaningful way. However, it seems to me that there is something which characterizes case study research above all else and which allows us to recognize a case study whatever its design. This is its concern with uniqueness and particularity. As Stake (1995: 8) puts it:

The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does. There is emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself.

Interactive exercises

1. Think about a suitable case for an intrinsic case study; if you had time, funding and the logistical

support necessary, what would intrigue and interest you enough to embark upon an intrinsic case study? Remember that your unit of analysis (i.e. the 'case') can be a person (e.g. a person living with a rare disease), a community (e.g. a group of people living an alternative lifestyle) or an event (e.g. a political protest, a riot). Having selected a suitable case, think about ways in which you would approach the research. How would you collect and analyse data? What would be the role of theory in your design?

2. Think about a suitable case for an instrumental case study; if you had time, funding and the logistical support necessary, what might be a worthwhile research question driving your instrumental case study? Remember that your unit of analysis (i.e. the 'case') needs to constitute an exemplar of the phenomenon you are interested in. This means that you need to identify the phenomenon of interest before you can select the case. Having selected a suitable case, think about ways in which you would approach the research. How would you collect and analyse data? What would be the role of theory in your design? Would it make sense to conduct multiple-case studies in order to shed further light upon the phenomenon?

Further reading

Bromley, D.B. (1986) *The Case Study Method in Psychology and Related Disciplines*. Chichester: John Wiley.

Chamberlain, K., Camic, P. and Yardley, L. (2004) Qualitative analysis of experience: grounded theory and case studies, in D.F. Marks and L. Yardley (eds) *Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology*. London: Sage.

Hamel, J. (1993) *Case Study Methods*. London: Sage.

Radley, A. and Chamberlain, K. (2001) Health psychology and the study of the case: from method to analytic concern, *Social Science and Medicine*, 53: 321–32.

Smith, J.A., Harré, R. and Van Langenhove, L. (1995) Idiography and the case study, in J.A. Smith, R. Harré and L. Van Langenhove (eds) *Rethinking Psychology*. London: Sage.

Stake, R.E. (1994) Case studies, in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

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

Snapshot Box 9.1

Extrapolation or generalizability?

Silverman (2000: 300) defines 'generalizability' as that characteristic of research which permits 'generalizing from particular cases to populations'. Some researchers (e.g. Giddens 1984; Hammersley 1992) have suggested that it is possible to establish the representativeness of a single case on the basis of comparisons with a larger sample of similar cases. This argument is based upon an *inductive* logic whereby the frequency of occurrences, or *cases*, serves to strengthen our confidence in the typicality of the phenomenon. Here, generalizability is achieved through accumulation of similar cases. Others (e.g. Bromley 1986; Yin 1994) argue that such a view of generalizability is not appropriate within the context of case study research. These researchers propose that case studies can give rise to theoretical insights that may be generalizable; however, they cannot be used to generalize their findings to populations of similar cases. Yin (1994) differentiates between *analytic generalization* and *statistical generalization*. He suggests that 'the case study, like the experiment, does not represent "a sample", and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization)' (p. 10).

Yin argues that cases should not be conceived of as sampling units like subjects in an experiment or a survey. Rather, the case study can be likened to the experiment itself. This means that, while a case study can constitute a

test of a theory, it can never be representative of other cases in any statistical sense. As a result, case study research can generate generalizable theoretical propositions but it cannot tell us anything about the characteristics of populations. From this point of view, case study research follows a *hypothetico-deductive* logic whereby cases help us to test the limits of our existing understanding and allow us to develop or modify theories to explain occurrences. Stake (1994: 245) sums up the argument: '[Whereas] the single or a few cases are poor representation of a population of cases and poor grounds for advancing grand generalization . . . case studies are of value in refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability.'

Since the argument about the nature of generalizability in case study research has not been resolved, it is important to be aware of the problems associated with both *inductive* and *hypothetico-deductive* models of generalizability. While induction can never establish certainty in relation to the universality of a phenomenon, hypothetico-deductive work relies upon, and therefore remains limited by, the use of existing theoretical frameworks (see also Chapter 1). An alternative approach to generalization in qualitative research has been proposed by Alasuutari (1995: 156–7), who recommends that we replace the term 'generalization' with 'extrapolation' to refer to the ways in which 'the researcher demonstrates that the analysis relates to things beyond the material at hand'. In this way,

we can talk about the wider applicability of case study research without importing claims associated with statistical or experimental research into our arguments. The following authors provide helpful discussions of generalizability in qualitative research:

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

Bromley, D.B. (1986) *The Case Study Method in Psychology and Related Disciplines*. Chichester: John Wiley.

Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

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

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig***<***http://www.openup.co.uk/willig***> to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 10

Discursive psychology

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the 'turn to language' and the critique of cognitivism
- discourse analysis as a way of theorizing psychological phenomena
- the difference between discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis
- the aims and objectives of discursive psychology as a research methodology
- the methodological procedures associated with discursive psychology research, including techniques for gathering and analysing data and writing up the research
- limitations of discursive psychology

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate discursive psychology epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

Chapters 10 and 11 introduce *discursive psychology* and *Foucauldian discourse analysis*, respectively. These two approaches to the analysis of discourse share important features. Some researchers argue that they are complementary and that any analysis of discourse should involve insights from both (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1995; Wetherell 1998; see also Snapshot Box 10.1 at the end of this chapter). However, in recent years, the two versions of discourse analysis have become increasingly differentiated.

In this chapter, I provide a general introduction to the 'turn to language' in psychology, and the emergence of the two versions of discourse analysis, discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to discursive psychology. The next chapter introduces Foucauldian discourse analysis. A direct comparison between the two versions of discourse analysis is made at the close of Chapter 11.

The 'turn to language'

Psychologists' 'turn to language' was inspired by theories and research that had emerged within other disciplines over a period of time. From the 1950s onwards, philosophers, communications theorists, historians and sociologists became increasingly interested in language as a social performance. The assumption that language provided a set of unambiguous signs with which to label internal states and with which to describe external reality began to be challenged. Instead, language was re-conceptualized as productive; that is, language was seen to construct versions of social reality and it was seen to achieve social objectives. The focus of inquiry shifted from the individual and his or her intentions to language and its productive potential. Wittgenstein's philosophy, Austin's speech act theory and Foucault's historical studies of discursive practice are important examples of such early work. However, psychology had remained relatively untouched by these intellectual developments throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, it was concerned with the study of mental representations and with the rules that controlled cognitive mediation of various types of 'input' from the environment. In the 1970s, social psychologists began to challenge psychology's cognitivism (e.g. Gergen 1973, 1989), and in the 1980s the 'turn to language' gained a serious foothold in psychology. The publication of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* played an important part in this development. Their book presents a wide-ranging critique of cognitivism, followed by a detailed analysis of interview transcripts using a discourse analytic approach. Later publications developed the critique of psychology's preoccupation with cognition and its use as an all-purpose explanatory strategy, which involved 'claiming for the cognitive processes of individuals the central role in

shaping perception and action' (Edwards and Potter 1992: 13). The critique of cognitivism argues that it is based upon a number of unfounded assumptions about the relationship between language and representation. These include (1) that talk is a route to cognition, (2) that cognitions are based on perception, (3) that an objective perception of reality is theoretically possible, (4) that there are consensual objects of thought, and (5) that there are cognitive structures that are relatively enduring. Let us look at each of these assumptions in turn.

1. From a cognitive point of view, people's verbal expression of their beliefs and attitudes provides information about the cognitions that reside in their minds. For the research participant, language provides a way of expressing what is 'in their minds'; for the researcher, language provides a way of accessing participants' cognitions. In other words, *talk is a route to cognition*. As long as the researcher ensures that participants have no reason to lie, their words are taken to constitute true representations of their mental state (e.g. of the beliefs that they subscribe to or the attitudes that they hold). Discourse analysts do not share this view of language. They argue that when people state a belief or express an opinion, they are taking part in a conversation that has a purpose and in which all participants have a stake. In other words, to make sense of what people say, we need to take into account the social context within which they speak. For example, when male participants are interviewed by a female researcher with the aim of identifying men's attitudes towards

sharing housework, their responses may be best understood as a way of disclaiming undesirable social identities (as 'sexist slob', as dependent on their female partners, as lazy). This is not to say that they are lying to the researcher about the amount of housework that they do (even though, of course, they may do that as well); rather, it suggests that, in their responses, participants *orient towards* a particular reading of the questions that they are being asked (e.g. as a challenge, as a criticism, as an opportunity to complain), and that the accounts they provide need to be understood in relation to such a reading. Similarly, a response to a question may orient towards what was discussed in an earlier part of the interview. For instance, having been asked about domestic violence earlier on, a participant may take care to distance himself from any association with such practices in his responses to later questions. Indeed, a participant may orient towards events that took place outside of the immediate interview context, such as those reported in the media. This means that, from a discourse analytic point of view, people's speech is understood as social action, and it is analysed in terms of what it accomplishes within a social context. As a result, we should not be surprised to find that people's expressed attitudes are not necessarily consistent across social contexts.

2. Ultimately, cognitivism has to assume that *cognitions are based on perceptions*. Cognitions are mental representations of real objects, events and processes that occur in the world. Even though cognitions are abstractions and, therefore, often simplifications and

distortions of such external events, they do constitute attempts to capture reality. In turn, once established, cognitive schemata and representations facilitate perception and interpretation of novel experiences and observations. By contrast,

discourse analysts argue that the world can be 'read' in an unlimited number of ways and that, far from giving rise to mental representations, objects and events are, in fact, constructed through language itself. As a result, it is discourse and conversation that should be the focus of study, because that is where meanings are created and negotiated.

3. If cognitions are based on perceptions, as proposed by cognitivism, it follows that *an objective perception of reality is theoretically possible*. Errors and simplifications in representation are the result of the application of time-saving heuristics, which introduce biases into cognition. Given the right circumstances, it should be possible to eliminate such biases from cognitive processes. Again, discourse analysts take issue with this assumption. If language constructs, rather than represents, social reality, it follows that there can be no objective perception of this reality. Instead, emphasis is placed upon the ways in which social categories are constructed and with what consequences they are deployed in conversation.
4. Attitudes describe how people feel about objects and events in the social world, whereas attribution theory is concerned with how people account for actions and events. In both cases, researchers assume that the

social object or event towards which participants have different attitudes, and which participants attribute to different causes, is itself consensual. That is, even though people hold different attitudes and attributions in relation to something (e.g. European Monetary Union, same-sex marriages, the break-up of the Soviet Union), that 'something' itself is not disputed. In other words, there are *consensual objects of thought*, in relation to which people form opinions. People agree on *what it is* they are talking about, but they disagree about why it happened (attributions) and whether or not it is a good thing (attitudes). Discourse analysts do not accept that there are such consensual objects of thought. They argue that the social objects themselves are constructed through language and that one person's version of, say, 'the break-up of the Soviet Union' may be quite different from that of another person. From this point of view, what has traditionally been referred to as 'attitudes' and 'attributions' are, in fact, aspects of the discursive construction of the object itself. For example, if we conceptualize the break-up of the Soviet Union as a consequence of macroeconomic global developments, we would attribute the event to economic processes. If, by contrast, we conceptualize it as a victory for the USA in the Cold War, we would attribute it to the superior political strategies of the US administration. Thus, what differentiates people is not their attitudes and attributions *towards* a social object or event, but rather the *way in which they construct the object or event itself*, through language.

5. Finally, cognitivism is based upon the assumption that somewhere inside the human mind there are *cognitive structures that are relatively enduring*. People are said to hold views and have cognitive styles. They access cognitive schemata and they process information in predictable ways. Cognitive structures can change, but such change needs to be explained in terms of intervening variables, such as persuasive messages or novel experiences. The assumption is that, in the normal course of events, beliefs, attitudes, attributions and so on remain stable and predictable from day to day. Discourse analysts' conceptualization of language as productive and performative is not compatible with such a view. Instead, they argue that people's accounts, the views they express and the explanations they provide, depend on the discursive context within which they are produced. Thus, what people say tells us something about what they are *doing* with their words (e.g. disclaiming, excusing, justifying, persuading, pleading, etc.) rather than about the cognitive structures these words represent.

Discourse analysts' challenge to cognitivism shows that discourse analysis is not simply a research method. It is a critique of mainstream psychology, it provides an alternative way of conceptualizing language, and it indicates a method of data analysis that can tell us something about the discursive construction of social reality. Discourse analysis is more than a methodology because 'it involves a theoretical way of understanding the nature of discourse and the nature of psychological phenomena' (Billig 1997: 43).

Discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis

There are two major versions of discourse analysis (but note that Wetherell 2001 identifies as many as six different ways of *doing* discourse analysis). Even though they share a concern with the role of language in the construction of social reality, and are therefore critical of cognitivism, the two versions address different sorts of research question. They also identify with different intellectual traditions. *Discursive psychology* was inspired by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis and their interest in the negotiation of meaning in local interaction in everyday contexts. It is concerned with discourse practices; that is, it studies what people do with language and it emphasizes the performative qualities of discourse. *Foucauldian discourse analysis* was influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and post-structuralist writers who explored the role of language in the constitution of social and psychological life. It is concerned with the discursive resources that are available to people, and the ways in which discourse constructs subjectivity, selfhood and power relations. While discursive psychology is primarily concerned with *how* people *use* discursive resources in order to achieve interpersonal objectives in social interaction, Foucauldian discourse analysis focuses upon *what kind of* objects and subjects are constructed through discourses and *what kinds of* ways-of-being these objects and subjects make available to people.

The two versions of discourse analysis address different sorts of questions. Discursive psychology asks how participants use language in order to negotiate and manage social interactions so as to achieve interpersonal objectives (e.g. disclaim an

undesirable social identity, justify an action, attribute blame). Foucauldian discourse analysis seeks to describe and critique the discursive worlds people inhabit and to explore their implications for subjectivity and experience (e.g. what is it like to be positioned as 'asylum seeker' and what kind of actions and experiences are compatible with such a positioning?). Willig (2008) applies the two versions of discourse analysis to the same interview extract in order to highlight similarities and differences between them.

Burr (1995, 2003), Parker (1997) and Langdridge (2004: Chapter 18) provide detailed discussions of the distinction between the two versions of discourse analysis. However, Potter and Wetherell (1995: 81) argue that the distinction between the two versions 'should not be painted too sharply' and that a combined focus on discursive practices *and* resources is preferable. Wetherell (1998) also advocates a synthesis of the two versions. The debate about whether or not it is helpful to identify two distinct versions of discourse analysis is discussed in more detail in Snapshot Box 10.1.

Discursive psychology

This version of discourse analysis was introduced into British social psychology with the publication of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. The label 'discursive psychology' was provided later by Edwards and Potter (1992). As the method evolved, changes in emphasis also emerged. These are largely to do with an increasing emphasis on the flexibility of discursive resources and a preference for the use of naturalistic data sources. Recent developments in discursive psychology continue to be strongly influenced by

conversation analytic principles (see Wooffitt 2005). Wiggins and Potter (2008) provide a detailed account of the history and evolution of discursive psychology and its relationship with earlier formulations of discourse analytic perspectives. Discursive psychology is a *psychology* because it is concerned with psychological phenomena such as memory or identity. However, in line with the critique of cognitivism, discursive psychology conceptualizes these phenomena as *discursive actions* rather than as cognitive processes. This means that discursive psychologists are interested in references to concepts such as memory and identity within naturally occurring talk and text, and the functions and consequences of such references. Psychological activities such as justification, rationalization, categorization, attribution, naming and blaming are understood as ways in which participants manage their stake in social interactions. They are discursive practices that are used by participants within particular contexts to achieve social and interpersonal objectives. In the process, participants may mobilize references to 'memory' or 'identity' (e.g. disclaiming responsibility for missing a birthday by saying 'My memory was playing up again' or justifying an impulsive act by invoking one's 'passionate nature'). As a result, psychological concepts such as prejudice, identity, memory or trust become something people *do* rather than something people *have or are*.

The focus of analysis in discursive psychology is on *how* participants use discursive resources and with what effects. In other words, discursive psychologists pay attention to the *action orientation* of talk. They are concerned with the ways in which speakers manage issues of stake and interest. They identify discursive strategies such as 'disclaiming' or

'footing' and explore their function in a particular discursive context.

For example, an interviewee may disclaim a racist social identity by saying 'I am not racist but I think immigration controls should be strengthened' and legitimize the statement by referring to a higher authority: 'I agree with the Prime Minister's statement that the situation requires urgent action.' Other discursive devices used to manage interest and accountability include the use of metaphors and analogies, direct quotations, extreme case formulations, graphic descriptions, consensus formulations, stake inoculation and many more (for a detailed discussion of such devices, see Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1996).

Discursive psychology emerged from a critique of the cognitivism that dominated mainstream academic psychology at the time, and it offered a radically different way of understanding psychological concepts (such as 'memory' or 'identity'). Early discursive work in social psychology was critical of psychology as a discipline and challenged many of the assumptions (about language, about knowledge, about people) upon which the discipline was based. Within this context, it is interesting to note that in a recent review of discourse analytic work in social psychology, Parker (2011) argues that contemporary discursive psychology has become incorporated into the discipline of psychology as it now offers an alternative (i.e. discursive) way of explaining what motivates human behaviour. As such, it has ceased to challenge psychology as a discipline, instead offering its own brand of (discursive) psychology (see also Corcoran 2009; Billig 2012, for critical appraisals of contemporary discursive psychology).

Data collection

Ideally, discourse analysis should be used to analyse naturally occurring text and talk (Hepburn and Wiggins 2005; Potter and Hepburn 2005; see contributions to Hepburn and Wiggins 2007). This is because the research questions addressed by discursive psychology are concerned with how people manage accountability and stake in everyday life. Such questions are best explored by analysing conversations that are unsolicited and which take place within familiar settings (e.g. the home or the workplace). For example, recordings of naturally occurring telephone conversations, police–suspect interviews, medical consultations, social work case conferences, radio interviews with politicians and counselling sessions have all been used for discourse analysis. However, both ethical and practical difficulties in obtaining such naturally occurring data have led many discourse analysts to carry out semi-structured interviews to generate data for analysis (e.g. see Hepburn and Potter 2003 for a discussion of the ethical challenges involved in utilizing calls to a telephone helpline as data). The disadvantage of using semi-structured interviews is that participants invariably orient towards the interview situation and, as a result, our discursive analysis will reveal more about the ways in which the participant manages his or her stake in the interview *as an interviewee*, than about discursive strategies used in everyday life. In addition, any discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews must include an analysis of *both* interviewer's and interviewee's comments. This requires a high level of reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

An alternative way of generating data for discourse analysis is to set up a group discussion, preferably within pre-existing

groups (e.g. a group of friends, colleagues, family members) (see Puchta and Potter 2004). This simulates a naturally occurring conversation, and it is likely that participants will be more relaxed and spontaneous than they would be within the context of a one-to-one interview with a researcher (see also Billig 1997: 45). Sometimes researchers decide to interview friends or acquaintances in order to reduce the artificiality of the interview situation. However, it is important to be aware that interviewing friends can be a challenging experience and that it may lead to reappraisals of one another.

Before discourse analysis can take place, the researcher needs to prepare a *transcript* of the material to be analysed. Transcription is an extremely time-consuming process. It takes at least 10 hours to transcribe a one-hour long interview. Group interviews or interviews with poor sound quality take even longer. In addition, the amount of time spent transcribing depends on the transcription style adopted. The most labour-intensive transcription style is the one used in conversation analysis (see Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Have 1999; Jefferson 2004). Discourse analysts often adopt a reduced adaptation of this transcription style (sometimes referred to as 'Jefferson Lite', see Parker 2005) which retains the key features of the original transcription notation. Here, speech errors, pauses, interruptions, changes in volume and emphasis, as well as audible intake of breath are indicated in the transcript. A full transcription notation of the reduced adaptation can be found in the appendix to Potter and Wetherell (1987) (for an account of the basic principles of transcription, see O'Connell and Kowal 1995). It is important that the transcript contains at least some information about non-linguistic aspects of the conversation, such as delay,

hesitations or emphasis. This is because the way in which something is said can affect its meaning. For example, irony can often be detected only by paying attention to tone of voice. A discourse analysis that aims to trace the action orientation of talk will need to pay attention to *the way in which* things are said as well as to *what* is being said.

Given that discourse analysis is a very labour-intensive method, decisions about sample size are often strongly influenced by pragmatic considerations. That is, where research is carried out within narrow time limits, the number of interviews the researcher decides to conduct, transcribe and analyse is likely to be determined by the time available. As a result, researchers often analyse less data than they would have
liked to. However, discourse analysts do not need to work with vast amounts of text in order to produce meaningful analyses. Ultimately, the sample size required to produce valid research depends on the specific research question asked by the researcher (see also Potter and Wetherell 1987: 161–2). If the research question is concerned with the availability and use of particular discursive constructions among a group of people, a relatively large number of interviews with members of the group may be required. Similarly, if the researcher wants to know which discursive strategies people use to disclaim responsibility for an undesirable outcome, the sample size has to be large enough to allow for the identification of a range of strategies and their use within different discursive contexts. On the other hand, if our aim is to understand how a particular text (e.g. an influential political speech, a controversial advertising campaign, a celebrated scene from a movie) achieves its effect, our analysis will concentrate upon a single text.

How to do discourse analysis

I have already pointed out that discourse analysis is more than a methodology. Discourse analysis involves a conceptualization of language as *constructive* and as *functional*. Discourse analysis requires psychologists to look at language in a different way and to ask different questions about it. Instead of asking, 'What do participants' responses tell us about their attitudes, beliefs or thoughts?', we need to interrogate the internal organization of the discourse itself and ask, 'What is this discourse doing?' Discourse analysis can therefore be described as a particular *way of reading* – reading for action orientation (what is this text doing?) rather than simply reading for meaning (what is this text saying?). Since discourse analysis requires us to adopt an orientation to talk and text *as social action*, it cannot be learned from one day to the next and it cannot be followed like a recipe. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 175) propose that 'discourse analysis is heavily dependent on craft skills and tacit knowledge', while Billig (1997: 39) warns that discourse analysis is not a set of methodological procedures that can be learned in the absence of its wider, theoretical approach to psychology. All this means that discourse analysis needs to be understood, first of all, in terms of its 'broad theoretical framework concerning the nature of discourse and its role in social life' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 175). On the basis of such an understanding, researchers may then approach texts for analysis. To help novices get started, leading discourse analysts have produced procedural guidelines for the analysis of discourse; for example, Potter and Wetherell (1987: 160–76) identify 'ten stages in the analysis of discourse', and Billig (1997: 54) presents a 'procedural guide for discourse analysis'. Wiggins and Potter (2008) provide detailed and comprehensive

guidance regarding the practicalities of discursive psychology research. Antaki et al. (2003) identify criteria by which to evaluate discursive psychology research. However, authors tend to caution readers against following such guidelines too rigidly.

In the next section, I present some guidelines for the analysis of interview transcripts and for the production of the research report, as they pertain to discourse analysis within the discursive psychology tradition (guidelines for Foucauldian discourse analysis are presented in Chapter 11).

Procedural guidelines for the analysis of discourse

Reading

First, the researcher needs to take the time to *read* the transcripts carefully. Although the researcher will continue to read and re-read the transcripts throughout the process of coding and analysis, it is important that the transcripts are read, at least once, without any attempt at analysis. This is because such a reading allows us to experience *as a reader* some of the discursive effects of the text. For example, a text may come across as an apology even though the words 'I am sorry' are not actually spoken. We may feel that a text 'makes it sound like' there is a war going on even though the topic of the transcribed speech was a forthcoming election. Reading a text before analysing it allows us to become aware of *what a text is doing*. The purpose of analysis is to identify exactly *how* the text manages to accomplish this.

It is important to listen to the recordings before analysis, particularly if the transcription notation used is fairly basic.

Coding

Reading and re-reading of the transcripts are followed by the selection of material for analysis, or *coding*. Coding of the transcripts is done in the light of the research question. For example, if our research question
is concerned with the ways in which heterosexual adults talk about safer sex and the risk of HIV transmission, all references to condoms, condom use and sexual safety would need to be selected (see Willig 1997). All relevant sections of text are highlighted, copied and filed for analysis. At this stage, it is important to make sure that *all* material that is potentially relevant is included. This means that even instances that are indirectly or only vaguely related to the research question should be identified. Most importantly, use of certain key words is *not* required for selection of textual material. All *implicit constructions* (MacNaghten 1993) must be included at this stage. Thus, in my study of heterosexual adults' talk about safer sex, use of the terms 'condom' or 'safer sex' was not required for inclusion; and references to sexual safety in its widest sense (e.g. talk about 'precautions' and 'safe relationships') were also selected for analysis.

The need for coding before analysis illustrates that we can never produce a complete discourse analysis of a text. Our research question identifies a particular aspect of the discourse that we decide to explore in detail. Coding helps us to select relevant sections of the texts that constitute our data. There are always many aspects of the discourse that we will not analyse. This means that the same material can be analysed again, generating further insights (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992; Willig 1995, 1997, 1998).

Analysis

Discourse analysis proceeds on the basis of the researcher's interaction with the text. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 168) recommend that throughout the process of analysis the researcher asks, 'Why am I reading this passage in this way? What features [of the text] produce this reading?' Analysis of textual data is generated by paying close attention to the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse. To facilitate a systematic and sustained exploration of these dimensions, *context, variability* and *construction* of discursive accounts need to be attended to. The researcher looks at how the text constructs its objects and subjects, how such constructions vary across discursive contexts, and with what consequences they may be deployed. To identify diverse constructions of subjects and objects in the text, we need to pay attention to the terminology, stylistic and grammatical features, preferred metaphors and figures of speech that may be used in their construction. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 149) refer to such systems of terms as 'interpretative repertoires'. Different repertoires are used to construct different versions of events. For example, a newspaper article may refer to young offenders as 'young tear aways', while a defending lawyer may describe his or her clients as 'no-hope kids'. The former construction emphasizes the uncontrollability of young offenders and implies the need for stricter parenting and policing, whereas the latter draws attention to the unmet psychological and educational needs of young offenders and the importance of social and economic deprivation. Different repertoires can be used by one and the same speaker in different discursive contexts in the pursuit of different social objectives. Part of the analysis of discourse is to identify the action orientation of accounts. To be able to do

this, the researcher needs to pay careful attention to the discursive contexts within which such accounts are produced and to trace their consequences for the participants in a conversation. This can only be done satisfactorily on the basis of an analysis of *both* the interviewer's and the interviewee's contribution to the conversation. It is important to remember that discourse analysis requires us to examine language *in context*.

Interpretative repertoires are used to construct alternative, and often contradictory, versions of events. Discourse analysts have identified conflicting repertoires within participants' talk about one and the same topic. For example, Potter and Wetherell (1995) found that their participants used two different repertoires to talk about Maori culture and its role in the lives of Maoris in New Zealand – 'Culture-as-Heritage' and 'Culture-as-Therapy'. Billig (1997) identifies two alternative, and contrasting, accounts of the meaning of history in participants' discussions of the British royal family – 'History as National Decline' and 'History as National Progress'. The presence of tensions and contradictions among the interpretative repertoires used by speakers demonstrates that the discursive resources that people draw on are inherently dilemmatic (see Billig et al. 1988; Billig 1991). That is, they contain contrary themes that can be pitted against each other within rhetorical contexts. To understand why and how a speaker is using a particular theme, we need to look to the rhetorical context within which (s)he is deploying it. Again, the analytic focus is upon variability across contexts and the action orientation of talk.

Writing

The *introduction* to a discourse analytic report often consists of a discussion of the limitations of existing psychological research in relation to the subject matter (e.g. cognitivist approaches to the study of 'prejudice'
or behaviouristic conceptualizations of 'addiction'), followed by a rationale for the use of discourse analysis. However, as discourse analysis gains in popularity, researchers will have to review existing discourse analytic studies in their introductions. It is important to be aware of other discourse analytic studies of the same, or related, phenomena to ensure that one's own study is designed to extend or build upon existing research. For example, having identified the use of the phrase 'I dunno' as a way of limiting the extent to which a claim can be undermined by one's partner in conversation ('stake inoculation') in a television interview with Princess Diana, Potter (1997) goes on to show that 'I don't know' is used in the same way by a participant in a counselling session.

Similarly, having explored some of the ways in which 'trust' and 'sexual safety' were discursively constructed and deployed in conversation by heterosexual adults (Willig 1995, 1997, 1998), it would be interesting to see whether gay men or lesbians use similar discursive constructions when talking about sex, risks and relationships. Thus, while early discourse analytic studies stood alone and, by necessity, defined themselves *against* mainstream psychological research, it is now possible, and indeed necessary, for discourse analysts to discuss their work *in relation to* existing discourse analytic research (see also Potter and Wetherell 1994).

The *method* section of a discourse analytic report should provide some information about the nature of discourse

analysis. This should include coverage of both theoretical as well as methodological aspects. In other words, the method used to analyse the data needs to be introduced within the context of its theoretical claims about the nature of discourse and its role in the construction of social (and psychological) realities. In addition, the method section should contain information about the ways in which the data (i.e. the texts) have been obtained or produced by the researcher, including transcription notation where appropriate. If the source of data was a semi-structured interview, there should be some discussion of the interviewing style used by the researcher. Questions to be addressed here include: Did the researcher use an interview agenda and, if so, what were the questions? Did the interviewer use an argumentative or a purely facilitative style? What kind of event did the interview constitute (e.g. a research interview, a conversation between friends that happened to be tape-recorded, a challenge to the interviewee's views)? Demographic information about participants should only be provided *where relevant*. For example, if the study is concerned with the ways in which men talk about women and work, it may well be helpful to know whether participants are themselves employed or unemployed, and whether or not they have female partners. However, provision of 'standard' demographic information (e.g. age, gender, social class, ethnicity, education) is *not* appropriate. This is because, from a discourse analytic point of view, provision of such 'information' is, in fact, a way of constructing identities. Providing such 'information' out of context and without rationale suggests that particular social categories capture the essence of people placed within them. Discourse analysis is about exploring the ways in which social reality is constructed within particular contexts through

language; an imposition of social categories at the outset is not helpful.

The presentation of the *analysis* constitutes the most extensive section of a discourse analytic report. The structure of this section should reflect both the research question and the emphasis of the analysis. For example, where a study is primarily concerned with the identification of *interpretative repertoires*, the report may be structured by subheadings that introduce the various repertoires (e.g. 'Culture-as-Heritage' and 'Culture-as-Therapy', or 'History as National Decline' and 'History as National Progress'). A discussion of their contextual deployment and effects would then be presented under the appropriate subheading. Alternatively, an exploration of *discursive strategies* used in, say, the negotiation of memory or identity, could be structured around the strategies themselves (e.g. disclaiming, footing) or around their effects (e.g. to enable the speaker to criticize without taking personal responsibility for the criticism and its consequences). Most discourse analytic studies will, of course, combine a discussion of interpretative repertoires and discursive strategies (and their effects). However, the structure of the analysis section will reflect the researcher's primary concern. It is a good idea also to identify this in the title of the report. For example, a title referring to 'discourses of *x*' or 'constructions of *y*' suggests that the study is primarily concerned with the nature of available repertoires, whereas a title that talks about 'negotiating *x*' or 'doing *y*' is likely to introduce a study of discursive strategies and their consequences.

Whatever the primary concern of the study, the analysis section will contain extracts from transcripts or whatever texts

constitute the data. Extracts are cited verbatim in the report and they must be clearly identified (e.g. through quotation marks, a different font, or indentation). Selection of extracts for inclusion will, again, depend on the study's focus and the research question. A detailed discussion of the researcher's analysis of the extracts must be provided. It is important to remember that extracts never speak for themselves.

For the purposes of presenting discourse analytic research, it makes sense to merge *analysis* and *discussion* sections. This is because, as in most qualitative research, findings cannot be presented first and then discussed. Instead, a meaningful presentation of the analysis of data can only really take place within the context of a discussion of the insights generated by the analysis. However, it is possible to address wider issues arising out of the research, such as any broader theoretical and conceptual developments, the practical implications of the analysis or any future research indicated by the present study, in a separate *conclusion* section.

All research reports should include a *list of references*, including all authors referred to in the report. There may also be *appendices* containing additional information (e.g. transcription notation or a transcript). These should be clearly labelled and identified at relevant points in the report itself.

Finally, a word about process. Writing up discourse analytic research is not necessarily a process that is entirely separate from the analysis of the texts. Both Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Billig (1997) draw attention to the fact that writing a report is itself a way of clarifying analysis. The attempt to produce a clear and coherent account of one's research in writing allows the researcher to identify inconsistencies and

tensions, which in turn may lead to new insights. Alternatively, the researcher may have to return to the data in order to address difficulties and problems raised in the process of writing. It is, therefore, a good idea to allow plenty of time for writing up a discourse analytic study.

An example of discourse analysis

In order to illustrate the way in which discourse analysts approach a text, let us look at some of the interview extracts discussed by Potter and Wetherell (1987: 46–55). All extracts are taken from transcripts of a series of open-ended interviews with white, middle-class New Zealanders. All are concerned with participants' views of 'Polynesian immigrants'. While the analytic comments presented below are tentative and do not constitute a full discourse analysis of the interview transcripts, they do demonstrate the ways in which discourse analysts pay attention to the action orientation of talk.

Extract 1

I'm not anti them at all you know, I, if they're willing to get on and be like us; but if they're just going to come here, just to be able to use our social welfares and stuff like that, then why don't they stay home?

This extract opens with a *disclaimer* (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). A disclaimer is a verbal device that anticipates, and rejects, potentially negative attributions. In this case, 'I'm not anti them at all, you know' disclaims possible attributions of racism in the light of the comments that are about to follow: 'then why don't they stay home?' To justify the criticisms

made of 'Polynesian immigrants' in this extract, the respondent uses an *extreme case formulation* (Pomerantz 1986), whereby claims or evaluations are taken to their extremes to provide an effective warrant. Here, the repeated use of the word 'just' fulfils this function: 'but if they're *just* going to come here, *just* to be able to use our social welfares'. The use of the disclaimer and the extreme case formulation allow the respondent to blame Polynesian immigrants for the hostility they encounter among white New Zealanders and to disclaim any negative attributions or charges of racism at the same time. This demonstrates that discourse has an *action orientation*; in this case, blaming and disclaiming are the tasks that have been accomplished discursively.

Extract 2

What I would li . . . rather see is that, sure, bring them into New Zealand, right, try and train them in a skill, and encourage them to go back again.

Extract 3

I think that if we encouraged more Polynesians and Maoris to be skilled people they would want to stay here, they're not um as uh nomadic as New Zealanders are [Interviewer. Haha.] so I think that would be better.

Both of these extracts are taken from the same interview transcript. The obvious contradiction in the respondent's comments makes it difficult to establish a clear attitude towards immigration; we cannot say whether the respondent is *for* or *against* Polynesians taking up permanent residence in New Zealand. However, from a discourse analytic

perspective, such variability is to be expected. This is because speakers
orient towards the context within which they speak. Since discourse is organized to accomplish social functions, we need to look at the surrounding text in order to be able to identify the functions to which the discourse is put.

Extract 2 (extended version)

Interviewer: *[Do] you think that, say, immigration from the Pacific Islands should be encouraged [ ] to a much larger extent than it is? It's fairly restricted at the moment.*

Respondent: *Yes. Um, I think there's some problems in, in encouraging that too much, is that they come in uneducated about our ways, and I think it's important they understand what they're coming to. I, what I would li . . . rather see is that, sure, bring them into New Zealand, right, try and train them in a skill, and encourage them to go back again because their dependence on us will be lesser. I mean [ ] while the people back there are dependent on the people being here earning money to send it back, I mean that's a very very negative way of looking at something. [ ] people really should be trying, they should be trying to help their own nation first.*

Extract 3 (extended version)

Polynesians, they are doing jobs now that white people wouldn't do. So in many sectors of the community or, or life, um, we would be very much at a loss without them, I think. Um, what I would like to see is more effort being made to train them into skills, skilled jobs, because we are without skilled people and a lot of our skilled people, white people,

have left the country to go to other places. I think that if we encouraged more Polynesians and Maoris to be skilled people they would want to stay here, they're not um as, uh, nomadic as New Zealanders are [Interviewer. Haha.] so I think that would be better.

The respondent's changing position in relation to the question of whether or not Polynesian workers should return to the Pacific Islands makes more sense now. In Extract 2 (extended version), the respondent is concerned with Polynesian society's dependence on wages earned in New Zealand, whereas in Extract 3 (extended version), the respondent discusses the problems of New Zealand's labour market. In relation to the first concern, 'dependence', the presence of Polynesian workers in New Zealand is a bad thing, whereas in relation to the second concern, 'New Zealand's labour market', it is a good thing. Discourse analysis is able to account for variability and contradictions in respondents' accounts because it focuses upon the organization of discourse and its functions. Speakers have access to a variety of contrary themes and arguments that they deploy within different discursive contexts. As Billig (1997: 44) puts it, '[E]ach person has a variety of "voices".' Instead of mining the discourse for the respondent's underlying 'true' attitude or 'real' view, discursive psychologists view respondents' comments as discursive acts that can only be understood in context.

Extract 4

Then again, it's a problem of their racial integration. They've got a big racial minority coming in now and so they've got to get used to the way of life and, er, perhaps rape is accepted

over in Samoa and Polynesia, but not in Auckland. They've got to learn that. And the problem's that a lot of people coming in with mental disease I think it is, because there is a lot of interbreeding in those islan . . . islands. And that brings a big, high increase of retards and then people who come over here, retards perhaps and they

Interviewer: *and that causes problems?*

Respondent: *And that's pretty general I know.*

This extract demonstrates how discourse *constructs* the objects of which it speaks. The speaker's version of 'Polynesian immigrants' – as rapists, as retards, as products of inbreeding – contains a negative evaluation. The speaker does not simply provide a negative evaluation of a consensual object of thought; instead, the object itself is constructed in a way that *commands* a negative evaluation. In this way, description (i.e. what 'Polynesian immigrants' are like), explanation (i.e. why they are this way) and evaluation (i.e. how the speaker feels about them) are interdependent aspects of discourse.

Potter and Wetherell's (1987) brief analysis of the four interview extracts demonstrates how *context, variability* and discursive *construction* are fundamental concerns in discourse analytic work. The *context* within which an account is produced provides the analyst with information about the organization and the function of the account – that is, its *action orientation. Variability* in accounts draws attention to the
requirements of the discursive context within which speakers are located and the ways in which they *orient towards* such

requirements. Different discursive *constructions* of one and the same object contain different explanations and evaluations. This means that objects (people, events, processes, topics) are not *talked about* but *constituted through* discourse and, therefore, quite literally 'talked into being'. Thus, discourse analysts ask 'How is participants' language constructed, and what are the consequences of different types of construction?' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 55). Analytic attention to *context, variability* and *construction* allows the discourse analyst to trace the action orientation of talk and text.

Limitations of discursive psychology

It is possible to identify a number of limitations associated with discursive psychology. Some of these have led researchers to turn to the Foucauldian version of discourse analysis introduced in the next chapter. However, it is important to differentiate between limitations that are the result of problems inherent in the methodology, and those that are the inevitable consequence of the chosen focus of the approach. I explore both types of limitations below. Let us begin with limitations in focus.

Limitations in focus

Discursive psychology is interested in discourse and in discourse only, and has been criticized for what Langdridge (2004: 345) refers to as 'the lack of a person' (see also Burr 2002; Butt and Langdridge 2003). Potter and Wetherell (1987: 178) state that '[O]ur focus is exclusively on discourse itself: how it is constructed, its functions, and the consequences which arise from different discursive

organisation. In this sense, discourse analysis is a radically non-cognitive form of social psychology.' Thus, discursive psychologists suggest that if we are interested in phenomena such as memory, social identity or the emotions, we should study the ways in which people negotiate their meanings in conversation with one another. The focus of the analysis is on language and its role in the construction of these phenomena. What is of interest to discursive psychologists is the discursive construction and negotiation of psychological concepts and processes, rather than their hypothesized referents (e.g. mental states or cognitions). This means that discursive psychology does not address questions about *subjectivity* – that is, our sense of self, including intentionality, self-awareness and autobiographical memories. This version of discourse analysis is concerned with public discourse, and it does not provide any guidance as to how we may study internalized, or private, manifestations of discourse such as thought or self-awareness. As such, it has been argued that discursive psychology adopts a rather narrow behaviouristic focus, being concerned only with observable (in this case, linguistic) behaviour (see Parker 2011). However, when Potter and Wetherell (1987: 180) point out that for discourse analysis 'the relationship between language and mental states is a non-issue', they do not suggest that 'mental states' or 'cognitive processes' are *necessarily* redundant concepts; in fact, they caution against 'the danger of getting involved in fruitless debates about the reality or non-reality of mental entities, which can easily end in the kind of linguistic imperialism which denies all significance to cognitive processes'.

Inherent limitations

Discursive psychology emphasizes the importance of accountability and stake in conversation (see Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter 1997). It is argued that participants orient to issues of stake and interest throughout their interactions. According to this version of discourse analysis, interpretative repertoires, discursive constructions and discursive devices are deployed strategically by participants in conversation in the pursuit of interpersonal and social objectives. Here, discourse is very much a *tool* that is used by speakers to actively manage their interactions and to pursue their objectives. The assumption is that participants in social interaction have a stake in this interaction and that they are capable of managing their stake through the use of discursive resources. However, despite its heavy emphasis upon the action orientation of talk and text, discursive psychology is unable to account for *why* particular individuals, or groups of individuals, pursue particular discursive objectives. For instance, why is it that speakers work so hard to disclaim certain attributions? Why do some work harder than others? Why is it that sometimes people appear to be using discursive strategies that do *not* work in their favour? Why do some people find it difficult to say things (such as 'Sorry' or 'I love you') even though it would be strategically useful to do so? In other words, discursive psychology assumes that all conversation is driven by stake and interest; however,

it is unable to account for what motivates people to adopt, or fail to adopt, a particular stake or to pursue, or fail to pursue, a particular interest (see also Madill and Doherty 1994). Put another way, discursive psychology brackets, and yet relies upon, a notion of motivation or desire, which it is incapable of theorizing. In recent years, qualitative psychologists have attempted to fill this gap by combining discursive analysis of accounts with an attempt to also provide answers to questions

about the speaker's emotional investments in what they are saying. This is often referred to as a 'psychosocial approach'. It tends to involve a 'binocular' reading of the data whereby a discursive analysis is followed by a more psychodynamic interrogation of the data in an attempt to pinpoint the deeper psychological structures or mechanisms which have led research participants to commit themselves to the particular discourses and subject positions identified in the discursive analysis (e.g. Frosh et al. 2003; Gough 2004; Frosh and Saville Young 2008; see also Willig 2012a for more on the 'psychosocial' approach). However, it is important to acknowledge that many discourse analysts are not comfortable with the use of psychodynamic concepts and have strong reservations regarding these methodological developments (e.g. Wetherell 2005).

Finally, discursive psychology can be criticized for limiting its analysis of discourse to the texts that constitute its data. The assumption is that meaning is produced through/in the text and that there is, therefore, no need to look 'outside of the text' for further information. Here, what matters is the way in which speakers read one another's comments within a particular context (e.g. the radio interview or the therapy session), rather than who they are or what their words may mean in a wider social context. The problem with this view is that certain discursive and non-discursive practices, rituals, forms of dress and address, and so on, reflect and enact social and material structures. It may be necessary to be aware of such wider social meanings and functions to interpret the use of discourse in a particular context satisfactorily. For example, in order to 'read' a suspect's silence within the context of a police–suspect interview, it would help us to know whether or not the police officer was holding a gun. In

recent years, discursive psychology has started to work with video recordings allowing researchers to include visual data such as gestures, gaze and physical orientation (e.g. MacMartin and LeBaron 2006). However, on the whole, discursive psychology, while placing a strong emphasis upon *language in context* (e.g. by insisting on the inclusion of the interviewer's comments in the analysis), tends to discard the wider social and material context in which a conversation takes place, unless speakers explicitly comment on it or orient towards it in their talk.

Three epistemological questions

To conclude this chapter on discursive psychology, let us take a look at what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, the assumptions it makes about the world it studies, and the way in which it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the process of knowledge production. I address these three questions in turn.

What kind of knowledge does discursive psychology aim to produce?

Discursive psychology is concerned with *how* particular versions of reality are manufactured, negotiated and deployed in conversation. This means that discursive psychology does not seek to understand the 'true nature' of psychological phenomena such as memory, social identity or prejudice. Instead, it studies how such phenomena are constituted in talk as social action. Therefore, the kind of knowledge that discursive psychology produces is not knowledge of the nature of phenomena (such as cognitions, mental states, personality traits or whatever); rather, it is an understanding

of the processes by which they are enacted in and through discourse and with what effects. In other words, discursive psychology does not seek to produce a knowledge *of things* but an understanding of the *processes by which they are 'talked into being'*. Discursive psychology is social constructionist in orientation. The knowledge it produces is about how particular constructions are brought into being through the use of interpretative repertoires and discursive devices. It does not make claims about the nature of the world, the existence of underlying causal laws or mechanisms, or entities that give rise to psychological phenomena.

What kinds of assumptions does discursive psychology make about the world?

Discursive psychologists are interested in the ways in which language is constructive and functional. This means that they emphasize the variability and fluidity of discourse as it serves people in their performance of social actions. As a result, discursive psychologists see the world as a shifting and negotiable place that
cannot be understood, or 'read', except through language. And since language is constructive and functional, no one reading can be said to be 'right' or 'true' in any final sense. This means that, from a discursive psychologist's perspective, it would be wrong to make any *a priori* assumptions about 'the nature of the world', except to note that the various possible versions of what the world may be like are themselves discursive constructions that are best understood in terms of their action orientation as they are deployed in specific conversational contexts. Discursive psychology, therefore, subscribes to a relativist position.

How does discursive psychology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Given that discursive psychology emphasizes the constructive and functional nature of language, the role of the researcher is, of necessity, that of an *author* of the research. Since discursive research is an analysis of language use, which is itself, in turn, written up and thus gives rise to another text, it is impossible to see the researcher as a witness or a discoverer. Instead, discursive psychologists acknowledge their active role in the construction of their research findings. They present their research as a reading of the data that is not the only possible reading. Billig (1997: 48) draws attention to the fact that a discursive analysis of a text is never completed and that '[T]he final draft is only final in the sense that the analyst feels that for reasons of deadlines, exhaustion or boredom, no further improvements are likely to be made and that the current draft contains analyses which might be of interest to the reader.' Thus, discourse analysis can provide insights constructed by the analyst; however, it can never 'tell the truth about' a phenomenon because, according to a discursive perspective, such a thing as 'the truth' is itself not *recovered from* but rather *constructed through* language.

Conclusion

In this chapter, a general introduction to the 'turn to language' and discourse analytic thinking was followed by a detailed discussion of one of two major versions of discourse analysis in psychology: *discursive psychology*.

In the next chapter, we take a look at another approach to discourse analytic research. *Foucauldian discourse analysis* shares discursive psychology's critique of cognitivism and its emphasis upon the role of language in the social construction of reality. However, there are also key differences between the two approaches. These will be discussed in more detail in the following pages.

Interactive exercises

1. Construct a dialogue between yourself and a friend in which you turn down an invitation to dinner. You can either do this on your own, by thinking about how you might formulate your response to the friend's invitation and how she or he may react to your response, or you can role-play this situation with a friend or colleague and tape-record your conversation. Look at the transcript and reflect on how the refusal takes shape. How did you package your refusal and why? What did you not do? What might have happened if you had responded differently?
2. Record and transcribe five minutes of conversation between two characters in a soap opera. Carefully examine the transcript and think about the characters' stake in the conversation that they are having. What may be their

interactional objectives and how do they use language in order to achieve them?

Further reading

Edwards, D. (2004) Discursive psychology, in K. Fitch and R. Sanders (eds) *Handbook of Language and Interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hepburn, A. and Potter, J. (2003) Discourse analytic practice, in C. Seale, D. Silverman, J. Gubrium and G. Gobo (eds) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage.

Potter, J. (1997) Discourse analysis as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk, in D. Silverman (ed.) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Sage.

Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1994) Analysing discourse, in A. Bryman and R.G. Burgess (eds) *Analysing Qualitative Data*. London: Routledge.

Wetherell M., Taylor S. and Yates S.J. (eds) (2001) *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*. London: Sage.

Wiggins, S. and Potter, J. (2008) Discursive psychology, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

Snapshot Box 10.1

One method or two?

It has become increasingly common to differentiate between two traditions of discourse analysis in psychology. Even though most researchers emphasize the overlap and cross-fertilization between the two 'versions', they nevertheless identify two separate strands. Some discourse analysts prefer to think of these as differences in emphasis or focus (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1995; Billig 1997), while others refer to them as different theoretical frameworks or approaches (e.g. Parker 1997; Potter 1997). For example, Potter and Wetherell (1995) differentiate between a concern with *discourse practices* – that is, with what people do with their talk and writing – and a concern with the *discursive resources*, which people draw on when they talk or write. However, according to Potter and Wetherell (1995: 80), these two concerns constitute a 'twin focus' for discourse analysis rather than representing two separate versions of discourse analysis. By contrast, both Parker (1997) and Potter (1997) suggest that there are distinct versions, or variants, of discourse analysis that have grown out of different theoretical and disciplinary traditions (post-structuralism, philosophy and

literary theory versus ethnomethodology, sociology and conversation analysis).

Wetherell (1998) takes issue with such a conceptual separation between the two perspectives. She argues that a 'division of labour' with regard to a focus on discursive practices, as inspired by conversation analysis, and a focus on discursive resources, following post-structuralist theory, is counterproductive. Wetherell's (1998) paper constitutes an attempt 'to intervene in the construction within social psychology of contrasting camps of discourse analysts, and to suggest [further] reasons for preferring a more eclectic approach' (p. 405). Wetherell argues that only a synthesis of the two 'versions' – that is, an adoption of a 'twin focus' – allows the discourse analyst to produce a reading that pays attention to *both* the situated and shifting nature of discursive constructions as well as the wider social and institutional frameworks (of meaning, of practices, of social relations) within which they are produced. That is, we need to take into account *both* the availability of interpretative repertoires within a particular social and cultural formation *and* the participants' local concerns and their realization through discourse within a specific context, if we want to understand what is happening in a particular piece of social interaction. While a focus on *discursive practice* helps us to understand *how* speakers construct and negotiate meaning, a focus on *discursive resources* helps us to answer questions about *why* speakers draw on certain repertoires and not others. Wetherell (1998)

presents an analysis of a segment of a group discussion in order to demonstrate how discourse analysis can integrate the two perspectives in a way that gives rise to insights that either version on its own would not have been able to generate. It could be argued that the most ambitious discourse analytic studies pay attention to *both* the situated and shifting deployment of discursive constructions, *and* the wider social and institutional frameworks within which they are produced and which shape their production (e.g. Edley and Wetherell 2001). To decide to what extent you agree with Wetherell's call for a more synthetic (that is, integrated) approach to discourse analysis, you may wish to follow up the debate in the following publications:

Parker, I. (1997) Discursive psychology, in D. Fox and I. Prilleltensky (eds) *Critical Psychology: An Introduction*. London: Sage.

Potter, J. (1997) Discourse analysis as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk, in D. Silverman (ed.) *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Sage.

Schegloff, E.A. (1997) Whose text? Whose context?, *Discourse and Society*, 8(2): 165–88.

Wetherell, M. (1998) Positioning and interpretative repertoires: conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue, *Discourse and Society*, 9(3): 387–413.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 11

Foucauldian discourse analysis

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the conceptual origins of Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA)
- FDA's scope and its concern with subjectivity, practice and power
- the aims and objectives of FDA as a research methodology
- the methodological procedures associated with FDA, including techniques for gathering and analysing data in six stages
- FDA's limitations

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate FDA epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

☑ identify the key differences between discursive psychology and FDA

The Foucauldian version of discourse analysis was introduced into Anglo-American psychology in the late 1970s. A group of psychologists who had been influenced by post-structuralist ideas, most notably the work of Michel Foucault, began to explore the relationship between language and subjectivity and its implications for psychological research. Some of their work was published in the pages of the journal *Ideology and Consciousness*. The publication of *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity* in 1984 provided readers with a clear illustration of how post-structuralist theory could be applied to psychology. In the book, the authors – Julian Henriques, Wendy Hollway, Cathy Urwin, Couze
Venn and Valerie Walkerdine – critically and reflexively examine psychological theories (e.g. of child development, of gender differences, of individual differences) and their role in constructing the objects and subjects that they claim to explain. *Changing the Subject* became a highly influential publication, which inspired many discourse analytic research projects, including doctoral theses, throughout the 1980s and

1990s. A second edition of *Changing the Subject* was published in 1998.

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) is concerned with language and its role in the constitution of social and psychological life. From a Foucauldian point of view, discourses facilitate and limit, enable and constrain what can be said, by whom, where and when (see Parker 1992). Foucauldian discourse analysts focus on the availability of discursive resources within a culture – something like a discursive economy – and the implications of this for those who live within it. Here, discourses may be defined as 'sets of statements that construct objects and an array of subject positions' (Parker 1994: 245). These constructions in turn make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world. Discourses offer *subject positions*, which, when taken up, have implications for subjectivity and experience. For example, from within a biomedical discourse, those who experience ill-health occupy the subject position of 'the patient', which locates them as the passive recipient of expert care within a trajectory of cure. The concept of *positioning* has received increasing attention in recent years (see Harré and Van Langenhove 1999). FDA is also concerned with the role of discourse in wider social processes of legitimation and power. Since discourses make available ways-of-seeing and ways-of-being, they are strongly implicated in the exercise of power. Dominant discourses privilege those versions of social reality that legitimate existing power relations and social structures. Some discourses are so entrenched that it is very difficult to see how we may challenge them. They have become 'common sense'. At the same time, it is in the nature of language that alternative constructions are always possible and that

counter-discourses can, and do, emerge eventually. Foucauldian discourse analysts also take a historical perspective and explore the ways in which discourses have changed over time, and how this may have shaped historical subjectivities (see also Rose 1999). This is what Foucault (1990) did in his three volumes on *The History of Sexuality*. Finally, the Foucauldian version of discourse analysis also pays attention to the relationship between discourses and institutions. Here, discourses are not conceptualized simply as ways of speaking or writing. Rather, they are bound up with institutional practices – that is, with ways of organizing, regulating and administering social life. Thus, while discourses legitimate and reinforce existing social and institutional structures, these structures in turn also support and validate the discourses. For instance, being positioned as 'the patient' within a biomedical discourse means that one's body becomes an object of legitimate interest to doctors and nurses, that it may be exposed, touched and invaded in the process of treatment that forms part of the practice of medicine and its institutions (the hospital, the surgery) (see also Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network 1999: 17).

The Foucauldian version of discourse analysis is concerned with language and language use; however, its interest in language takes it beyond the immediate contexts within which language may be used by speaking subjects. Thus, unlike discursive psychology, which is primarily concerned with interpersonal communication, FDA asks questions about the relationship between discourse and how people think or feel (subjectivity), what they may do (practices) and the material conditions within which such experiences may take place.

In the remainder of this chapter, I identify suitable texts for FDA, formulate procedural guidelines for analysing discourse in this way and work through an example of such analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of FDA. Its responses to the three epistemological questions are also identified. The chapter closes with a direct comparison between discursive psychology and FDA.

Selecting texts for analysis

FDA can be carried out 'wherever there is meaning' (Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network 1999: 1). This means that we do not necessarily have to analyse words. While most analysts will work with transcripts of speech or written documents, FDA can be carried out on any symbolic system. Parker (1992: 7) recommends that we 'consider all tissues of meaning as texts'. This means that '[S]peech, writing, non-verbal behaviour, Braille, Morse code, semaphore, runes, advertisements, fashion systems, stained glass, architecture, tarot cards and bus tickets' all constitute suitable texts for analysis (p. 7). In *Critical Textwork*, Ian Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network (1999) present discursive analyses of a wide variety of 'texts' including cities and gardens. FDA, therefore, allows us to engage with an extremely wide range of materials.

To select texts for analysis that will generate answers to our research question(s), we need to be clear about what kinds of text are available to us. We need to ask questions about the object status of the text: is it an account, or a narrative, or a part of a conversation (see also Harré 1997)? Or is it part of a campaign, a set of rules or a ritual? How was it produced and who has access to it? Is it language-based or does it use other

types of symbolic system? The selection of suitable texts for analysis is informed by the research question. For example, if we wanted to know how the discipline of health psychology has constructed its subject(s), we would need to analyse health psychology textbooks, research papers and perhaps also conversations between health psychologists (see Ogden 1995). If we want to find out how contemporary discourses of pain and pain management position sufferers of chronic pain, and with what consequences, we may analyse literature that discusses biopsychosocial theories of pain, information and guidance given to chronic pain patients (e.g. leaflets, booklets, videotapes), and perhaps also doctor–patient consultations at a pain clinic (see Kugelmann 1997). If, however, we want to find out how ordinary people construct meaning in relation to a particular topic (e.g. the menopause, divorce, national identity), we can work with transcripts of semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions alone. Where researchers are interested in exploring the relationship between public or expert discourses and the ways in which lay people take up (and possibly transform) such discourses, they need to analyse a variety of texts, including documents, published papers and official publications (to identify expert discourses), as well as interview transcripts, group discussions or diaries (to generate lay accounts for analysis) (see Willig 2000 for more on the relationship between expert and lay discourses).

Procedural guidelines for the analysis of discourse

In Chapter one of *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*, Parker (1992) identifies 20 steps in the analysis of discourse dynamics. These 20 steps take the researcher from the selection of a text for analysis

(Steps 1 and 2) through the systematic identification of the subjects and objects constructed in them (Steps 3–12) to an examination of the ways in which the discourses that structure the text reproduce power relations (Steps 13–20). Parker provides us with a detailed and wide-ranging guide, which helps us to distinguish discourses, their relations with one another, their historical location and their political and social effects (see Langdridge 2004: 339 for an abridged version of Parker's steps). Other guides to Foucauldian discourse analysis (e.g. Kendall and Wickham 1999: 42–6) rely on fewer steps but presuppose a more advanced conceptual understanding of Foucault's method. In this section, I set out six stages in the analysis of discourse. These stages allow the researcher to map some of the discursive resources used in a text and the subject positions they contain, and to explore their implications for subjectivity and practice (see Box 11.1 at the end of this chapter for a checklist of key questions to ask of a text in order to facilitate analysis). This is followed by an illustration of how the six stages may be worked through in relation to a short interview extract. Please bear in mind, however, that these six stages do not constitute a full analysis in the Foucauldian sense. In particular, Foucault's concern with the historicity and evolution of discursive formations over time (their genealogy) is not addressed here. For more guidance on how to address key Foucauldian concerns such as genealogy, governmentality and subjectification, see Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008).

Stage 1: Discursive constructions

The first stage of analysis is concerned with the ways in which discursive objects are constructed. Which discursive object we focus on depends on our research question. For

example, if we are interested in how people talk about 'love' and with what consequences, our discursive object would be 'love'. The first stage of analysis involves the identification of the different ways in which the discursive object is constructed in the text. This requires that we highlight all instances of reference to the discursive object. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is important that we do not simply look for keywords. Both implicit and explicit references need to be included. Our search for constructions of the discursive object is guided by shared meaning rather than lexical comparability. The fact that a text does *not* contain a direct reference to the discursive object can tell us a lot about the way in which the object is constructed. For example, someone may talk about a relative's terminal illness without directly naming it. Here, references to 'it', 'this awful thing' or 'the condition' construct the discursive object (i.e. terminal illness) as something unspeakable and perhaps also unknowable.

Stage 2: Discourses

Having identified all sections of text that contribute to the construction of the discursive object, we focus on the differences between constructions. What appears to be one and the same discursive object can be constructed in very different ways. The second stage of analysis aims to locate the various discursive constructions of the object within wider discourses. For example, within the context of an interview about her experience of her husband's prostate cancer, a woman may draw on a biomedical discourse when she talks about the process of diagnosis and treatment, a psychological discourse when she explains why she thinks her husband developed the illness in the first place, and a romantic

discourse when she describes how she and her husband find the strength to fight the illness together. Thus, the husband's illness is constructed as a biochemical disease process, as the somatic manifestation of psychological traits, and as the enemy in a battle between good (the loving couple) and evil (separation through death) within the same text.

Stage 3: Action orientation

The third stage of analysis involves a closer examination of the discursive contexts within which the different constructions of the object are being deployed. What is gained from constructing the object in this particular way at this particular point within the text? What is its function and how does it relate to other constructions produced in the surrounding text? These questions are concerned with what has been referred to as the *action orientation* of talk and text in the previous chapter. To return to our example of a wife talking about her husband's cancer, it may be that her use of biomedical discourse allows her to attribute responsibility for diagnosis and treatment to medical professionals and to emphasize that her husband is being taken good care of. Her use of romantic discourse may have been produced in response to a question about her own role in her husband's recovery after surgery and may have served to emphasize that she is, in fact, contributing significantly to his recovery. Finally, psychological discourse may have been used to account for her husband's cancer in order to disclaim responsibility for sharing in a carcinogenic lifestyle (e.g. 'I told him to slow down and take better care of himself but he wouldn't listen'). A focus on action orientation allows us to gain a clearer understanding of what the various constructions

of the discursive object are capable of achieving within the text.

Stage 4: Positionings

Having identified the various constructions of the discursive object within the text, and having located them within wider discourses, we now take a closer look at the *subject positions* that they offer. A *subject position* within a discourse identifies 'a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire' (Davies and Harré 1999: 35). In other words, discourses construct *subjects* as well as objects and, as a result, make available positions within networks of meaning that speakers can take up (as well as place others within). For example, Hollway's (1989) 'discourse of male sexual drive' contains the subject position of the instinct-driven male sexual predator, and positions both men and women as highly socialized moral actors. Subject positions are different from roles in that they offer discursive locations from which to speak and act rather than prescribing a particular part to be acted out. In addition, roles can be played without subjective identification, whereas taking up a subject position has direct implications for subjectivity (see Stage 6 below).

Stage 5: Practice

This stage is concerned with the relationship between discourse and practice. It requires a systematic exploration of the ways in which discursive constructions and the subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action. By constructing particular versions of the world, and by positioning subjects within them in

particular ways, discourses limit what can be said and done. Furthermore, non-verbal practices can, and do, form part of discourses.

For example, the practice of unprotected sex has been found to be bound up with a marital discourse that constructs marriage and its equivalent, the 'long-term relationship', as incompatible with the use of condoms (Willig 1995). Thus, certain practices become legitimate forms of behaviour from within particular discourses. Such practices in turn reproduce the discourses that legitimate them. In this way, speaking and doing support one another in the construction of subjects and objects. Stage 5 of the analysis of discourse maps the possibilities for action contained within the discursive constructions identified in the text.

Stage 6: Subjectivity

The final stage in the analysis explores the relationship between discourse and subjectivity. Discourses make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world. They construct social as well as psychological realities. Discursive positioning plays an important role in this process. As Davies and Harré (1999: 35) put it:

Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned.

This stage in the analysis traces the consequences of taking up various subject positions for the participants' subjective experience. Having asked questions about what can be said and done from within different discourses (Stage 5), we are now concerned with what can be felt, thought and experienced from within various subject positions. For example, it may be that positioning himself within a discourse of male sexual drive allows a man not only to publicly disclaim responsibility for an act of sexual aggression, but to actually *feel* less guilty about it as well.

An illustration of the application of the six stages to an interview extract

The following extract is taken from a transcript of a semi-structured interview with a woman who had recently experienced the break-up of an intimate relationship. The extract represents an exchange between the interviewer (I) and the respondent (R) that occurred about halfway through the hour-long interview (see Willig 2008 for a discursive psychology analysis of the same extract).

1 I: And when you made the decision um when you were actually working towards

2 finishing it did you talk to friends about it?

3 R: Oh of course

4 I: Yeah

5 R: All the time yeah it would always be a case of how do I do it

6 I: Ah right

7 R: How do I say it what do I say I know I've got to do it how do I go about doing

8 it you know and and just sort of role playing it through and and you know just

9 sort of just preparing myself to actually say to him I don't want to go out with

10 you any more because it's so hard even though you know it's got to be done

11 It is just so hard because there's all these you know ties and emotional baggage

12 which is which you're carrying and you you you're worrying about the other

13 person and you're thinking you invested you know he's invested maybe two

14 years in me

15 I: Yes

16 R: by going out with me and suddenly I'm dumping him what if he doesn't find

17 anyone else to go out with

18 I: Oh right yes

19 R: You you start taking responsibility for them and for how they'll cope

20 afterwards you know maybe to the detriment to your own personal sort of well

21 being

22 I: Right

23 R: And it was a case of how is he going to cope what's going to happen to him

24 what if no one goes out with him what if this and what if that and it's all a case

25 of ifs anyway and you know as far as I was concerned I was I was more

26 concerned about him and how he would be [. . .] (and a little later in the interview)

27 I: [. . .] if you sort of think about it as going on through time um was there

28 anything that changed in the way you behaved towards each other or sex life or

29 anything like that? Could you say you know something changed or

30 R: No it was the way I saw it was would I want to marry him was the sort of um

31 you know foundation I would use

32 I: Right

33 R: because I thought OK we've been going out for two nearly two years if we were

34 going out for another two years would I want to marry him and the answer

35 was no

36 I: Right

37 R: And even though [. . .] I had no intentions of getting married say for another you

38 know four five whatever amount of years it was on that basis I was using the

39 criteria of my wanting to continue going out with him

40 I: Right

41 R: because it was a case of where is this relationship going and as far as I was

42 concerned it had hit the the brick wall and it wasn't going any further

(originally published in Willig 2001)

Stage 1: Discursive constructions

Let us focus on 'the relationship' as our discursive object. Since the study from which the interview extract is taken was concerned with how people describe and account for the break-up of an intimate relationship (see Willig and dew Valour 1999, 2000), it makes sense to ask questions about the ways in which 'the relationship' is constructed through language. In the extract above, 'the relationship' is referred to as something that can be 'finished' (line 2), as something that involves 'going out with' someone (line 9), as something that involves 'ties and emotional baggage' (line 11), as something that requires 'investment' (line 13), as something that provides security (lines 16–19 and lines 23–6), as something that can be stable or change (lines 27–9), as something that requires a foundation or *raison d'être* (lines 30–1 and lines 38–9), as something associated with marriage (lines 30–9) and as something that requires a future (lines 41–2). These nine references construct 'the relationship' as a clearly identifiable social arrangement with a beginning and an end, which offers security in return for investment of time and emotion (lines 2–26). In the second half of the extract, 'the relationship' is also constructed as a step on the way to marriage (lines 30–42).

Stage 2: Discourses

In the interview extract, the relationship is constructed in at least two different ways. On the one hand, the relationship is constructed as a social arrangement between two people who agree to invest resources (e.g. time and emotion) to gain mutual support and security. Such an arrangement is hard to extricate oneself from ('It's hard [. . .] it's just so hard', lines 10–11) because 'ties and emotional baggage' have grown over time. On the other hand, the relationship is constructed as a testing ground for, and a step on the way to, a superior form of involvement, namely marriage. Here, the relationship has to be 'going somewhere' for it to be worthwhile ('[. . .] it had hit the brick wall and it wasn't going any further', lines 41–2), and its quality is judged in the light of its future direction ('And even though [. . .] I had no intentions of getting married for another you know four five whatever amount of years it was on that basis I was using the criteria of my wanting to continue going out with him', lines 37–9).

Let us attempt to locate these two constructions of the relationship (as 'social arrangement' and as 'a step on the way') within wider discourses surrounding intimate relationships. The construction of interpersonal relationships as mutually beneficial social arrangements resonates with *economic discourse*. Notions of investment of resources in return for long-term security and the expectation that social actors exchange goods and services with one another are prominent in contemporary talk about the economy. For example, the term 'partner', now widely used to refer to one's significant other, also describes those we share business interests with. By constructing the relationship through discursive resources derived from economic discourse, we map a picture of intimate relationships that contains assumptions, expectations, legitimate practices and subject

positions that give rise to a particular version of intimate relationships. This version is mobilized in the construction of the relationship as a 'social arrangement'. By contrast, the construction of the relationship as 'a step on the way' to marriage draws on a *romantic discourse*. Here, the relationship is not conceptualized as a mutually beneficial arrangement but rather as a way of moving towards the ultimate goal: marriage. Marriage itself is not defined or explored within the text. It is interesting that there appears to be no need to account for *why* the respondent uses suitability for marriage as a 'foundation' (line 31), a 'basis' (line 38) and 'the criteria' (line 39) in her account. She even points out that she has no intention of actually getting married in the near future. However, marriage as a goal forms part
of a romantic discourse in which 'love', 'marriage' and 'monogamy' are inextricably linked with one another. By invoking one, we invoke them all. That is, from within a romantic discourse, references to marriage imply the presence of love and monogamy, while references to love imply monogamy as a practice and marriage as a goal. As a result, suitability for marriage becomes a legitimate basis for making decisions about intimate relationships even where there is no suggestion that marriage is a realistic option in the near or medium future.

Stage 3: Action orientation

A closer examination of the discursive context within which the two different constructions of the relationship are deployed allows us to find out more about them. What are their implications for the speaker's interactional concerns? To what extent do they fulfil functions such as assign responsibility or promote one version of events over another?

How do they position the speaker within the moral order invoked by the construction (see also Stage 4: Positionings)?

The portion of text that constructs the relationship as a 'social arrangement' is produced in response to a question about the involvement of friends in the decision-making process (I: 'And when you made the decision um when you were actually working towards finishing it did you talk to friends about it?'; lines 20–2). This question in turn is preceded by an account of how the respondent's friends had 'taken a dislike' to her ex-partner and how they had 'talked about him with disdain'. As a result, the respondent pointed out, 'everyone was glad when I'd finished it with him'. The respondent's use of a discursive construction of the relationship as a 'social arrangement' could be seen, within this context, as a way of emphasizing her sense of responsibility for her ex-partner's well-being. Talk about her friends' dislike of her ex-partner and their joy at seeing the relationship break up may have created the impression that he, disliked and rejected, was the victim of a callous act of abandonment on the respondent's part. To counteract such an impression, a construction of the relationship as a 'social arrangement' draws attention to its mutually supportive nature and to the respondent's awareness of the emotional significance of the break-up ('It's hard [. . .] it's just so hard', lines 10–11).

The portion of text that constructs the relationship as a 'step on the way' is produced following the respondent's account of how her ex-partner 'didn't think there was a problem that couldn't be worked out', including the respondent's unhappiness with the relationship. The use of romantic discourse at this point allows the respondent to ward off the charge that she did not give her ex-partner a chance to 'work

out' the problems and to save the relationship. From within a romantic discourse, no amount of work can transform 'liking' into 'love', or an 'OK-relationship' into 'the real thing'. The acid-test of romantic love ('would I want to marry him?', line 30) renders redundant attempts to work out problems, because if marriage is not a goal that can be envisaged, the relationship is not worth saving ('and as far as I was concerned it had hit the brick wall and it wasn't going any further', lines 41–2). From within a romantic discourse, the respondent cannot be blamed for not trying hard enough to make the relationship work.

Stage 4: Positionings

What are the subject positions offered by the two discursive constructions of 'the relationship'? A construction of relationships as 'social arrangement' positions partners as highly dependent on one another. Involvement in such a relationship undermines the individual's freedom and mobility; partners are tied to one another through investments, history and emotions ('there's all these you know ties and emotional baggage which … you're carrying', line 11). As a result, whoever decides to withdraw from the arrangement is going to cause the other person considerable disruption, inconvenience and probably also a great deal of distress. The subject positions offered by this construction are, therefore, those of responsible social actors who depend on one another for support and who are faced with the difficult task of realizing their interests within relationships of interdependence.

The romantic construction of intimate relationships as 'a step on the way' offers provisional subject positions to lovers.

While involved in unmarried relationships, lovers are not fully committed to the relationship. Their involvement contains an opt-out clause that allows them to withdraw from the relationship without penalty. Everything that occurs between lovers within such an arrangement is permanently 'under review' and there is no guarantee that the relationship has a future. Therefore, the subject positions offered by this construction are those of free agents who reserve the right to withdraw from the relationship at any time and without moral sanction.

Stage 5: Practice

What are the possibilities for action mapped by the two discursive constructions of relationships? What can be said and done by the subjects positioned within them? Constructions of relationships as 'social arrangements' and their subject positions of responsible social actors require those positioned within them to act responsibly and with consideration for the consequences of their actions. Being part of a mutually beneficial social arrangement means that whatever we do has effects on the other party within the arrangement, and that we need to take responsibility for these effects. The respondent's account of how she rehearsed breaking-up (lines 5–10) and how hard it was for her to 'actually say to him I don't want to go out with you any more' (lines 9–10) demonstrates her positioning as a responsible social actor. Taking responsibility for one's partner's well-being (line 19) and breaking up in a way that demonstrates concern for their future are practices that support a construction of relationships as 'social arrangements'. By contrast, being positioned within a relationship as 'a step on the way' does not require the same

preoccupation with the other's well-being. Note that the section of text that constructs the relationship as 'a step on the way' (lines 30–42) does not contain any references to the respondent's ex-partner. Instead, it talks about the nature of the relationship and the criteria by which to assess its value. The subject position of a free agent who reserves the right to withdraw from the relationship at any time and without moral sanction involves a focus upon the self and its interests. The free agent is required to make (the right) choices and (good) decisions; (s)he is free to choose but receives no help in making decisions. This means that the subject position of the free agent is associated with careful deliberation and a consideration of the effects of potential decisions and choices upon the self alone. This is demonstrated in lines 30–42 (note the consistent use of the first person singular and the references to 'foundation', 'basis' and 'criteria' for decision-making in this section).

Stage 6: Subjectivity

This stage in the analysis is, of necessity, the most speculative. This is because here we are attempting to make links between the discursive constructions used by participants and their implications for subjective experience. Since there is no necessary direct relationship between language and various mental states (see the critique of cognitivism in Chapter 10), we can do no more than to delineate what *can* be felt, thought and experienced from within various subject positions; whether or not, or to what extent, individual speakers actually *do* feel, think or experience in these ways on particular occasions is a different question (and one we probably cannot answer by using discourse analysis alone; see *Limitations of FDA* below).

So, what kinds of subjective experience may be made available by constructions of relationships as 'social arrangements' and their subject positions of responsible social actors? And what kinds of psychological reality may be constructed by a romantic discourse that positions subjects as free agents in search of the ideal relationship? It could be argued that feelings of guilt and regret are available to those positioning themselves within a construction of relationships as 'social arrangements' ('You start taking responsibility for them and for how they'll cope afterwards you know maybe to the detriment to your own personal sort of well-being', lines 19–21), while taking up a position as a free agent within a construction of relationships as 'a step on the way' may involve a sense of time-urgency in relation to decision-making ('because I thought OK we've been going out for two nearly two years if we were going out for another two years would I want to marry him and the answer was no', lines 33–5).

The six stages in the analysis of discourse outlined and illustrated here help us to approach a text and to explore the ways in which it constructs its objects and subjects. In addition, working through the six stages allows us to trace some of these constructions' implications for practice and subjectivity. They can also provide a structure for the presentation of discourse analytic research within the framework of a research paper or report (see Chapter 10 for general guidelines for writing up discourse analytic work). However, it is important to point out that the six stages do not constitute a full analysis in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault was concerned with the relationships between discourse, history and governmentality (see Rose 1999). His methodology involved much more than the analysis of

isolated texts and included 'archaeology' and 'genealogy' (for an accessible introduction to these terms, see Kendall and Wickham 1999: 24–31). Critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995; Wodak 1996) stays closer to Foucault's methods by paying attention to the relationship between a particular discursive event and the institutions and social structures that frame it. Parker's (1992) 20 steps in the analysis of discourse dynamics also
include those that focus on the historical origins of discourses and their relationships with institutions, power and ideology (steps 13–20).

The six stages identified in this chapter are designed to provide a 'way in' to FDA; a fuller understanding of the social, historical and material dimensions of discourse can only be gained by engaging with the other aspects of Foucault's methods (see e.g. Kendall and Wickham 1999).

Limitations of FDA

The Foucauldian version of discourse analysis conceives of 'text' in its widest sense as containing networks of meaning (discourses) that construct social and psychological realities. It is more ambitious than discursive psychology in that it claims to have something to say about the relationship between symbolic systems (including language), human subjectivity and social relations, rather than being concerned only with language use in interpersonal communication. However, addressing issues such as subjectivity, ideology and power raises a number of difficult theoretical questions for Foucauldian discourse analysts. These include questions about the extent to which we can theorize subjectivity on the basis of discourse alone, and the relationship between

discourse and material reality. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Can subjectivity be theorized on the basis of discourse alone?

The Foucauldian version of discourse analysis attributes to discourse the power to construct subjects. Here, discourse is implicated in the process by which 'human beings are made subjects' (Foucault 1982: 208) and, as a result, gain access to particular ways-of-seeing the world and ways-of-being in the world. The availability and uptake of subject positions in discourse give rise to (social, cultural and grammatical) selves, including that of the unitary rational subject (see Henriques et al. 1984; Harré and Gillett 1994). Discourse analysts agree that discourse is implicated in the construction of selves and subjectivity; however, it is less clear whether discourse is *all* that is required for the thinking, feeling human subject to emerge.

There are some who argue that the mere availability of subject positions in discourse cannot account for the emotional investments individuals make in particular discursive positions and their attachment to those positions. For example, Urwin (1984) emphasizes the role of fantasy, identification and separation in the production of subjectivity. Hollway (1989) uses psychoanalytic concepts such as projection to account for the motivational basis upon which particular positions in discourse are taken up. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) develop this approach and propose the notion of the 'defended subject' whose positionings in discourse are the product of attempts to ward off anxiety (see *British Journal of Social Psychology*, volume 44, for a debate about the use of psychoanalytic concepts in order to unpick

discursive positionings). Frosh and colleagues (e.g. Frosh et al. 2003; Frosh and Saville Young 2008) advocate a 'psychosocial approach' that applies psychoanalytic interpretative strategies in order to 'thicken' the discursive reading. Here, biographical information (e.g. about the participant's early life experiences, sibling relationships, etc.) as well as the researcher's observations regarding the participant's way of relating to the researcher (e.g. an interviewee's questions about how they compare to other interviewees; an interviewee's ability to make the interviewer think of them as special, etc.) can be used as data to provide insights into participants' emotional investments in particular discourses and subject positions. Other discourse analysts (e.g. Davies and Harré 1999) do not feel the need to invoke such theoretical constructs and attempt to account for emotional meanings attached to particular positions in terms of individual life histories and experiences (e.g. of having been located in these positions or of having related to someone in that position). This in turn raises a question about the stability of subject positions and the effects of contradictory positionings on the sense of self. For example, Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) propose that it is only the singularity of our selfhood, expressed through the use of devices such as the first-person pronoun 'I', which remains stable. However, the same singularity (or self) can take up a wide range of subject positions in discourse and thus present a wide range of public personas. These in turn can be internalized and give rise to psychological states, including thoughts and feelings (see Harré and Gillett 1994). But how stable are such internalized states? To what extent can a particular subject position be taken up habitually and to what extent is positioning something that is entirely context-dependent? How can we explain individual

differences in preferred subject positions and why do people sometimes position themselves in ways that limit their opportunities for action? These questions need to be addressed more fully by those
who use the Foucauldian version of discourse analysis, particularly where they do not wish to invoke theoretical constructs from outside of a discursive framework, such as psychoanalysis (for a more detailed discussion of these questions, see also Willig 2000, 2012a).

What is the relationship between discourse and material reality?

Discourse analysts agree that discursive constructions have 'real' effects. That is, the way in which we talk about things has implications for the ways in which we experience the world, both physically and psychologically. As Parker (1992: 8) put it, '[D]iscourse constructs "representations" of the world which have a reality almost as coercive as gravity, and, like gravity, we know of objects through their effects.' Religious discourse, for example, illustrates this process very well. However, there is less clarity about the way in which social and material reality in turn may impact upon discourse. If discourse does, indeed, *construct reality*, then to what extent can 'reality' be said to constrain discourse? To put it another way, are there limits to what discourse can do, and if so, what are they? And can we conceive of 'reality' as something separate from, or outside of, discourse? These questions have been addressed by discourse analysts and they have generated strong disagreements between 'relativists' and 'realists' (see Snapshot Box 11.1 at the end of this chapter).

While most would agree that 'reality' is of necessity mediated by discourse, and that we do not have direct access even to material reality, there are different views about the extent to which discourse is constrained by social and material structures. Some discourse analysts hold that discourses are produced within a particular set of material conditions and that they can only construct versions of reality that are compatible with these conditions. Others refuse to assign primacy to either discourse or material reality, and emphasize the interdependency between discourses, institutions and social practices. These disagreements have implications for our conceptualization of *power*. If we take the first position, power is maintained and enacted through discourse (among other things such as police forces, armies and weapons), but it is not where power originates. If, however, we take the second position, power is actually produced by discourse; it is an aspect of discursive relations rather than a resource controlled by a particular group of people. Whatever position we take, the relationship between discourse and material reality is a complex one, and it requires further elaboration within discourse analytic work in psychology (for a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Parker 1998; see also Sims-Schouten et al. 2007 for an argument in favour of critical realist discourse analysis followed by a counter-argument by Speer 2007).

Three epistemological questions

Before we make a direct comparison between discursive psychology and FDA, let us take a look at the epistemological orientation of the latter. The three questions below will help us to focus on the kind of knowledge produced by FDA, the

assumptions it makes about the world and the role of the researcher in the research process.

What kind of knowledge does FDA aim to produce?

FDA aims to map the discursive worlds people inhabit and to trace possible ways-of-being afforded by them. Some discourse analysts also ask questions about the historical origin of discourses and their relationship with institutions and social structures. Like discursive psychologists, Foucauldian discourse analysts do not seek to understand the 'true nature' of psychological phenomena, but rather the ways in which particular *versions* of such phenomena are constructed through language (and other symbolic practices). However, unlike discursive psychology, this approach to discourse analysis is also concerned with the social, psychological and physical effects of discourse. FDA aims to produce knowledge about the discursive economy within which we find ourselves, how it got to be this way (historically) and what this means for us as human subjects (for our sense of self, for our subjectivity, for our experiences). FDA is *social constructionist* in orientation; however, the more realist versions of this approach also aspire to an understanding of the underlying mechanisms that give rise to conditions that make possible the formation of particular discourses (see Snapshot Box 11.1). This means that some Foucauldian discourse analysts subscribe to a *critical realist* epistemology (e.g. Parker 1992; Willig 1999a; Sims-Schouten et al. 2007).

What kinds of assumptions does FDA make about the world?

According to this approach, there is no one 'world' that can be described and studied; rather, there are numerous *versions* of the world, each of which is constructed through discourses and practices. Some of these are more widely used, more strongly supported by institutions and, therefore, constitute more legitimate ways-of-seeing. However, no version of the world remains dominant for ever because the social construction of reality through discourse is characterized by change and transformation. Thus, FDA makes very few assumptions about the nature of the world. It takes as its starting point the proposition that multiple readings are always possible and that objects and subjects are not represented by, but rather constructed through, language. Its aim is to identify and map these readings and their consequences. FDA is based on the assumption that discourse plays a fundamental role in the construction of meaning and that human subjectivity is (largely or wholly) structured through language.

How does FDA conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

From a Foucauldian perspective, *all* forms of knowledge are constructed through discourse and discursive practices. This includes scientific knowledge. As a result, the reports and papers produced by a researcher are themselves discursive constructions that cannot be evaluated outside of a discursive framework. As with discursive psychology, here the researcher *authors*, rather than discovers, knowledge. A reflexive awareness of the problematic status of one's own knowledge claims, and of the discourses used to construct them, is, therefore, an important component of discourse analytic research.

Key differences between discursive psychology and FDA

Both versions of the discourse analytic method share a concern with the role of language in the construction of social reality. However, as I hope has become clear in this and the previous chapter, there are also important differences between the two approaches. To conclude the two chapters dedicated to the discourse analytic method, I want to make a direct comparison between the two versions of discourse analysis. Key differences between them are presented under three headings: *Research questions*, *Agency* and *Experience*.

Research questions

Discursive psychology and FDA are designed to answer different sorts of research question. Discursive psychology projects typically ask, 'How do participants use language to manage stake in social interactions?', while FDA is used to find out 'What characterizes the discursive worlds people inhabit and what are their implications for possible ways-of-being?'

Agency

Discursive psychology and FDA emphasize different aspects of human agency. Discursive psychology conceptualizes the speaker as an active agent who uses discursive strategies to manage stake in social interactions. By contrast, FDA draws attention to the power of discourse to construct its objects, including the human subject itself. The availability of subject positions constrain what can be said, done and felt by individuals.

Experience

Discursive psychology questions the value of the category 'experience' itself. Instead, it conceptualizes it (along with others such as 'subjectivity' and 'identity') as a discursive move whereby speakers may refer to their 'experiences' to validate their claims (e.g. 'I know this is hard because I've been there!'). Here, 'experience' is just another discursive construction, to be deployed as and when required. Anything more than this is seen to constitute a return to cognitivism and this would, therefore, not be compatible with discursive psychology. By contrast, FDA does attempt to theorize 'experience' (and 'subjectivity'). According to this approach, discursive constructions and practices are implicated in the ways in which we experience ourselves (e.g. as 'sick' or 'healthy', as 'normal' or 'abnormal', as 'disabled' or 'able-bodied', and so on). As a result, an exploration of the availability of subject positions in discourse has implications for possibilities of selfhood and subjective experience.

Conclusion

Discourse analysis is a relatively recent arrival in psychology. However, despite its short history, it has already generated a large body of literature. As researchers use discourse analytic approaches within different contexts, they encounter new challenges that lead them to develop new ways of applying a discursive perspective. For example, early work in discourse analysis tended to concern itself with social psychological topics

such as prejudice. More recently, health psychologists have started to use the method, which has led to the formulation of a material-discursive approach (Yardley 1997), while others have attempted to find ways in which discourse analysis could inform social and psychological interventions (Willig 1999b). Wetherell (2001) identifies as many as six different ways of doing discourse analysis. This demonstrates that discourse analysis is not a method of data analysis in any simple sense. Rather, it provides us with a way of thinking about the role of discourse in the construction of social and psychological realities and this in turn can help us approach research questions in an innovative and original way. The two versions of discourse analysis introduced in this book constitute ways of approaching texts rather than recipes for producing 'correct analyses'. The choice of approach should be determined by the research question(s) we wish to address; in some cases this means that a combination of the two approaches is called for.

Interactive exercises

1. Obtain a transcript of the lyrics of your favourite song. Using the transcript as your data, work through the six stages of FDA as outlined in this chapter. Having identified the discursive constructions, discourses and subject positions contained within the song, reflect on their

implications for subjectivity and practice. What are the possibilities for action mapped out by the lyrics? What can be said and done, felt, thought and experienced by the subjects positioned within them? Moving on to a psychosocial analysis, you may want to ask yourself why it is that you like the song so much. What is it about you and your personal history that makes you respond to the discourses invoked by the lyrics in the way that you do? On a more political level of analysis, you may want to think about the extent to which the lyrics are empowering or disempowering – do they offer subject positions from within which to challenge oppressive or limiting social practices or do they reinforce them? Having deconstructed the lyrics, is it still your favourite song?

2. Write a short piece about yourself (around 300 words) in response to the question 'Who am I?'. Using the text you have generated as your data, work through the six stages of FDA as outlined in this chapter. Identify the discursive constructions, discourses and subject positions that structure your account and reflect on their implications for subjectivity and practice. Reflect also on what you have not included and why. Again, you may want to take the analysis further and think about your emotional investments into your preferred discourses and positionings, and to reflect on their political implications.

Further reading

Burr, V. (2003) *Social Constructionism*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Carabine, J. (2000) Unmarried motherhood 1830–1990: a genealogical analysis, in M. Wetherell, S. Taylor and S.J. Yates (eds) *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*. London: Open University Press.

Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.

Kendall, G. and Wickham, G. (1999) *Using Foucault's Method*. London: Sage.

Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Parker, I. and the Bolton Discourse Network (1999) *Critical Textwork: An Introduction to Varieties of Discourse and Analysis*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Willig, C. (1998) Constructions of sexual activity and their implications for sexual practice, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 3(3): 383–92.

Box 11.1 Key questions driving Foucauldian discourse analysis (adapted from Vingoe 2008)

Key questions	*Corresponding analytic stage*
How is the discursive object constructed through language?	Stage 1: Discursive constructions
What type of object is being constructed?	
What discourses are drawn upon?	Stage 2: Discourses
What is their relationship to one another?	
What do the constructions achieve?	Stage 3: Action orientation
What is gained from deploying them here?	
What are their functions?	

What is the author doing here?	
What subject positions are made available by these constructions?	Stage 4: Positionings
What possibilities for action are mapped out by these constructions?	Stage 5: Practice
What can be said and done from within these subject positions?	
What can potentially be felt, thought and experienced from the available subject positions?	Stage 6: Subjectivity

Snapshot Box 11.1

What, if anything, exists outside of discourse?

Discourse analysts argue that discourse constructs reality. It is not surprising that such a radical claim has given rise to challenges from those who feel that there is more to social and psychological life than language and its various uses. Discourse analysts have responded to such challenges in different ways. In fact, there is an ongoing debate among psychologists who use discourse analytic methods about the extent to which there is such a thing as the 'extra-discursive'. Even though there are many positions and arguments that characterize this debate, its most well-known protagonists are probably Jonathan Potter and Ian Parker.

Potter identifies with a *relativist* position, whereas Parker has argued for a *critical realist* stance. Parker (1992, 1998) has expressed concern that some versions of discourse analytic research may appear to suggest that discursive constructions are entirely independent of the material world. Such a view is idealistic in the sense that it attributes primacy to ideas (expressed in language) rather than to matter (as manifested in structures that exist independently of what we may think of, or say about, them). Parker advocates a critical realist position that acknowledges that our knowledge of the world is necessarily mediated by, and therefore also constructed

through, language (i.e. epistemological relativism) while maintaining that there are underlying structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena, versions of which we then construct through language (i.e. ontological realism). This means that discursive constructions of reality are not free-floating but that they are grounded in social and material structures, such as institutions and their practices. Therefore, Parker (1992: 28) argues, 'discourse analysis needs to attend to the conditions which make the meanings of texts possible'.

By contrast, in 'Death and furniture: the rhetoric, politics and theology of bottom line arguments against relativism', Edwards et al. (1995) defend a radical form of *relativism* that refuses to accept 'a bottom line, a bedrock of reality that places limits on what may be treated as epistemologically constructed or deconstructible' (p. 26). In their article, they present a discourse analytic examination of realist arguments in order to demonstrate that even references to 'death and furniture' (i.e. physical and material realities) are themselves discursive constructions rhetorically deployed in the course of a debate. They argue that even thumping a table to appeal to its materiality is a semiotically mediated communicative act and, therefore, a discursive move. Tables can be described in different ways, for different purposes. We may refer to their uses, to their status as a cultural artefact, to the materials they are made of, their consistency at a molecular or even atomic level, and so on. Hitting the table does not give it an extra-discursive essence.

Similarly, they point out that death can take many forms (e.g. natural death, terminal disease, murder, manslaughter, capital punishment, fatal accident, suicide, etc.) and it can be conceptualized in different ways (resurrection, afterlife, brain death, spiritual death, etc.). In this way, the authors reinforce their claim that 'it is language itself that provides the tools for constructing a reality beyond words' (p. 31).

Both critical realists and relativists have criticized the implications of each other's arguments. Critical realists have accused relativists of being unable to take up a moral or political position in relation to anything at all. It is argued that if everything is discursively constructed, then we have no grounds for adjudicating between different views. As a result, all views are equally valid and 'anything goes'. Relativists in turn have pointed out that realists' commitment to 'bottom line' arguments means that certain truth claims are ruled out of bounds and cannot be challenged. A principled questioning of all truth claims is, therefore, not possible within a realist framework. It is this, however, relativists argue, which is required to promote a genuine spirit of inquiry.

The debate between realists and relativists has produced many publications. To find out more about the various arguments and positions involved, you may wish to start with the following:

Burman, E. (1990) Differing with deconstruction: a feminist critique, in I. Parker and J. Shotter (eds) *Deconstructing Social Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Edwards, D., Ashmore, M. and Potter, P. (1995) Death and furniture: the rhetoric, politics and theology of bottom line arguments against relativism, *History of the Human Sciences*, 8(2): 25–49.

Parker, I. (1992) *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Parker, I. (ed.) (1998) *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*. London: Sage.

Potter, J. (1992) Constructing realism: seven moves (plus or minus a couple), *Theory and Psychology*, 2: 167–73.

Potter, J. (1998) Fragments in the realization of relativism, in I. Parker (ed.) *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*. London: Sage.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig***<***http://www.openup.co.uk/willig***> to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 12

Narrative psychology

Joanna Silver

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- narrative as a way of thinking about human experience
- the aims and objectives of narrative psychology as a research methodology
- how to conduct a narrative analysis
- the relationship between narrative psychology and memory work
- the methodological procedures associated with memory work, including techniques for gathering and analysing data in three phases

☑ the scope and limitations of research based on accounts of past experience

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate narrative psychology epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

Narrative psychology is interested in the ways in which people organize and thus bring order to experience. Through constructing narratives about their lives, people make connections between events and interpret them. While narrative researchers agree about the importance of narratives in human interactions and share an interest in the structure and forms of the stories that people narrate, it is important to be aware that narrative researchers have differences in their theoretical assumptions and methods of analysis.

Murray (2003) demonstrates that while literary or folklore critics have always been interested in narratives (e.g. Brooks 1985; Propp 1968), the movement to narratives in psychology occurred in the last three decades as part of a more general shift away from a quantitative positivist psychology, towards a psychology that acknowledged the importance of language and 'lived' subjective experience.

In this chapter, we define the term 'narrative' and discuss some of the types of narratives that have been identified by narrative researchers. We will then look at the function of narratives and the relationship between narrative psychology and memory. Thereafter we will look at how to conduct a narrative analysis and provide an example of such research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the epistemological position associated with narrative psychology.

What are narratives?

Riessman (1993) states that the exact definition of a narrative is open to debate among researchers. One definition proposed by Murray (2003: 113) is that narrative is 'an organized interpretation of a sequence of events [which] involves attributing agency to the characters in the narrative and inferring causal links between the events'. In addition, a narrative provides us with an opportunity 'to define ourselves, to clarify the continuity in our lives and to convey this to others' (Murray 2003: 116). McAdams (1993) argues that most narratives share six features: settings, characters, initiating events, attempts, consequences and reactions. Stories usually take place in settings and involve characters who take part in the story. Often an initiating event sparks an attempt to reach a goal, which leads to consequences that require a reaction from the characters. Additionally, it is suggested that most stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end and can be categorized into romance, comedy, tragedy and satire (see Hiles and aermák 2008: 156). It is important to note that these definitions are not accepted by all narrative researchers. For example, Emerson and Frosh (2004: 8) state that 'defining a narrative as something with a "beginning,

middle and end" raises the question of whether what is being focused on is a kind of "defensive" structure in which the actual disorganisation of everyday life (its "beginning, muddle and end") is being denied'.

Frank (1995: 1), in his book *The Wounded Storyteller*, describes illness as a loss of the 'destination and map' that previously guided a person's life. He identifies three types of narratives told by people who have experienced illness: *restitution narratives*, *chaos narratives* and *quest narratives*. These narratives will be explained below and examples of each type will be given with reference to a paper entitled 'Men, sport, spinal cord injury and narratives of hope' by Smith and Sparkes (2005). In this paper the researchers focus on the narratives of 14 men aged between 26 and 51 who suffered from spinal cord injuries through playing sport.

Frank (1995: 1096) explains that in a *restitution narrative* the plot is 'yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again'. Thus, the endpoint in such a narrative is the expectation of improved health. Smith and Sparkes (2005) in the above-mentioned paper found that a restitution narrative was prominent in 11 out of the 14 men's accounts, and the same authors (2008) suggest this is the dominant cultural narrative regarding spinal cord injury. Such accounts contained the belief that in the future there would be a medical cure, which would lead to the restoration of health. Eamonn, a 29-year-old whose spinal cord was damaged 12 years prior to the study, and Matthew, a 35-year-old who damaged his spinal cord aged 20, clearly describe this hope (Smith and Sparkes 2005: 1097):

So becoming disabled was not what I expected, and when it happened I lost everything. It was, is, such a huge crisis and because of it, I've lost my life. So, every day I tell myself that I'll walk again. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning. I don't work and don't play sport any more. So, what do I really have to look forward to? Well I have hope. (Eamonn)

Okay I'm disabled, but I don't see myself like that in the future. This might sound anti-disabled or something, but I really do hope that I will be able to walk someday. To get back my old life. It's a tragedy what happened to me. (Matthew)

Although such narratives can be comforting to people experiencing serious illnesses, Frank (1995) asks what happens when people who have used restitution narratives to frame their experiences find that recovery is not possible. In such situations, Frank argues that a person may have no alternative narratives to draw on and thus a 'narrative wreckage' may develop.

Frank (1995) states that unlike a *restitution narrative* that offers concrete hope, the plot of a *chaos narrative* imagines life never getting better and contains an absence of narrative order. The following quotation from Jamie, a 44-year-old who damaged his spinal cord and took part in Smith and Sparkes' (2005: 1097) study, illustrates the hopelessness and despair that tellers of chaos narratives experience:

I have no future, no. Then, I won't walk again . . . I've been given a chance of life, but it's not a life, not living . . . What can I do? My life, it's, it's, not here. It's over . . . I have

nothing left to live. I have no hope of a life. I have nothing. There is no hope for me.

Frank demonstrates that chaos narratives are anxiety-provoking, threatening and challenging to hear as they do not offer hope and are a reminder of the fragility of the human body. While it can be tempting to try to encourage the narrators of such stories to create new stories, Frank argues that there is both a moral and a clinical need to honour chaos narratives. The narrators of chaos narratives cannot create new stories according to Frank, until other people can bear witness to and tolerate what the narrators have to say.

The final narrative that Frank describes is the *quest narrative*. In these stories, the narrators view illness as part of a journey or quest. Thus, illness is accepted and there is a hope that something will be gained from the experience of being ill. Whereas restitution narratives offer material hope in the form of a cure from illness, the hope offered in quest narratives is transcendent hope. In Smith and Sparkes' (2005) study, Doug, a 34-year-old who injured his spinal cord aged 23, and David, a 28-year-old who injured his spinal cord aged 17, explain how the illness experience has been transformative:

Right now I feel great about life and myself . . . I've developed a much more rounded personality and have become a different person, a much better one after the accident I think, with lots of different sides to me . . . Right now I don't view disability as a crisis. I'm on a different path, and I think a better, more fulfilling one. (Doug)

I've changed so much since [the spinal cord injury], and feel a better person now. In fact, my whole personality has

changed . . . What I've learnt so far has made it all worth it . . . I've got more choices now to explore who I want to be, and disabled people deserve more choices. (David)

Frank states that although quest narratives offer tellers a distinctive voice, the danger of such narratives is that they can romanticize illness and may not fully acknowledge the difficult and distressing nature of illness.

While existing typologies for illness narratives have increased knowledge of the forms that narratives can take, it is important that the narrative researcher does not simply sort the narratives that constitute his or her data into an existing framework of types of plot or story forms. The identification of a typology of plots ought to be the outcome of the research rather than its starting point. The types of story identified in the research may or may not resonate with existing typologies.

What are the functions of narratives?

Some narrative researchers view narratives as an essential part of meaning-making. Ricoeur (1984) argues that humans need narratives to bring order to a world that is constantly changing and uses the term *emplotment* to describe how narrators try logically to organize sequences into meaningful plots. Bruner (1990) shows that the desire to seek organization and coherence particularly occurs when life seems disorganized and incoherent, as narratives often materialize when there has been a discrepancy between people's experiences of ideal and real, or conflicts between self and society. Thus, people often tell narratives during difficult times such as illness, bereavement and divorce. It is

claimed that constructing such narratives can help make sense of such events and render them meaningful as 'telling, and even more so writing, it seems, is a way of taking control, creating order, thus keeping chaos at bay' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 23).

Hiles and aermák (2008) show how some researchers believe narratives have a crucial part in the construction and maintenance of self-identity. It is argued that people choose what stories to narrate and what stories not to tell, and in doing so are active in constructing their own identities. By altering the stories we tell, we can therefore alter our identities. Murray (2003) shows how we can have several narrative identities that are linked to different social relationships and that these identities can give a sense of localized coherence and stability.

It has been claimed that illness narratives can have a therapeutic function. Frank (1995) states that narratives can provide a person who is ill with a chance to find a new 'destination' and 'map' in life. While illness can wound a person's body and voice, narratives can be a means of reasserting a person's voice. Additionally, Murray (1997) states that illness narratives often describe the period before illness in somewhat idyllic terms and that such stories may be a way for the narrator to remove guilt and reinforce blamelessness.

As well as being personally healing, narratives can promote change. The Centre for Narrative Research (2008) states that:

narratives themselves can be important components of social change, and narrative research may contribute to such

change. Researchers have worked successfully with narrative to address medical, social and educational problems, to build communities and resolve crises, to aid reconciliation and to improve understanding in situations of conflict and change.

In a chapter entitled 'Women, resistance, and the breast cancer movement', Patricia Kaufert (1998) recounts how the narratives of women with breast cancer led to a resistance movement. She describes how women used narratives to document and make sense of the fear they experienced when diagnosed with breast cancer and the effect that treatment had on their bodies and sense of self. Three women, Audre Lorde, Eva Bereti and Mary Drover, spoke about how they refused to allow their selfhood to be equated with becoming a woman with breast cancer but instead allowed their previous pre-cancer identities as a poet, healer and competent woman to become the cornerstones of a new self. Lorde wrote and published journals about her experiences, the purpose being to uncover rather than conceal her experience of breast cancer. Kaufert shows how, from individual protests, networks of resistance developed in the form of support groups for women. In 1991 the National Breast Cancer Coalition was formed in the USA, which aimed to 'work to eradicate breast cancer through focusing national attention on breast cancer and by involving patients and caring others as advocates for action, advances and change' (Langer 1992: 207, cited in Kaufert, 1998: 299). The Cancer Coalition used public demonstrations, marches and candlelit vigils as a way of getting its voice heard and becoming a Washington lobby group. Such activities led to more funding for breast cancer research and eventually the Harkin Amendment whereby $120 million for breast cancer research was added to the Defense Appropriation Act.

On an individual level, narratives can produce change for a person. Narrative therapy is a form of therapy that looks at the constraining, restricting stories that people tell about their lives and helps people to reconstruct new stories that are more fulfilling and freeing (for more about narrative therapy, see White and Epston 1990).

How to conduct a narrative analysis

Reissman (1993: 2) explains that a narrative analysis will look carefully at a participant's story and examine how they 'impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives'. However, narrative researchers differ in the ways in which they approach the study of story grammar. They show interest in different features of narratives and they ask different questions of the narrative during analysis. Ultimately, it does not matter which approach is taken as long as the narrative analysis is systematic and clear, and as long as it generates insights into the structure of the narrative, its functions and its social and/or psychological implications.

Narrative researchers work with narrative accounts of particular experiences. These can be obtained by using existing documents, such as David Frost's famous television interviews with President Richard Nixon in 1977, or through narrative interviewing. Crossley (2000), drawing on McAdams (1993), outlines a semi-structured interview protocol that can be used for narrative interviews. Here, a tape-recorded interview is used to cover seven questions about *life chapters*, *key events*, *significant people*, *future scripts*, *stresses and problems*, *personal ideologies* and *life themes*. A question about *life chapters* involves thinking of

life as if it were a book and dividing it into distinct chapters. The *key events* question asks about critical and significant episodes in the past. The *significant people* question asks about crucial people in the life story and particular heroes and heroines. The *future script* question asks about a person's future plans and dreams. The *stresses and problems* question investigates significant conflicts, unresolved issues, problems and stressors. The *personal ideology* question explores essential beliefs and values, and the *life theme* question examines whether there is a central theme, message or idea within the person's narrative. It is important to note that while this protocol can help to structure narrative interviews, it does not need to be followed rigidly and there are other ways to conduct such interviews (e.g. Emerson and Frosh 2004; Hiles and aermák 2008).

Narrative interviews often take place on several different occasions as sometimes it can take time for a person to tell their story. As with all qualitative interviews, it is vital to ensure that participants are put at ease and feel comfortable to answer questions. After the researcher has interviewed the participant(s), (s)he will transcribe the interview(s). Reissman (1993: 60) argues that 'analysis cannot be easily distinguished from transcription'. Crossley (2000) states that whereas discourse analytic work requires the transcribing
of fine details including all pauses and intonations (see Chapter 10), for a narrative analysis this is not usually necessary and a transcript of the content of the interview, including questions and answers, is all that is required. However, the level of transcription required will vary depending on the aims of the project and the type of analysis that the researcher is doing.

Although there are no standard procedures for carrying out a narrative analysis, Langdridge (2007) as well as Hiles and aermák (2008) have formulated helpful guidelines for narrative analysis. They recommend that the narrative researcher apply a range of interpretative perspectives to the narrative. This means working through the text repeatedly, asking different questions of the narrative. One set of questions concerns the *content* of the narrative: What type of story is being told? Who are the protagonists and what happens to them? Does the story have a clear direction (e.g. is it progressive or regressive) or does it meander and fizzle out? Another set of questions is concerned with the *tone* of the narrative: How is the story being told? What kind of language is being used? Is the delivery flat or emotional? Is the story's tone optimistic or pessimistic? Comic or tragic? Does the speaker seek agreement from the listener(s)? What may be the rhetorical functions of the narrative (e.g. does it aim to persuade, excuse, justify, entertain)? A further set of questions focuses on the *themes* that are invoked within the narrative: What are the thematic priorities of the text? What are its key themes? How do they relate to one another? Do they support or contradict one another? Finally, we need to ask questions about the *social and psychological functions* of the narrative: What kinds of identities are constructed in the narrative? How does the narrative position the protagonist? How does it position other people in relation to the protagonist? How much agency does the narrative offer its protagonist? Who is and who is not powerful within the story? In whose interest do events unfold in the narrative? Who gains and who loses as a result? Whereas other qualitative research methods such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and discourse analysis tend to break the text down into themes, a narrative researcher will

try not to fragment the text, but will instead view the narrative as a whole.

As well as thinking carefully about the content and structure of narratives that are told by individuals, it is important to consider how their narratives are shaped by wider social and cultural narratives. Murray (1999) argues that when socially interacting we use narratives that are already within our culture. Additionally, Mishler (1986) argues that it is important to pay attention to the role of the interview context in shaping the narrative, as narratives do not occur in isolation, but as a result of an interaction between researcher and participant. Frank (1995: 3) states that narratives are always told to someone, even if that person is not present as 'even messages in a bottle imply a potential reader'. Mishler (1986: 82) demonstrates that a narrative is a joint production between interviewer and participant as 'the interviewer's presence and form of involvement – how she or he listens, attends, encourages, interrupts, digresses, initiates topics, and terminates responses – is integral to a respondent's account.' Specifically, Mishler (1986: 96) suggests asking four questions:

1. How do an interviewer's questions, assessments, silences and responses enter into a story's production?
2. How do stories told in interviews differ from those told in other contexts, such as naturally occurring conversations?
3. Do different types of interview and question formats produce different types of stories?

4. How can the presence and influence of an interviewer be taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of a respondent's story?

It is important to think about why the narrator wishes to tell his or her story and the particular impression (s)he may wish to convey to the listener. Additionally, as with all qualitative research, in narrative psychology the researcher is not seen as objective, but instead will bring his or her own assumptions, biases and beliefs to the analysis. It is vital that the researcher reflects carefully on his or her interpretation of the narrative and thinks about how the narrative was co-constructed.

For further information about how to conduct narrative research in psychology, see Crossley (2000), Langdridge (2007) Hiles and aermák (2008), and Emerson and Frosh (2004).

An example of a narrative analysis

This example comes from 'Narrative constructions of anorexia and abuse: an athlete's search for meaning in trauma' (Papathomas and Lavallee 2012). Papathomas and Lavallee carried out a narrative analysis looking at the experiences of Beth, a 24-year-old athlete, who had previously been clinically diagnosed
with the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. At the time of the interviews, Beth reported that she still struggled with eating habits and attitudes.

Beth took part in six unstructured life history interviews, which allowed her to talk freely and broadly about important aspects of her life. During these interviews the first author,

Papathomas, worked on building rapport and trust with Beth and used probes to encourage her to reflect and take part in narrative construction. At the first meeting between Beth and Papathomas, it became apparent that Beth had been sexually abused by her tennis coach. While the researchers were aware that Beth's experience was different from that typically portrayed in the eating disorders in sports literature, it was felt important to honour Beth's atypical narrative and embrace the diversity and complexity that this would offer.

When analysing the data, Papathomas took the role of what Smith and Sparkes (2009: 281) term a 'story analyst', which is defined as a researcher who 'steps back from the story generated and employs analytical procedures, strategies and techniques in order to abstractly scrutinise, explain, and think about its certain features'. As a story analyst, Papathomas describes drawing on techniques from many narrative theorists, in particular Holstein and Gubrium (2000a) and Gubrium and Holstein (2009). These researchers look at the 'whats' of narrative reality, which focus on the environmental circumstances of narration and the 'hows' of narrative, which focus on the processes through which a person imaginatively completes a narrative. With this in mind, Papathomas read the transcripts of the interviews with Beth several times and made many loose analytical observations beside segments of text. Papathomas focused on the themes of the narrative and made interpretations about the social and cultural determinants of the story (the 'whats'). Additionally, Papathomas looked carefully at the performative aspects of the narrative and the way that Beth resourcefully linked certain experiences to make meaning (the 'hows').

The analysis showed that Beth had a troubled and turbulent childhood and was a nervous, self-conscious child. At the age of 11, she began playing tennis and excelled at this, employing a personal coach at the age of 12. After a series of defeats, Beth changed coaches. She described opening up to her new coach about her low confidence and troubled home life. Sadly, this trust was exploited and Beth explained that at the age of 13 she was sexually abused by the coach, which was followed by the onset of anorexia nervosa five years later.

Papathomas and Lavallee suggest that prior to taking part in the study Beth had resisted narrative opportunities to tell her story, as this was too painful for her. As well as being psychologically problematic, the researchers postulated that the lack of ability to narrate stopped Beth from being able to construct a story to make sense of her experiences and produce narrative coherence. However, the researchers suggest that Beth's taking part in the study is evidence of a willingness to work on her narrative construction.

Beth's narrative revealed that originally she did not see her relationship with her coach as abusive as she conceived of it as a romantic relationship. Labelling it as such normalized and legitimized her experiences. Thus, Papathomas and Lavallee claim that Beth's coach played the romantic hero, helping Beth with her problematic home life. As an adult, Beth struggles with the competing narrative constructions of a romantic love story, which portrays her as an equally responsible and willing participant in the relationship with her coach, and an abuse story, which portrays her as a susceptible minor who does not have moral responsibility for what happened to her. Beth explains how fictional television

programmes such as *EastEnders*, which has featured abuse stories, and talking to others, are helpful means of confirming that she was not to blame for the abuse, thus reconstructing her narrative. However, despite this, Beth is not fully able to make a stable and coherent narrative of her childhood abuse, meaning that she 'lives in a tortuously confused state, perpetually flitting between two opposing narratives neither of which can provide an understanding she is satisfied with' (Papathomas and Lavallee 2012: 306). The researchers argue that the lack of narrative resolution means that Beth is likely to relive past experiences as a way of trying to make sense of what happened.

Whereas Papathomas and Lavallee state that Beth was eager to find a *specific* understanding of her abuse experiences, they argue that she wanted to find *some* understanding of her experiences of anorexia nervosa. Beth explains that while her experiences of abuse were a culturally persuasive way of understanding her eating disorder, this was not a satisfactory explanation for her. Instead, Beth describes how her mother was a crucial influence in the development of her negative body image and illustrates this with narrative devices that are designed to persuade the listener. The researchers argue that the role of the family in eating disorders is often seen as integral to dominant medical narratives, and so Beth is drawing on this narrative to find meaning. Additionally, the researchers show how Beth drew on another dominant narrative in psychology and sports psychology, which suggests that sporting environments are conducive to the development of eating disorders. Interestingly, at earlier points in her interview, Beth resists this

narrative, but the researchers suggest that it is later drawn on, as Beth may be eager for meaning and lacking in resources to construct this meaning.

At the end of the interviews, when perhaps all available narrative options had been attempted, Beth offers a powerful narrative that attempts to coherently connect her family issues, abuse and anorexia nervosa. She explains that her guilt about the relationship with her coach may have led to food restriction as a way of protecting herself from getting into trouble with her parents for this relationship. Papathomas and Lavallee suggest that Beth's present eating problems may therefore be associated with her struggle to maintain two opposing narratives of her childhood experiences with her coach: the *love narrative* and the *abuse narrative*. The researchers conclude this study by suggesting that it is important to expand the use of available cultural narratives so that people have more narrative resources to draw on to make sense of their experiences.

Narrative psychology and memory work

As we have seen, narrative psychology involves looking at the stories people tell about their lives. *Memory work*, a method of inquiry that was developed in the 1980s by Frigga Haug and her colleagues in West Germany (see Haug 1987), also looks closely at participants' recollections of the past and elicits, analyses and interprets these accounts.

Haug's research group was interested in the ways in which individuals appropriate and internalize social relations and practices, or in Haug's words, 'the way they enter into pre-given structures within which they produce both

themselves and the categories of society' (1987: 40). Haug and her colleagues wanted to understand the processes of socialization by which 'practices of femininity' (1987: 39) had become incorporated into their own bodies and selves. They wanted to know how they themselves had played an active part in the construction of their identities as 'women', even where this involved subordination. Haug and her research group were not content to invoke social roles and norms to explain why people reproduce oppressive social relations. Instead, they wanted to explore the complex ways in which individuals process the social world, over time, in an attempt to find meaning and pleasure in their interaction with it. Memories play an important role in this process. They provide 'the material out of which we have made ourselves' (1987: 48). It is important to understand that memory work does not claim that it is the events of the past themselves that make us who we are; rather, as in narrative psychology, it is the process by which we have attempted to assimilate the unfamiliar, to resolve contradictions and conflict, and to construct a particular version of the past, and of ourselves, which is decisive.

Memory work and narrative psychology have several differences. Whereas narrative psychology often uses biographical narratives or lengthy accounts, memory work is designed to cover the traces of the process of identity formation and works with memories of specific situations. It is argued that such memories are more likely to contain evidence of contrasts and contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies, that is, the 'rough edges' that can tell us something about the process of self-construction. By contrast, autobiographical stories tend to have been rehearsed and recounted many times, and they will have become more and

more coherent and stereotyped in the process. It could be argued that, as a result, memories tell us more about the product of our self-formation.

Narrative psychology researchers tend to work with other people's accounts of the past while memory work collapses the distinction between researcher and research participants (for a direct comparison between the two approaches, see Stephenson and Kippax 2008: 138). Another important feature of memory work is its collective nature. Memories are produced and analysed by a group of people – a collective – who attempt to trace the social nature of the production of these memories. Thus, while acknowledging that each memory is unique and individual, memory work is concerned with what memories tell us about the social relations within which their meanings were constructed. Ideally, memory work should 'involve the co-researchers in a re-appraisal of these meanings in the light of their common experience' (Crawford et al. 1992: 50).

While memory work groups differ in their composition, the time they take to complete their research and even the procedures according to which they generate and analyse memories, it is a good idea to follow a set of guidelines, developed by Haug (1987) and elaborated by Crawford et al. (1992), to facilitate systematic analysis and theorizing. In Chapter 3 of *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning from Memory*, Crawford et al. (1992: 43–52) present a clear and comprehensive guide to the memory work process. They split the research process into three phases.

Phase one is concerned with the writing of the memories. Initially a memory work group should be formed with

between four and eight members. It is essential that there is mutual trust and a feeling of safety within the group. To prompt group members to write memories, the group needs to agree on a suitable trigger. The trigger is a word or a short phrase that is expected to generate memories that are relevant to the topic under investigation. For example, where the topic is 'emotions' (as it was for Crawford et al. 1992), suitable triggers would be 'saying you are sorry', 'danger' and 'crying'. Useful triggers also tend to refer to specific events or episodes rather than generalized or abstract concepts. Once a trigger has been chosen, each member writes a memory in response to the trigger, which can take place within the context of the group meeting itself or outside of it. To ensure that the memories are written in a way that renders them suitable for memory work analysis, they should be written in the third-person singular and include as much circumstantial detail as possible. This could be references to sounds, tastes and smells that appear to be inconsequential or trivial in terms of the event being remembered. The style of writing should be purely descriptive but rich in detail. This is because a first-person account, which includes autobiographical explanations and justifications of events, would be less likely to contain contradiction, conflict and ambiguity.

Phase 2 involves analysing the memories. At first, the memory group reconvenes and each individual, written, memory is analysed separately and examined in terms of the sequences of actions, role relations, clichés and contradictions, statements made and absences that characterize it (*textual analysis*). This step in the analysis shares some features with Stage 1 of Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) (see Chapter 11), in that it aims to identify the social construction of meaning contained in each memory.

After this, co-researchers will compare their memories with each other, looking for similarities, differences, recurring themes and common patterns, and looking at the social relations within which the memories may be located and the cultural meanings on which they may draw (*cross-sectional analysis*). It is also important to discuss what is *not* written in the memories and what might have been expected to be included. This step in the analysis aims to uncover the processes involved in the construction of common-sense understandings. These group discussions are tape-recorded and transcribed, as they constitute data for further analysis in Phase 3. After these discussions, it may be helpful for group members to rewrite their memories in the light of the analysis as thinking about different ways of making sense of the 'same' event can heighten awareness of the process of meaning construction.

The final phase, *Phase 3*, involves *integration* and *theory building*. The memories produced in response to several triggers will be compared and contrasted and the transcripts of the group discussions of the memories will provide further data for integrative analysis. The ideas generated by the group in relation to particular social constructions are themselves subjected to critical appraisal and further theorizing. Existing theories and models are also explored in the light of the group's insights. In addition, everyday notions and common-sense perceptions (e.g. of what it means to 'feel' something) are also subjected to critical reappraisal. In memory work, the transcripts of the group's textual and cross-sectional analysis are used as data, while psychological theories and everyday notions are subjected to the same critical appraisal. The data collection and analysis phases are not clearly differentiated (as is the case in grounded theory,

see Chapter 7), and both academic and everyday discourse are engaged with during the analysis.

Writing up memory work both requires and facilitates integration of the material. It is also likely that theoretical formulations will be clarified, and even revised, during the process of writing. Since memory work is a collective enterprise, writing cannot be separated from further discussion (another challenge to a familiar distinction). Drafts of papers will have to be read and discussed by the co-researchers, and this may generate new ideas and changes to the original analysis. It is hard to determine when a memory work project has been completed, and writing it up does not necessarily achieve a sense of closure.

Memory work research can be written up in different ways. Following the introduction and methodology sections, the presentation of findings can be structured around *constructions* (e.g. 'Women as Objects', 'Women as Monogamous' and 'Women as Seductive'; see Kippax et al. 1990), *themes* (e.g. 'Condom Visibility', 'Pill Invisibility' and 'The Long-term Relationship'; see Harden and Willig 1998) or *topics* (e.g. 'The Hair Project', 'The Body Project', 'The Slavegirl Project' and 'The Legs Project'; see Haug 1987). In all cases, this is followed by an integrative discussion section in which the theoretical implications of the research are addressed in some detail.

In an attempt to be clear and systematic in our introduction to data collection and analysis in memory work, we may have given the impression that memory work always involves an orderly progression through the three phases of research. In reality, memory work need not, in fact, be linear. Like

grounded theory (see Chapter 7), memory work benefits from an openness that allows researchers to move back and forth between phases and to retrace steps. For example, an insight generated through cross-sectional analysis may lead group members to return to individual memories and to expand or even revise their textual analysis of these memories. In addition, new triggers for the same topic may emerge as a result of the group discussion during textual or cross-sectional analysis and prompt the group to return to write memories. The work of the group continues until the topic has been exhausted, or, to borrow a term from grounded theory, *saturation* has been achieved.

'Saying sorry': an example of data analysis in memory work

In *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning from Memory*, Crawford et al. (1992) discuss the social construction of emotions such as happiness and hurt, fear and joy, guilt and shame, anger and rage. In their book, they present memories written within the context of a memory work group. The group's collective analysis of these memories attempts to trace the processes by which group members developed their emotions. To generate memories for analysis, Crawford et al. used several relevant triggers, such as 'being happy', 'danger', 'crying', 'play', 'holidays', 'being praised' and 'fear'. In this section, we illustrate the process of analysis in memory work by looking at the memories produced by Crawford et al. in response to the trigger 'saying sorry.' The group produced five memories that constituted the pool of memories for cross-sectional analysis. This is Ann's memory:

She was aged between 4 and 6. It was evening, her mother in the kitchen cooking dinner. She was playing on the carpet near her father's feet. He was reading the paper, sometimes talking to her, sometimes responding to her questions or comments. It was a warm night, he had taken off his suit coat. Absorbed in her game she didn't notice him falling asleep until he failed to respond to one of her remarks. His hands were tucked behind his head, his mouth slightly open, he was snoring lightly. She crept to him giggling to herself, anticipating his delight as she initiated one of their tickling games, watchful as to whether he was really *asleep. He pretended a lot. At the first touch of the cotton shirt covering his armpits his eyes startled open, his mouth erupted an 'ugh' of anger, his hand stung across her face: 'Don't you* ever *do that again.' She cried loudly enough so her mother heard (or perhaps she heard him shout) and came in. 'What happened?' And after the explanation: 'She didn't mean to upset you.'*

The group's textual analysis of Ann's memory drew attention to the memory's emotional tone, which is characterized by sharp contrasts and contradiction. Delight is quickly transformed into fright and surprise. We are presented with an image of a loving father who plays 'reciprocal games', yet his response to being tickled is anger and violence. The role relations presented in the memory are characterized by a discrepancy in power between Ann and her father. Even though the tickling game is described as reciprocal ('one of their tickling games'), Ann is punished when she attempts to initiate it. Her apology (which is, in fact, not explicitly referred to in this memory) is a way of placating her father to prevent further punishment, rather than an expression of regret or an acceptance of guilt. The reference to 'her mother in the kitchen cooking dinner' while her father is 'reading the

paper' invokes traditional gender roles. The mother's intervention to restore harmony also reflects a gendered social cliché. Finally, the mother's defence of Ann – 'she didn't mean to upset you' – constitutes an apology on Ann's behalf and is therefore also an attribution of responsibility to Ann for the incident. As a result, Ann is positioned as being responsible for her father's anger.

The other group members' memories of 'saying sorry' reflected many of the themes that emerged from Ann's memory. Cross-sectional analysis of the five memories led to the identification of common patterns. First, the group members' expectations that memories of 'saying sorry' would contain references to emotions such as guilt, shame, repentance or regret were not met. Instead, the memories invoked feelings of confusion, fear and indignation. 'Saying sorry' was not an expression of regret but rather an attempt to deflect adults' anger. Second, the sequences presented in the memories suggested that no wrong-doing had been intended. Instead, protagonists' attempts to behave in an 'adult' fashion had been interpreted as a challenge to authority. In four of the five memories, the protagonist had acted in what she perceived to be a reasonable, even mature manner (e.g. initiating a game, reading the newspaper, saying a prayer, defending a clubhouse) only to be met with disapproval by adults (father, grandmother, mother, parents). 'Saying sorry' was a way of recognizing that adults had power over children (to punish them, to hurt them, to make them apologize) but not that they were right. As a result, a sense of injustice and feelings of humiliation prevailed.

The identification of these common patterns led the group to ask questions about the social relations within which their

experiences had been constituted. To what extent and in what ways did the protagonists' actions challenge the social relations within which they took place? What kind of commentary did they make on these relations? What purpose was served by making them apologize for their actions? A discussion of these questions allowed the group to move to a more theoretical level of analysis.

Here, group members attempted to contextualize their memories and to understand the wider meanings of their actions at the time. For example, in Fay's memory her mother reprimands her for reading her aunt's newspaper without permission. Fay is made to apologize to her aunt. Fay's actions were embedded in a specific set of social relations. She and her mother shared a house with her aunt and two other female relatives during the war years. The aunt was the breadwinner. She occupied a powerful position within the household. Although 'difficult', the aunt was treated with respect by the other women who tried not to annoy her. Within this context, Fay's actions constituted a challenge to her aunt's authority. Fay's apology to the aunt was necessary to restore power relations within the household: 'For the sake of "oiling the social mechanism" it was essential that Fay be made to apologise' (Crawford et al. 1992: 63).

Similar processes could be observed in the other memories. In three of the five memories, 'saying sorry' served the purpose of restoring the existing web of social relationships. In addition, all the memories positioned the protagonists as being responsible for other people's well-being. By being made to apologize, the girls were taught to accept responsibility for the effects that their actions had on others, even where these were unintended. Crawford et al. (1992)

proposed that this process is gendered, in that adult women tend to feel responsible for other people's emotional well-being even when they have no power to control it. The episodes remembered by the group can, therefore, be understood as instances of female socialization.

Overall, Crawford et al.'s (1992: 73–4) analysis of memories of 'saying sorry' suggested that:

Children construct a number of emotions – anger, defiance, glee, shame, guilt . . . in the context of a complex of relations around issues of responsibility and autonomy. In most of the memories discussed, our actions are actions of children trying out our wings, pushing at the boundaries. We try to be adult amongst adults, or we try to be one with our peers; we act as we believe others expect us to act, we reciprocate, we test our competence. Adults often respond to these actions by punishing us . . . Our actions are viewed as irresponsible and incompetent . . . Children define transgression in terms of adult punishment. Our autonomy is threatened by the punishment and the implicit (and often explicit) admonition not to repeat the action.

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge does narrative psychology aim to produce?

Narrative psychology aims to produce knowledge about how people weave their experiences into meaningful stories and about some of the (psychological and social) consequences of this. Narrative researchers do not look at whether the stories produced by participants are objectively 'true' or 'false'.

Reissman (1993: 15) explains that 'meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal'. Different people can tell different stories about the same event, and the same person can tell different stories about an event depending on the context in which the story is being told. To the narrative researcher this is not problematic, as narrative psychology looks at how participants construct the past, what is included and what is excluded in the stories they tell about their past, and what these stories mean to them. As such, narrative psychology research produces social constructionist knowledge; however, it is important to acknowledge that narrative research is very much concerned with the social and psychological consequences of the stories that people tell, and these consequences are very real, in that they shape how people live their lives. Some narrative researchers are also interested in the social, cultural and material conditions which determine the availability of certain types of stories, which means that such research would then adopt a critical realist perspective.

What kinds of assumptions does narrative psychology make about the world?

Narrative psychology is based upon the supposition that human behaviour and experience are meaningful and that to comprehend others and ourselves we must look closely at the systems and structures of meaning that make up our minds and world (Polkinghorne 1988). Narrative psychology assumes that people
are reflective, and that they are natural storytellers who make their experiences meaningful by telling stories about them. Additionally, narrative researchers believe that people understand themselves using language, talking and writing

and that through these processes people are continually involved in the process of creating themselves (Crossley 2000). From a narrative perspective, meaning is made and negotiated within a social context, and as such it invokes a symbolic interactionist perspective. Since narrative psychology assumes that the way in which people experience themselves in the world is the product of the narratives they construct, it adopts a social constructionist orientation whereby an individual's subjective 'reality' is not directly determined by social and material structures but by the stories they tell about them. At the same time, narrative researchers acknowledge that such constructions of meaning are fundamentally social in nature and that they are not 'free-floating' in the sense that there are limits to what can be said about an experience within a particular sociocultural and historical context.

How does narrative psychology conceptualize the role of researcher in the research process?

Narrative psychology views the researcher as having an active role in the research process. The questions the researcher asks and the nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants will somewhat determine what stories the participant does and does not tell. Additionally, when analysing, the researcher does not just describe the participants' stories, but will be influenced by his or her own assumptions, biases and beliefs. It is imperative that the researcher is transparent about this and talks explicitly about the method used and reflects on his or her role in the production and understanding of the narratives. Additionally, the role of the researcher and his or her activities reflects the

activities of the participants in that conducting and writing up research are another way of telling a story.

Conclusion

Narrative psychologists argue that through telling stories about themselves, people are continually creating and re-creating themselves (Crossley 2000). From a narrative perspective, lives are 'storied' (e.g. Smith and Sparkes 2005), and the meaning of experience is not fixed because novel stories can always be told about it. However, while narrative researchers share a commitment to taking stories seriously, there are also important differences between narrative approaches to qualitative research as researchers differ in their views about the processes by which narratives are formed and how they operate (see Snapshot Box 12.1 for a review of such differences). It is, therefore, crucial that the narrative researcher establishes clarity about their conceptualization of 'narrative', its nature and functions, before embarking upon narrative research.

Interactive exercises

1. Write a memory to the trigger 'feeling relieved' following the guidelines provided in this chapter (Phase 3). Conduct a textual analysis of your memory. Pay attention to the sequences of actions, role relations, clichés and contradictions

invoked in your memory and note absences and gaps. Now reflect on the way in which your memory constructs meaning around the notion of 'feeling relieved'. What might be its implications for experience and practice? Can you think of alternative ways in which 'feeling relieved' may be constructed? How may others experience 'feeling relieved'?

2. Write an account of a significant event that took place in your recent past (e.g. an argument with a friend or partner; a job interview or examination; an accident). Then rewrite the account in a different style and/or voice (e.g. factual as opposed to emotional; from another's perspective as opposed to your own, etc.). Compare the two accounts and reflect on the different ways in which they construct meaning around the 'same' event. What might be their implications for experience and practice? How might they shape our experiences of similar events in the future? Which of the two accounts seems more 'normal' or less unusual? Is one of the accounts privileged within our culture?

Further reading

Crawford, J., Kippax, S., Onyx, J., Gault, U. and Benton, P. (1992) *Emotion and Gender: Constructing Meaning from Memory*. London: Sage.

Crossley, M.L. (2000) *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma and the Construction of Meaning*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Frank, A.W. (1995) *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Hiles, D. and aermák, I. (2008) Narrative psychology, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

Papathomas, A. and Lavallee, D. (2012) Narrative constructions of anorexia and abuse: an athlete's search for meaning in trauma, *Journal of Loss and Trauma: International Perspectives on Stress and Coping*, 14(4): 293–318.

Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C. (2005) Men, sport, spinal cord injury and narratives of hope, *Social Science and Medicine*, 61(5): 1095–105.

Snapshot Box 12.1

Can a coherent story be told about the use of narrative in psychology? A review of tensions and differences

Smith and Sparkes (2006) draw attention to the fact that narrative inquiry as an approach to qualitative research in psychology poses a number of theoretical challenges to the researcher. While the basic premise of a narrative approach is refreshingly common-sensical and straightforward in that it is based on the assumption that 'a person is essentially a story-telling animal' (Smith and Sparkes 2006: 170), Smith and Sparkes argue that the field of narrative inquiry contains a number of important tensions and differing perspectives which the narrative researcher needs to be aware of and engage with. In their article they identify a number of conceptual tensions which characterize the field of narrative inquiry in psychology. These revolve around the conceptualization of 'the self', ontology (the nature of narrative) and epistemology (the status of the text). Regarding the conceptualization of 'the self', Smith and Sparkes note that some narrative researchers subscribe to the view that the life story people tell constitutes their identity and their sense of self. Although this story will be revised and retold many times throughout one's life, there is a fundamental continuity to the inner narrative and this narrative continuity constitutes one's identity; from this point of view, 'identity is a life story' (Singer 2004: 445). Other narrative scholars believe that although telling stories about ourselves plays an important part in the formation of a sense of self, there is more to selfhood than telling stories. From this point of view, non-linguistic dimensions of experience (e.g. embodied, psychic and/or unconscious) also contribute significantly to the sense of

who we are. Furthermore, there are different views regarding the relative stability of narrative constructions of selfhood, with some narrative researchers emphasizing continuity, coherence and integration while others draw attention to the non-unitary, fragmentary, context-specific nature of narrative identity.

Regarding the nature of narrative (ontology), Smith and Sparkes (2006) observe that narrative researchers can adopt realist or relativist positions in relation to the narratives they study. A realist perspective approaches a narrative structure as something which pre-exists the telling of it, and as something that is formed in response to life experiences and conditions which have an existence outside of the story that it told about them. Here, a narrative is something that we weave out of the 'raw materials' of our lives. It is something that evolves over time and which takes on the status of a psychological structure. By contrast, a relativist approach to narrative is not concerned with the relationship between narrative and (internal or external) 'reality' because it does not believe that it is possible to access 'reality' without at the same time constructing it. Here, what is of interest is how people construct themselves within particular social interactions and what this allows them to do in the social world. From this perspective the social always comes first, and narrative identities are 'by-products of historically and culturally located people embedded within specific social relationships' (Smith and Sparkes 2006: 182).

Realist and relativist approaches to narrative also differ in their focus;
while realist narrative research would be concerned with the phenomenological dimensions of narrative (i.e. the 'inner' world of the individual), relativist approaches would only be concerned with the social performance of narrative identities (i.e. the social context). Finally, regarding epistemology, Smith and Sparkes (2006) point out that some narrative researchers are primarily interested in the content of the stories that are told (i.e. the *what* of the story), while others focus on the discursive aspects of how the stories are told (i.e. the *how* of the story). The former approach, therefore, is particularly concerned with the types of storylines and narrative structures that are available to people (reminiscent of Foucauldian discourse analysts' interest in availability of discourses, see Chapter 11) while the latter is more concerned with how narrative structures are utilized within specific social contexts (reminiscent of discursive psychologists' interest in the deployment of discursive resources, see Chapter 10). In addition, there is a difference between narrative researchers who aspire to produce systematic and thorough analyses of the stories people tell in order to identify common themes, structural features and functional aspects of these stories (Smith and Sparkes 2006: 185 refer to them as 'story analysts'), and researchers who are themselves 'storytellers' and for whom the product of narrative research is the story itself. Here, rather than presenting the researcher's analysis of the stories told by research participants, the narrative

researcher presents the stories that participants have told them.

In their paper, Smith and Sparkes (2006: 185) make an excellent job of 'untangling and illuminating a number of theoretical tensions' within the narrative approach to qualitative research. It is now up to you to make up your mind about where you stand in relation to these. The following publications may help you with this:

Bruner, J. (1987) Life as narrative, *Social Research*, 54: 11–32.

McAdams, D. (1997) The case for unity in the (post)modern self, in R. Ashmore and L. Jussim (eds) *Self and Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mishler, E. (1999) *Storylines: Craft Artists' Narratives of Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C. (2006) Narrative inquiry in psychology: exploring the tensions within, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3: 169–92.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 13

Visual methods

Joanna Silver

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the role of the visual in qualitative research and its potential for increasing our understanding of psychological processes
- how to work with visual data such as photographs, films, drawings and paintings
- how to analyse visual material
- the relationship between visual methods and grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and discursive psychology
- the ethical challenges associated with visual methods

In addition, you will be able to:

☑ locate the use of visual methods epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge they aim to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions they make about the world, and (3) how they conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process.

Researchers who use visual methods in psychology use materials such as photographs, films and drawings to explore the world of research participants. How researchers use and interpret the visual is determined by the type of questions that are being explored and the theoretical frameworks that inform such questions (Reavey 2011b). Thus, the visual can be analysed in its own right, or can be used as a way of eliciting verbal data, which can be analysed by other research methods such as grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and discursive psychology.

Reavey and Johnson (2008) demonstrate that until fairly recently, qualitative research methods used linguistic data only, as it is often assumed that images are more ambiguous and difficult to interpret than
words. Nevertheless, the use of visual methods is growing in psychology, perhaps as a result of living in a world that is pervaded by images. For example, when walking down the street we will often see adverts for products that feature the 'perfect' male or female body. Reavey (2011a) argues that images tell us how we should look and feel and inform us about what is 'acceptable' and 'normal'. Additionally, the

growth in social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace means that individuals can continually view and edit images of the self and others. Such sites reinforce the importance of the visual and demonstrate that we do not communicate by language alone.

Frith et al. (2005) argue that the visual medium can develop psychological work by allowing researchers to find out information that would be difficult to access using other methods. Additionally, visual methods can alter the voice of the research and allow researchers and audiences to broaden their experience, comprehension and representation of the topic being researched. This means that visual methods can give us a great deal of insight and understanding into topics. For example, Radley et al. (2005) asked people who were homeless to take photographs that represented their experiences of homelessness. The photographs in this research allowed participants to show their experiences as well as talk about them, which may assist readers to understand more about homelessness.

In this chapter, we will look further at the potential of visual methods. In particular, we will focus on how researchers have worked with photographs, films, drawings and paintings. Then we look at how to analyse the visual and the relationship between visual methods and qualitative methods of analysis. Finally, we examine ethical considerations when using the visual and look at the epistemological position associated with visual methods.

Working with photographs

Collier (1957: 856), a photographer and researcher, first described how photographs could be inserted into research interviews. He found that photographs aided rapport between participants and researchers and that information obtained in photographic interviews was more 'encyclopaedic' and 'precise' than information obtained in interviews that did not use photographs. Other reasons for using photographs in interviews include to gain 'information, affect and reflection' from participants (Rose 2007: 38). This means that photographs can be helpful in evoking deep feelings and thoughts from participants. For example, participants who had body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a condition marked by a distressing preoccupation with an imaginary or minor defect in a facial feature or a localized part of the body, were asked to bring in photographs of themselves at different points in their lives (Silver and Reavey 2010; Silver et al. 2010). When looking at photographs of their younger selves, several participants experienced strong emotions such as envy and sadness as they felt that their appearance had declined over the years. Participants found that physically looking at and interacting with these old photographs allowed them to access these feelings easily. Harper (2002) argues that images can evoke deeper layers of human consciousness than words.

Additionally, Del Busso (2011) demonstrates that using photographs can give participants agency and control over the research process, as well as tapping into and situating participants' stories in remembered experiences, times, spaces and places. This means that photographs can encourage the precise details of stories and can help the reader understand the context in which these accounts occur. For example, Radley and Taylor (2003) asked hospital patients to take photographs of the salient features of their ward, its spaces

and objects in order to explore the role of the physical setting in their recovery. The researchers found that the use of such photographs prompted participants' memories of their time in hospital, which led to detailed, specific and rich accounts of their experiences.

There are three main ways in which photographs are used in psychological research: *photo-elicitation*, *photo-production* and *photovoice*. Photo-elicitation is the technique of using already existing images in research interviews. Photo-production involves using photographs that are created during the research process. Photovoice uses photographs as a way of promoting social change for marginalized groups.

Del Busso (2011) shows that photo-elicitation methods are useful for exploring issues of change, process and life stage. For example, this method could be used to explore the experience of divorce, the process of grieving, and the experience of entering adulthood. Some photo-elicitation studies have explored women's embodiment (Del Busso 2011) and narratives and visualizations of self in BDD (Silver and Reavey 2010; Silver et al. 2010).

In order to find out more about which everyday experiences are fundamental to women's experiences of being embodied over time, Del Busso (2011) asked eight young women to take part in a topical life-history interview where they spoke about particular experiences that were important to their embodiment. Additionally, the women provided pre-existing photographs that were relevant to the research topic and spoke about the content of each photograph and its relation to embodied experiences over time. The photographs were not analysed independently, but instead the women's

interpretations and analysis of them formed part of their overall accounts of embodied experiences. Del Busso found that the pre-existing photographs meant that participants did not just talk about 'surface' aspects of the image (i.e. 'myself as the body in the image'), but allowed them to talk in detail about their embodiment experiences in such a way that highlighted being in motion and taking part in actions in the material and spatial world. For example, one participant, who was heterosexual, described a photograph of herself taken after swimming through a rock cave, during which time she felt physically active and empowered. This experience contrasted to a felt social expectation of looking and acting in a feminine and 'heterosexy' manner. According to Del Busso, a limitation of the photo-elicitation method was that participants were looking at themselves in the photograph, which may have led to concentrating on their body (as object in the image) in contrast to the felt and sensed experience of being embodied.

Del Busso argues that photo-production methods allow participants to take an active position in the research as they will have to think carefully about what they wish to photograph and why, which can be empowering for participants. Such methods create a link between the world of the participant and the researcher as they can allow the researcher to see glimpses of the participant's world. Some photo-production studies have explored the experiences of being in hospital (Radley and Taylor 2003), being in a wheelchair (Ziller and Smith 1977), and the effect of chemotherapy on patients' perceptions of their appearance (Frith and Harcourt 2007).

Frith and Harcourt (2007) began their study by asking participants with breast cancer who were due to start chemotherapy about their expectations and worries about this treatment, particularly focusing on appearance. They were then given a disposable camera to take photographs of anything that captured their experiences of treatment, specifically focusing on feelings relating to their bodies. It was felt that this visual approach was appropriate for exploring a treatment that could lead to appearance changes including hair loss and ulcers. In individual interviews with a researcher, participants were asked to discuss each photograph in turn and state why it had been taken and how it represented their experiences. Furthermore, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of taking a photographic record, talk about what they planned to do with the photographs, and reflect on any photographs that were particularly important or missing. Frith (2011) demonstrates that often photographs are missing for practical reasons, such as the camera breaking, giving insight into the research task, whereas sometimes photographs are not taken or brought to an interview because an aspect of the experience is so important or painful that it cannot be taken. The photographs were not analysed in themselves, but instead the data elicited as a result of the photographs was analysed and common themes across participants' accounts were noted. Some participants took photographs that represented a particular experience, for example, a tree with berries hanging on it represented one participant's feeling that she was 'hanging on' to life. Other photographs marked significant events such as the day that a participant's hair began to fall out. The researchers found that this method was useful in gaining unobtrusive insight into everyday experiences that are not

usually accessible to health care professionals. For more on this study, see Frith and Harcourt (2007) and Frith (2011).

Wang (1999: 185) argues that photovoice can allow people to 'identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique'. Specifically, the three goals of photovoice are: (1) to allow participants to record and reflect on their own and their community's strengths and worries; (2) to encourage critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community concerns through discussing photographs with others; and (3) to reach policy-makers. Some examples of photovoice projects include inviting Chinese village women to take photographs of their everyday health and work realities (Wang and Burris 1994, 1997) and asking participants who were homeless to take pictures of the places which they inhabit (Hodgetts et al. 2007).

Hodgetts et al. (2007) began their research by inviting 12 participants who were homeless to semi-structured interviews based upon participant photovoice projects. Participants were asked about their journey to homelessness, social networks and health. They were then required to take photographs that gave an insight into their experiences of homelessness, social relationships and use of public places. In a further interview, participants spoke about each of their photographs. The researchers viewed the photographs as having a dialectical relationship with the participants who produced them, and the aim of analysis was to understand, with the photographs, more about the lives of the participants. The analysis suggested that participants felt that homelessness led to serious physical illness and stigma as well as a loss of self. However, despite often living in dirty, unhygienic spaces, participants valued important places where they had access to

basic material resources and social support. This study showed how health issues for people who are homeless are connected to their material, spatial and relational circumstances. Poor health can be affected by the actual physical and material places homeless people inhabit, such as cold,
damp streets. Additionally, social stigma and a belief that the self is deviant and out of place can have an extremely negative impact on health. Hodgetts et al. conclude that although comprehending more about the lives of homeless people will not stop homelessness occurring, it can help researchers, policy-makers and service providers interpret how homeless people make choices about accessing spaces of care.

Although using photographs in interviews can be empowering for participants and enable researchers to find out more about a topic, it is important to realize the limitations of this approach. Reavey (2011b) argues that we must not assume that images will necessarily induce emotions or that participants will choose to talk about emotions within a research context. Additionally, Prosser and Loxley (2008) claim that there is a danger that using photographs in interviews could encourage participants to talk about what they believe to be the researcher's chosen meaning, instead of the participant's chosen meaning. Furthermore, Hodgetts et al. (2011) argue that giving a 'voice' to marginalized participants can lead to romanticizing marginalized people, and the belief that participants are the experts can lead to an anti-expert stance towards scholars.

Working with films

Muir (2008) observes that films made by research participants have been used in social research since the 1960s. This method involves giving research participants a camcorder, film or other audio-visual piece of equipment and asking them to film something that gives insight into themselves or their lives. It is argued that this method can help give participants a 'voice' and allow them to record experiences in everyday life away from the gaze of the researcher (Muir 2008). Research using films has looked at the interactional accomplishment of midwifery postnatal examinations (Lomax and Casey 1998), how children cope when a parent is suffering from cancer (Buchwald et al. 2009) and how social class has informed the life trajectories of young British women (Pini and Walkerdine 2011).

Pini and Walkerdine (2011) describe their longitudinal study looking at a group of working-class British women and a group of middle-class British women who began making video diaries aged 16 or 21. Prior to this, in order to explore how social class came to inform the different women's life trajectories, the women had been studied at earlier life stages by means of more traditional data collection methods. The aim of asking participants to keep video diaries was to allow them to open up about their lives without feeling that an outsider was observing them. The information given by participants was eventually made into a series of 10 three-minute television programmes entitled, *Girls, Girls, Girls*.

Pini and Walkerdine show how the video data made clear the multiplicity and fragmentation involved in the constitution of subjectivity as the women acted differently depending on whom they were with at the time. Although the researchers

show that working- and middle-class participants had different material, linguistic, social and interpretative resources to make a visual fiction of self, they highlight how difficult it is to make hard and fast distinctions between video diaries created by working- and middle-class participants.

Many of the women who took part saw their camera as a trusted friend that they confided in on a regular basis. Pini and Walkerdine point out, however, that although it was hoped that the diaries would give an 'authentic' insight into the women's lives, all of the data was subjected to editing by participants and programme makers. Additionally, Pini and Walkerdine argue that it is naïve to see the exercise as empowering the women. While a researcher was not present during the filming, many women were extremely conscious of the perceived focus of the project and were aware that research psychologists as well as television viewers would watch their videos. They therefore wanted to appear 'normal' and 'respectable'. Not all participants enjoyed filming, some stating that they did it out of obligation only.

When planning to give participants video cameras in a psychological study, it is important to think carefully about the equipment used and how this may influence the outcome of the research. For example, Muir (2008) demonstrates that giving participants a tripod may produce high quality images, but may be obtrusive and discourage use in social settings. Thus, the researcher must think about whether it is more important to have high quality images or an unobtrusive means of filming. Similarly, the size, shape and usability of the camera will affect the way it is used by participants.

Working with drawings and paintings

Drawings are often used with children for diagnostic or therapeutic purposes in psychology, as there is an assumption that drawings are a useful way of communicating with people who are unable to express
themselves by using language alone. Although often confined to children, Guillemin (2004) demonstrates that drawings can be successfully used as an adjunct to other social research methods.

Guillemin shows how, when using drawings as a research tool, it is important to view the drawing as something that is made in a particular space and time, instead of an unchanging or constant entity. Thus, if someone who is experiencing cancer is asked to draw or paint their illness, it is likely that this drawing or painting will change on a very regular basis depending on their current prognosis, stage of treatment and general mood and feelings at the time. Guillemin demonstrates that usually participants' drawings are not analysed in themselves by researchers, but instead participants will be asked to interpret their drawings. A participant's drawings or paintings can therefore give us some insight into how they perceive their unique world. Drawings and paintings have been used in research to explore how women attending a menopause clinic understand the menopause (Guillemin 1996) and how women paint pictures of embodied experience (Gillies et al. 2005).

Gillies et al. (2005: 200), as part of an ongoing research project that explored ways in which meanings are constructed and lived, with and through the body, used paintings to explore embodiment, defined as 'not as simply given, or something to be tagged onto the discursive, but as a total expression of the discursive and non discursive'. As in

memory work (see Chapter 12), the researchers began by identifying a trigger, which was ageing. Group members then individually painted an image that characterized their feelings, thoughts and experiences of ageing by using a range of materials. Finally, at a separate meeting, each painting was discussed by the group as a whole. Discussions were recorded, transcribed and circulated. The transcripts were initially analysed by individual group members who looked at key themes in the discussion and similarities and differences in the paintings. After circulation, interpretations were discussed further.

Three major themes identified from the analysis were 'boundaries', 'time' and 'transformation'. Although the researchers hoped that using visual methods, as opposed to written methods, would transcend a Cartesian dualist discourse, this was only partly achieved, as they did not always produce a sense of ageing as an embodied experience. Gillies et al. argue that this method still meant that questions needed to be asked about the 'status of the text.' In particular, the researchers demonstrate that there are four ways to 'read' the paintings. They may give information about the nature of the phenomenon (e.g. the pictures may tell us something about the ageing process). They may give us some insight into the painter (e.g. they may tell us that a painter is scared of ageing). They may give information about the cultural resources/meanings available to the researchers (e.g. they may tell us that culturally we are encouraged to look young and disguise the ageing process). Finally, the paintings may be viewed as a prompt to promote more talk about the phenomenon. If you are intending to use drawings or paintings as a research method, it is important to think carefully about the 'status of the text' and how this status is

influenced by your research question. This issue is discussed further in Snapshot Box 13.1 at the end of this chapter (see also Chapter 1 for more on the 'status of the text').

How do we analyse the visual?

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, visual methods can be used to elicit verbal data, which can then be analysed and written about. However, Guillemin (2004) suggests that an obvious limitation to this approach is that while focusing on the visual, interpretations are restricted to spoken and written words. In contrast, Gleeson (2011) offers an approach called polytextual thematic analysis whereby the visual is analysed in its own right. This method of analysis is polytextual as it is based on the premise that all texts, including visual texts, are based on each other. It is 'thematic' as it tries to categorize the repetitive features or themes in the data that allow patterns to be seen. Gleeson argues that while psychologists may lack confidence in interpreting the visual, the skills involved in analysing words and pictures are similar and involve the same method of bringing one set of texts to bear on another so as to make meaning.

The 'recipe' for polytextual thematic analysis is outlined below (Gleeson 2011: 320):

1. Look at the images repeatedly, singly, in groups, successively and in different orders. Write down any possible themes that may surface, being careful to portray the features of the image that suggest that theme. These initial themes may be called 'proto-themes' to indicate their provisional and ever-changing nature.

2. Take notice of how the images make you feel and describe these feelings in your notes. Revisit these notes and add further comments as you analyse other images to see if your experience of the pictures changes when you begin to 'get your eye in'.
3. When a proto-theme arises more than once, gather all the material that is pertinent to that theme. Pull the pertinent pictures together and look to see whether the proto-theme is distinct.
4. Write a short description (or definition) of the proto-theme.
5. When you have recognized a theme in a picture, go back over all the other images to see if it is found anywhere else.
6. Again, gather all the material that is applicable to that proto-theme. Revisit the description of the proto-theme if required and bring together descriptions of the elements from different images that best exemplify that theme. At this point, the initial proto-themes may become themes. Such an alteration indicates that the theme has been thought about and checked a great deal, but does not mean that it is set in its final form.
7. Continue to find themes in the pictures until no more separate themes (that are relevant to the question you have brought to your analysis) transpire.
8. Look at all the descriptions of themes in relation to each other and contemplate the extent to which they are distinct. If anything is unclear, redefine the identified themes. Write descriptions of themes that

draw attention to the differences between themes. The aim of this is to make the most of differentiation so as to pull out distinctive features of the image.

9. Examine the themes to see if any gather in a manner that suggests a higher-order theme that links them.
10. Define the higher-order theme and think about all the other themes in relation to it. As other higher-order themes emerge, think about each in relation to all the other themes that have surfaced.
11. Decide which of the themes that have emerged best addresses the research question so that a select few can be picked out for writing up. It will be of benefit to include any supporting materials that contextualize the images being analysed. Supporting materials include culturally available visual images that can help interpret the image in question.

Gleeson states that if themes are presented as written descriptions of the visual elements of the data, each theme should be accompanied with a descriptive title, definition and a report of the elements that constitute that theme. A limitation of this approach, as acknowledged by Gleeson (2011), is that the visual is still analysed by written descriptions instead of being illustrated visually by images that capture and represent the theme.

The relationship between visual and qualitative methods of analysis

As we have just seen, visual data can be analysed in its own right. However, if the researcher decides not to analyse the visual data per se, visual methods can still be used as a data

collection technique. The verbal data elicited as a result of using visual methods such as drawings, films or photographs can then be analysed by qualitative methods such as grounded theory, IPA and discursive psychology. It is important, however, to think carefully about the epistemological position associated with your method of analysis and ensure that this is consistent with the status that you give to the visual text. In this section we will explore the relationship between visual methods and grounded theory, IPA and discursive psychology.

As we saw in Chapter 7, grounded theory research tends to be influenced by a realist orientation to knowledge generation (although there are social constructionist versions of grounded theory that are less realist). The aim of grounded theory is to develop theories that are grounded in the data. These theories can be 'discovered' by the researcher. The use of visual materials in a grounded theory study can, therefore, be a helpful way of uncovering relevant categories of meaning. In a realist version of grounded theory, the researcher captures the social/experiential reality that exists 'out there' in the world and which is contained within the visual materials (or within the verbal data elicited as a result of an engagement with the visual materials). Here, it is important that the researcher acts as a competent witness and ensures that his or her preconceptions or biases do not interfere with the discovery of what is going on in the participants' social world.

As noted in Chapter 8, IPA can be used to find out more about people's experiences of something – for example, the experience of being in love, or having heart disease. As the researcher needs to enter the life world of the participant, the

visual can provide a good way of doing this. Additionally, asking participants to talk about their visual data (such as films, drawings or photographs) can be a helpful way of steering away from closed questions, instead allowing the participant to speak about their personal experience of the phenomenon being explored. IPA does not look at whether participants' accounts are true or false, or correspond to an external 'reality', but instead looks at how participants make sense of their experiences.

Thus, when the visual is used in an IPA study, visual materials such as participants' pre-existing photographs cannot tell us about the factual, objective 'reality' of the topic being discussed and cannot elicit stored unchanging memories, but instead tell us more about the way participants make sense of their past experiences. IPA, unlike grounded theory, recognizes that a researcher cannot be totally objective when looking at a text and that analysis inevitably involves interpretation. It is therefore important that, when carrying out an IPA study that uses visual materials, the researcher reflects on his or her own biases and ways of viewing the world as this will influence the way that (s)he views both the visual materials and the verbal data produced as a result of the visual medium.

Discursive psychology is influenced by a social constructionist epistemology, so does not try to make claims about the world. Instead this method views language as performative and views people's speech as a social action (see Chapter 10). Thus, in a discursive psychology research project, the language will be closely examined as the researcher will be interested in how participants use language and for what purpose. While visual methods cannot therefore give us any information about what is going on outside the

text, they can be helpful in encouraging people to talk in detail about topics, so are a useful way of eliciting verbal data for such an analysis. As discursive methods should preferably be used to analyse naturally occurring data, visual methods can be incorporated into group discussions consisting of pre-existing groups. For example, if a researcher wanted to see how mathematics undergraduate students talked about their time at university, they could ask them to take photographs that they felt relevant to this topic. Such photographs may generate discussions in a focus group of students and this data could then be analysed by a discourse analysis.

Overall, introducing visual materials into a qualitative analysis can help generate rich data. Qualitative researchers look at how people make meaning in their world and often try to 'give voice' to marginalized people (see Chapter 1). It is argued that the use of visual materials in research projects is consistent with these aims of qualitative research.

Ethical considerations

Visual methods present particular ethical challenges to researchers. As with all research, informed consent is of the utmost importance. Wiles et al. (2008) point out that consent involves both consent to take or make visual images and consent to later use the images. It is therefore essential that participants provide consent before their photographs are presented in the research, and it is important that participants are clear how their photographs will be used. Additionally, the researcher must not use photographs that capture other people in them, unless they have explicitly consented to this and have a clear understanding about how exactly their image

will be used. Wiles et al. suggest that consent can be written, although in some circumstances filmed or audio-recorded consent may be more suitable.

Anonymity is at the heart of most psychological research studies. When using visual methods, this must be carefully thought about. Unless a participant explicitly wishes for his or her identity to be revealed, the researcher must think carefully about how to guarantee anonymity as both images of individuals and images of places can be potentially identifiable. One way to guarantee participants' anonymity is not to include any identifiable photographs but instead to *describe* the content of the image. However, Reavey and Johnson (2008) argue that while this preserves participants' identities, the stripping down of meaning from a polysemic image to a mono-modal account limits the richness of the data. Other ways to preserve participants' anonymity include increasing the pixilation of facial features so that they are blurred or using specific anonymization software that translates visual images into cartoons or drawn images and blocks out eyes, faces and other recognizable features (Wiles et al. 2008). However, Wiles et al. argue that such methods are problematic as the purpose of visual images is to give more information about something than using text alone and this may not be achieved if the images are altered. Obscuring faces may make it difficult to make sense of the images, as faces are necessary to allow us to interpret physical, psychological, social and emotional aspects of individuals' experiences (Wiles et al. 2008). Additionally, Wiles et al. argue that obscuring faces can objectify people and has associations with 'criminals' or 'victims' of crime as often such people will have their face obscured in media images so that they are not identified.

As with all ethical questions, there are no hard and fast rules about how to ensure that visual methods are carried out in a way that is not harmful to participants or other people who may be affected by the research. However, it is essential that researchers carefully think through the ethical implications of their research and how to overcome any challenges that they face.

Three epistemological questions

What kind of knowledge do visual methods aim to produce?

Visual methods cannot give us objective knowledge about the world, but instead aim to give us some insight into how a person views their particular world at a particular moment in time. For example, a participant's old family photographs cannot give us objective facts about their past experience, but instead can tell us about how the participant subjectively views the past. This subjective view of the past is not fixed, but is likely to change depending on the context in which the photograph is viewed.

Rose (2007) argues that visual imagery is never innocent as it is always constructed through a range of practices, technologies and knowledges. Thus, it is important to remember that images are no more 'real' than words and they cannot speak for themselves without interpretation on the part of the researcher (Radley and Taylor 2003). Willig (2012a) demonstrates that researchers need to think carefully about what the image represents as an image could be a visual representation of the participant's deep feelings, a representation of cultural meanings related to the topic, an

existential 'truth' about a specific experience, or something different altogether.

What kinds of assumptions do visual methods make about the world?

Visual methods assume that we live in a visual world and that we do not only communicate using language, but also through the visual. It is assumed that the way that we express ourselves through visual methods can tell us something meaningful. Visual data can provide the researcher with important information about the participant, the culture they inhabit and/or the researcher's own subjectivity. It could be argued that visual methods can sometimes access parts of a participant's experiences that words alone could not. Some visual methods such as photovoice also assume that the production of photographs can be used as a way of encouraging social change for disadvantaged groups of society. Overall, then, visual methods assume that there is more to human experience than can be captured in words and that this non-verbal dimension deserves attention from qualitative researchers.

How do visual methods conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

Both the participant and the researcher construct the meanings of images and there are many ways in which the researcher and participant play a part in this meaning-making. For example, Wiles et al. (2008) demonstrate that researchers may use a certain lens to photograph a participant, 'set up' a particular photograph or use software to change a photograph so that a specific point is made. Additionally, the researcher

will have a large role in the analysis of the data produced by visual methods as their own biases and beliefs will play a part in how the data is interpreted (whether this be the image, or the verbal data elicited as a result of the visual methods). It is important, therefore, that the researcher is open and reflective about his or her role in the research process in order to help others make sense of the data produced by visual methods. However, it is important to acknowledge that different methods of qualitative analysis adopt different perspectives on the role of the researcher, depending on their orientation to knowledge generation (see Chapter 2). This means that when visual methods are used to generate verbal data which is then analysed using a particular qualitative method of data analysis (e.g. grounded theory, IPA, discourse analysis), the conceptualization of the role of the researcher will then be informed by the chosen analytic method.

Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that visual methods are a useful and creative way of exploring psychological topics. Using photographs, films and drawings with participants can increase participant agency and control and help participants to make meaning of their experiences in a manner that does not rely on language alone. The visual data produced as a result of a study can be analysed in itself, or alternatively visual methods are an effective way of obtaining linguistic data. Visual methods present particular ethical challenges, such as how to preserve participants' anonymity in photographs and it is

essential that such challenges are sensitively considered before embarking on a project that uses the visual.

Interactive exercises

1. Try to remember your most recent holiday. Having conjured up some thoughts and feelings in relation to your memories of this holiday, imagine that you are telling a friend about the holiday. Speak into a recording device, reflecting on your holiday, for at least 10 minutes. Afterwards, transcribe your recording. Now select three photographs that you took on the holiday in question. Look at each of them for several minutes and then record the thoughts and feelings that come to you in response to looking at the three photographs. Again, transcribe the recording. Now compare the two transcripts. How are they similar and how are they different from one another? Did the two methods of reflection generate different kinds of data? Which transcript tells you more about your experience? Which one would you prefer to analyse? Why is this?
2. Using newspapers and/or magazines, select at least six images of people within a particular context. These could be politicians making a speech, ordinary people accepting awards or

being shown as winners of something (e.g. a lottery), or photos of celebrities 'off stage' (e.g. while shopping or taking their children to school). The important thing is that all six images represent the same topic (i.e. politicians making a speech *or* ordinary people accepting awards *or* celebrities 'off stage') as the aim of the analysis is to draw some conclusions about how a particular group of people is represented. Using Gleeson's (2011) 'recipe' for polytextual thematic analysis (see pp. 160–1), work your way through the stages of analysis. What do the proto-themes, themes and higher-order themes you have identified tell you about the images? Write a concluding statement which summarizes what your analysis has found out about the ways in which the group of people you are interested in are being represented in the media.

Further reading

Frith, H. and Harcourt, D. (2007) Using photographs to capture women's experiences of chemotherapy: reflecting on the method, *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10): 1340–50.

Gillies, V., Harden, A., Johnson, K., Reavey, P., Strange, V. and Willig, C. (2005) Painting pictures of embodied experience: the use of non-verbal data production for the study of embodiment, *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Special Issue on Visual Methodologies*, 2(3): 199–212.

Reavey, P. (ed.) (2011) *Visual Methods in Psychology: Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research.* Hove: Psychology Press.

Reavey, P. and Johnson, K. (2008) Visual approaches: using and interpreting images, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

Rose, G. (2007) *Visual Methods: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Snapshot Box 13.1

What is the 'status' of images in visual research?

Although the use of visual methods allows the researcher to capture dimensions of meaning which may not emerge as readily through the use of words alone, it is important to acknowledge that images (be they paintings, photographs or videos) are no more 'real' than words (Reavey and Johnson 2008: 311). Radley and Taylor (2003) remind us that images are given meaning by the research participants, and they suggest that it is this meaning that the qualitative researcher tends to be

interested in. It is the participants' responses to the image, their description of it, and the memories and associations that emerge in connection with it that provide the researcher with information about the participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences. The argument here is that the images themselves do not represent
the participants' inner world in a direct, unmediated way. And even if it were possible for an image to directly express a thought or a feeling, the researcher would still need to interpret the image in order to 'get at' its meaning. This is because images do not speak for themselves. They need to be interpreted just as written or spoken texts do, and this means that the researcher needs to make a decision regarding the status he or she attributes to the images before those images are analysed.

Gillies et al. (2005) propose that there are (at least!) four ways in which images produced by research participants can be approached. First, they can be approached phenomenologically, in which case the image would be taken as having something to say about the nature and quality of the experience that it is designed to capture. For example, a participant may paint a bright red shape with jagged edges to represent the pain they feel when experiencing a migraine, and the researcher would take this as telling them something about the experience of migraine pain. A second way of approaching an image involves using it in order to find out more about the psychology of the person who produced it. For example, when asked to select photographs which capture her

experience of a recent holiday, a research participant may produce only pictures of herself. The researcher may take this to tell them something about the participant's preoccupation with her body as an object. A third approach to interpreting images draws on a social constructionist perspective whereby the image produced by a research participant is taken to provide the researcher with information about the cultural resources available to the participant. For example, when invited to produce an image that represents the ageing process, a research participant may paint a picture of an elderly woman who is dressed in clothing which is associated with youth culture. The researcher may conclude that such an image speaks to a cultural preoccupation with 'looking young' and that it invokes gendered constructions such as 'mutton dressed as lamb'. Finally, images produced by research participants could be approached as not representing anything at all until the participants have spoken about their thoughts, feelings and associations in response to the image (see Radley and Taylor 2003). Whatever approach is adopted, it is essential that the researcher is clear about what they take the images to represent (i.e. their 'status' as data) before they analyse them. The status of the images is likely to be determined by the research question as it is the research question which specifies what it is that the researcher expects the data to tell them something about (e.g. the nature of the phenomenon under investigation; social and/or psychological structures; available social constructions and/or cultural resources, etc.). Again, as with all qualitative designs, the choice of methods of data

collection and analysis, the approach to interpretation that is adopted and the status attributed to the data are all informed by the research question.

You can follow up the arguments concerning the status of visual data using the following publications:

Gillies, V., Harden, A., Johnson, K., Reavey, P., Strange, V. and Willig, C. (2005) Painting pictures of embodied experience: the use of non-verbal data production for the study of embodiment, *Qualitative Research in Psychology: Special Issue on Visual Methodologies*, 2(3): 199–212.

Radley, A. and Taylor, D. (2003) Images of recovery: a photo-elicitation study on the hospital ward, *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(1): 77–99.

Reavey, P. and Johnson, K. (2008) Visual approaches: using and interpreting images, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Part 3

Reflections and conclusions

Part contents

14 Quality in qualitative research

15 Review and conclusions: where next for qualitative psychology?

Chapter 14

Quality in qualitative research

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- ☑ the importance of aiming for quality in qualitative research
- ☑ the relationship between epistemology and evaluation
- ☑ the most widely used criteria for evaluating qualitative research
- ☑ how to identify evaluative criteria which are relevant to the research being evaluated

This chapter addresses the question of how to evaluate qualitative research. How do we decide what makes a good qualitative study? How do we select appropriate criteria to evaluate qualitative research? And to what extent is it possible to establish guidelines for evaluating qualitative

research in general? It could be argued that the notion of systematic evaluation constitutes a considerable challenge for qualitative researchers. After all, qualitative research is concerned with meaning in context. It involves the interpretation of data. We have seen that the role of the qualitative researcher requires an active engagement with the data, which presupposes a standpoint or point of departure. This means that qualitative research acknowledges a subjective element in the research process. References to 'creativity' and 'subjectivity' can easily invoke romantic notions of artistic endeavour and intuitive insight, which in turn are often contrasted with notions of scientific rigour and objectivity. But such a conceptual opposition between 'art' and 'science' does not, in my view, reflect a real division between mutually exclusive ways of working, and qualitative researchers do need to address questions about the scientific value of their work and its contribution to knowledge. The criteria traditionally used to evaluate the scientific value of quantitative research in psychology (e.g. reliability, representativeness, validity, generalizability, objectivity) are not, however, in their current form, meaningfully applicable to qualitative research (see also Chapters 1 and 2). As a result, qualitative researchers have for some time been engaged in discussions about the ways in which qualitative research ought to be evaluated. The result has been the identification of a number of different sets of criteria and a lively debate around the value of such criteria.

In the remainder of this chapter, I review some of the evaluation criteria that have been proposed by qualitative researchers. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between epistemology and evaluation. It is argued that evaluation criteria need to be compatible with the

epistemological framework of the research that is being evaluated. This argument is then explored in relation to the methods introduced in this book. The chapter concludes by considering the limitations associated with the use of method-specific criteria in evaluating qualitative research.

What constitutes 'good' qualitative research?

Several authors have attempted to identify criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research in psychology. For example, Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) proposed seven attributes that characterize good qualitative research. These are based upon the assumption that the researcher and the researched, the knower and the known, are not independent entities, and that, therefore, 'objectivity' or absence of bias are not meaningful criteria for judging qualitative research. Henwood and Pidgeon's guidelines for good practice are concerned with ensuring rigour while acknowledging idiosyncracy and creativity in the research process. They include:

1. *The importance of fit*. Analytic categories generated by the researcher should fit the data well. To demonstrate good fit, the researcher is encouraged to write explicit, clear and comprehensive accounts of why phenomena have been labelled and categorized in particular ways.
2. *Integration of theory*. Relationships between units of analysis should be clearly explicated and their integration at different levels of generality should be readily apparent. The analyst's memos should

demonstrate the process of integration and its rationale.

3. *Reflexivity*. Since the research process inevitably shapes the object of inquiry, the role of the researcher needs to be acknowledged in the documentation of the research.
4. *Documentation*. The researcher should provide an inclusive and comprehensive account of what was done and why throughout the research process.
5. *Theoretical sampling and negative case analysis*. The researcher should continuously seek to extend and modify emerging theory. To do this, (s)he should explore cases that do not fit as well as those that are likely to generate new insights.
6. *Sensitivity to negotiated realities*. The researcher needs to attend to the ways in which the research is interpreted by the participants who generated the data in the first place. While participant validation is not always a requirement (people may disagree with the researcher's interpretation for all kinds of personal and social reasons), the researcher should at least be aware of participants' reactions and attempt to explain differences between his or her own interpretation and those of the participants.
7. *Transferability*. To allow readers to explore the extent to which the study may, or may not, have applicability beyond the specific context within which the data were generated, the researcher should report the contextual features of the study in full.

Elliott et al. (1999) have identified their own guidelines for the evaluation of qualitative research reports, and these have been widely adopted by qualitative researchers. These authors suggest that there are a number of criteria that are applicable to both qualitative and quantitative research (e.g. appropriateness of methods, clarity of presentation, contribution to knowledge) but that the evaluation of qualitative research requires consideration of further attributes that are especially pertinent to qualitative research. These are:

1. *Owning one's perspective*. Qualitative researchers should disclose their own values and assumptions to allow readers to interpret the analysis and to consider possible alternative interpretations (this corresponds broadly to Henwood and Pidgeon's 'reflexivity').
2. *Situating the sample*. Qualitative researchers should describe participants and their life circumstances in some detail to allow the reader to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings (this corresponds broadly to Henwood and Pidgeon's 'transferability').
3. *Grounding in examples*. Qualitative researchers should use examples of the data to demonstrate the analytic procedures used and the understanding they have generated. This also allows the reader to assess the fit between the data and the researcher's interpretations (this corresponds broadly to Henwood and Pidgeon's 'importance of fit').
4. *Providing credibility checks*. Qualitative researchers should check whether their accounts are credible by referring to others' (e.g. colleagues, participants, other researchers) interpretations of the data or by

applying other methods of analysis in relation to the same subject matter (e.g. other qualitative perspectives, quantitative data) (some aspects of this are covered in Henwood and Pidgeon's 'sensitivity to negotiated realities').

5. *Coherence*. Qualitative researchers should aim to present analyses that are characterized by coherence and integration (e.g. in the shape of a narrative or story, a 'map', a framework or underlying structure) while preserving nuances in the data (Henwood and Pidgeon are concerned with a similar issue in 'integration of theory').
6. *Accomplishing general versus specific research tasks*. Qualitative researchers need to be clear about their research tasks. If their research seeks to develop a general understanding of a phenomenon, they need to ensure that their study is based upon an appropriate range of instances. If they aim to provide insight into a specific instance or case, they need to ensure that it has been studied systematically and comprehensively. In both cases, limitations of the applicability of the findings beyond their original contexts need to be addressed.
7. *Resonating with readers*. Qualitative researchers should ensure that the material is presented in such a way as to stimulate resonance in the reader. Readers should feel that the research has clarified or expanded their understanding and appreciation of the subject matter.

We can see that there is some overlap between Henwood and Pidgeon's (1992) criteria and the guidelines of Elliott et al.

(1999). According to these authors, 'good practice' in qualitative research requires the systematic and clear presentation of analyses, which are demonstrably grounded in the data and which pay attention to reflexivity issues. In addition, such work is characterized by an awareness of its contextual and theoretical specificity and the limitations that this imposes upon its relevance and applicability. See also Yardley (2000, 2008) for a further discussion of principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research, and Howitt (2010) for a helpful practical guide to evaluating qualitative research.

Similar sets of criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research have been developed within other social scientific disciplines (e.g. Robson 1993; Leininger 1994). While most guidelines for evaluation do seem to tap into similar issues (e.g. reflexivity, credibility, transferability), it is clear that authors approach the question of evaluation from the particular standpoint afforded by their own preferred methodological practice(s). For example, Henwood and Pidgeon's (1992) criteria are informed by grounded theory concepts and terminology, whereas Elliott et al. (1999) locate themselves within a phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition. More recently, Smith has produced a helpful account of seven guidelines to establish 'what makes a good IPA paper' (2011: 24). We do need to ask ourselves to what extent evaluation criteria generated with a particular qualitative methodology in mind are, in fact, applicable to all types of qualitative research. Some (e.g. Madill et al. 2000; Reicher 2000) have argued that, since there is no such thing as a unified qualitative research paradigm, criteria for evaluating qualitative research need to be tailored to fit the particular method they are meant to evaluate. Qualitative research can

be conducted from within different epistemological and ontological frameworks that require different standards of excellence. This is because different methodological approaches are based upon different assumptions about the nature of the world, the meaning of knowledge and the role of the researcher in the research process (see Chapters 1 and 2).

In Chapter 1, I pointed out that, to be able to evaluate research in a meaningful way, we need to know what its objectives were and what kind of knowledge it aimed to produce. In other words, I suggested that, to be able to evaluate a study's contribution to knowledge, we need to have a clear understanding of the epistemological basis of the research method used in the study. To help the reader keep track of the epistemological arguments associated with each of the eight research methods detailed in this book, I identified three epistemological questions, which were addressed in relation to each of the eight methods.

In the next section, I explore the relationship between epistemology and evaluation in general. This is followed by a discussion of the ways in which we may evaluate research generated by different research methods.

Epistemology and evaluation

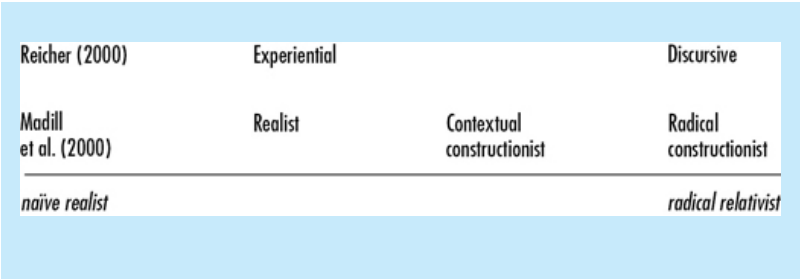
Both Reicher (2000) and Madill et al. (2000) argue that qualitative research is characterized by epistemological diversity and that this has implications for evaluation. However, they do not make use of the same classification of approaches in their exploration of this diversity. Reicher identifies two types of approach to qualitative research (*experiential* and *discursive*), while Madill et al. trace three

epistemological strands (*realist*, *contextual constructionist* and *radical constructionist*). Reicher contrasts qualitative research that aims to gain a better understanding of people's experiences, ways of thinking and actions (*experiential*) with qualitative research that is concerned with the role of language in the construction of reality (*discursive*). He argues that experiential qualitative methods (such as grounded theory) are essentially realist because they 'retain the notion that language is a reflection of internal categories of understanding and can therefore be used to "read off" what people really think and experience' (Reicher 2000: 3). By contrast, discursive qualitative methods are social constructionist because they conceptualize language as a form of social action that constructs versions of reality.

Madill et al.'s (2000) classification does not suggest such sharp contrasts. Instead, the three approaches they identify are more akin to positions on a continuum with naïve realism at one end and radical relativism at the other. Here, *realist* qualitative research is characterized by a discovery orientation that can take more or less naïve forms. Less naïve forms of realism (e.g. critical realism) have much in common with constructionist approaches because they recognize the subjective element in knowledge production. *Contextual constructionist* research is based upon the assumption that all knowledge is necessarily contextual and standpoint-dependent. This means that different perspectives generate different insights into the same phenomenon. As a result, such research is concerned with completeness rather than accuracy of representations. Finally, *radical constructionism* challenges the notion of representation itself. Here, knowledge is seen as a social construction and the focus of the research is the discursive resources and practices that

constitute 'knowledge'. Thus, Reicher's (2000) *experiential* category combines Madill et al.'s (2000) *realist* and *contextual constructionist* approaches (see Figure 14.1).

Figure 14.1 Classification of qualitative epistemologies



Both Reicher (2000) and Madill et al. (2000) agree that the differences between the various approaches and their epistemological underpinnings are significant. In Reicher's (2000: 4) words, 'they have different philosophical roots, they have different theoretical assumptions and they ask different types of questions'. As a result, they call for different criteria in their evaluation. According to Madill et al., studies that are conducted from within a realist epistemology can be evaluated in terms of their *objectivity* and *reliability*. Objectivity here refers to the absence of bias on the part of the researcher. For example, grounded theory researchers would be expected to ensure that they let categories emerge from the data rather than imposing meanings upon the data. Reliability of the analysis can be demonstrated by using triangulation (of researchers and/or of methods) to show how different perspectives converge and thus confirm one another's observations and interpretations. To demonstrate excellence, studies conducted from within a contextual constructionist epistemology would be expected to show the relationship

between accounts and the contexts within which they have been produced. That is, accounts need to be demonstrably grounded in the (e.g. situational, personal, cultural, social, etc.) conditions within which they were produced. This applies to both participants' accounts (e.g. of their experiences, of their thoughts and feelings) and researchers' accounts (i.e. their analyses and interpretations of data). Thus, an important criterion for evaluation within this context is *reflexivity*.

Studies conducted from within a radical constructionist epistemology reject the notion that research methods are ways of accessing entities such as experiences, thoughts or feelings owned by participants. As a result, criteria that are concerned with the accuracy or authenticity of accounts are meaningless from a
radical constructionist point of view. Instead, such research needs to be evaluated in its own terms. Madill et al. (2000) propose *internal coherence*, *deviant case analysis* and *reader evaluation* as appropriate criteria within this context. Internal coherence refers to the extent to which the analysis 'hangs together' and does not contain major contradictions. Deviant case analysis constitutes a test of an emerging theoretical formulation and serves to delimit the context of its applicability. Reader evaluation refers to the extent to which the study is seen to contribute insights and understanding on the part of its readers. In addition, the inclusion of raw data in the form of verbatim quotations or extracts from interview transcripts allows readers to arrive at their own interpretation of the material.

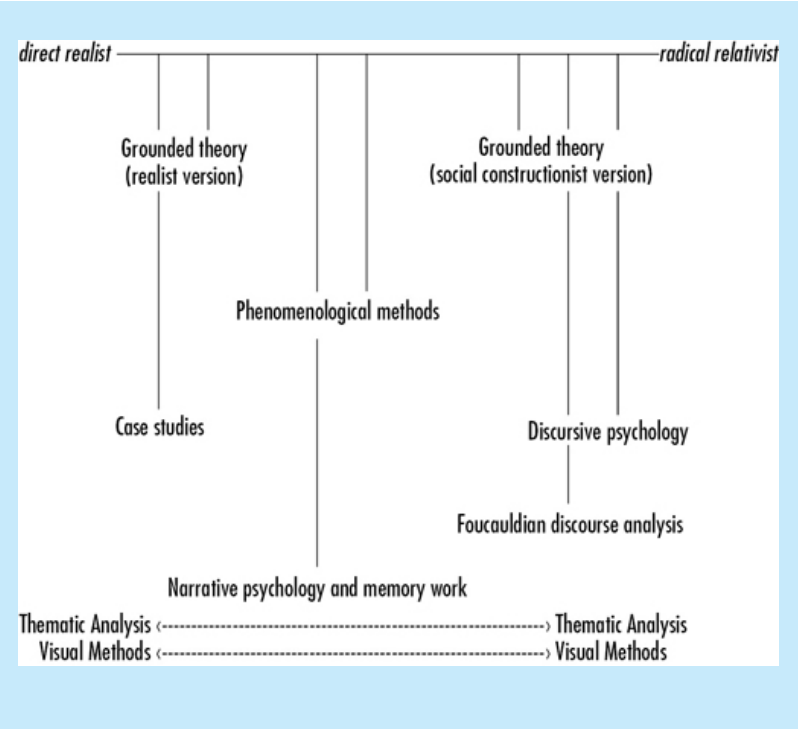
To allow readers to evaluate a qualitative study, researchers need to be clear about what it was they wanted to find out (i.e.

the research question) and what kind of knowledge they were trying to generate (i.e. their epistemological position) (see Chapter 2). In addition, they have to ensure that the research methods they use are appropriate to the research question and compatible with their epistemological position (see Chapter 3). Madill et al. (2000: 17) remind us that, 'qualitative researchers have a responsibility to make their epistemological position clear, conduct their research in a manner consistent with that position, and present their findings in a way that allows them to be evaluated appropriately'.

Evaluation of the methods introduced in this book

At the end of each chapter in Part 2 of this book, three epistemological questions were addressed in relation to the methods introduced in the chapter. The questions were: (1) What kind of knowledge does the method produce?, (2) What kinds of assumptions does the method make about the world? and (3) How does the method conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process? Looking back over Chapters 6–13, we are now able to locate each of the eight qualitative research approaches in terms of its epistemological position. On a continuum from naïve (or direct) realism to radical relativism, they may be positioned as shown in Figure 14.2.

Figure 14.2 Epistemological positions associated with the eight approaches



Using Madill et al.'s (2000) classification of epistemologies, case studies and the realist version of grounded theory could be described as 'realist', phenomenological methods, narrative approaches and memory work as well as the social constructionist version of grounded theory take a 'contextual constructionist' approach, while discursive psychology could be classified as 'radical constructionist'. Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) can be approached from either a 'contextual constructionist' or from a 'radical constructionist' perspective. Since thematic analysis and visual methods can be used to address a wide range of research questions, and since the status attributed to themes and images depends upon the research question, these

methods could potentially be located anywhere on the continuum. As discussed in the relevant chapters (Chapter 6 and Chapter 13), these methods do not in themselves demand that the researcher adopts a particular epistemological orientation. They are compatible with any epistemological position provided that the researcher is clear about the status they attribute to the data and about what the patterns identified in the data represent.

Having classified our eight approaches in terms of their epistemological positions, we are now able to identify appropriate evaluation criteria for each of them. Realist versions of grounded theory and case study research may be evaluated with reference to the extent to which they have captured what is really going on (in someone's life, in someone's mind, in a situation). Since their aim is to accurately describe and, where possible, also theorize social and psychological processes, they need to be judged in terms of the *objectivity* and *reliability* of the knowledge that they have generated. This could be done through various forms of triangulation. For example, two researchers could independently code the same section of data to establish the extent to which the categories each of them have identified correspond to one another. Similarly, observations of the same situation could be made by two or more observers to establish the accuracy of the observations made. If the data are to be interpreted using a set of specific theoretical concepts and premises, then two or more analysts could be invited to produce such theoretical readings in order to ensure that they are consistent. The purpose of triangulation within this context is to obtain confirmation of findings through convergence of different perspectives. The point at which perspectives converge is seen to represent 'reality'.

Phenomenological methods, narrative approaches and memory work, the social constructionist version of grounded theory and in some cases also FDA may be evaluated by assessing the extent to which they have successfully grounded their observations within the contexts that have generated them. However, it is important to bear in mind that studies using these methods may not aspire to explain the phenomena they describe. Instead, they may be designed to provide a rich and comprehensive description of a phenomenon (e.g. an experience, a way of life, a situation), which communicates to readers a sense of its quality and texture. In this case, the application of evaluative criteria that are concerned with the relationship between the phenomenon and the conditions that may have given rise to it may not be justified. For example, an interpretative phenomenological study would be less likely to be concerned with such a relationship than a critical realist approach to FDA, where the researcher aims to ground discourses in social and institutional practices or even structures (for a discussion of a critical realist approach to discourse analysis, see Willig 1999a, 2000; Sims-Schouten et al. 2007). Nevertheless, a concern with meaning in context and hermeneutic interpretation is shared by these methods, which means that studies using them need to address *reflexivity* issues. That is, they need to acknowledge that, and preferably also demonstrate how, the researcher's perspective and position have shaped the research.

Discursive psychology and FDA are best evaluated by assessing the quality of the accounts they produce. Do they tell a good story? Do they tell a story that is clear, internally coherent and sufficiently differentiated? Does it generate new insights for readers? Is it convincing? As a result of its affiliation with a radical constructionist epistemology,

discourse analytic research cannot be evaluated in terms of its correspondence to (as in realist research) or its relationship with (as in contextual constructionist work) external conditions or contexts. Instead, it needs to be evaluated in its own terms – that is, as a discursive construction in its own right, on the basis of its internal coherence, theoretical sophistication and persuasiveness. As Madill et al. (2000: 13) point out, '[T]his does not mean, though, that any interpretation is as good as another.' Evaluation criteria applicable to this type of work are designed to assess the *quality* of the research rather than its *validity*.

Some (e.g. Forshaw 2007) take issue with qualitative psychologists who advocate 'rigour' and 'thoroughness' in qualitative research. They argue that since qualitative research acknowledges that multiple interpretations exist and are equally valid, there is no need to concern ourselves with 'method'. For example, Forshaw (2007: 478) proposes that 'there is a worrying double-standard … on the one hand we are turning our backs on "truth" but on the other we are working out methods to understand texts and prescribing how we should tackle understanding them'. However, it is important to understand that while offering interpretations is different from making truth claims, method most certainly is implicated in interpretation and understanding. The difference between a methodical interpretation of a text such as an interview transcript, and the researcher's subjective view of it, is that the former is based upon a systematic, cyclical process of critical reflection and challenge of the interpreter's own emerging interpretations, whereas the
latter is the product of the author's unmediated associations and reactions. While both accounts may well be fascinating and insightful, they are the product of different processes. In

order for the reader to interpret (and appreciate) the researcher's interpretation, (s)he needs to know as much as possible about the process by which it was generated. This is why we need 'methods sections' in research reports (see Willig 2012a for a fuller discussion of what is involved in the process of interpretation).

Some caveats

I have argued that evaluation criteria need to be compatible with the epistemological framework of the research that is being evaluated. I have suggested that before we can evaluate a qualitative study we need to locate its epistemological position. To help us do that, I identified three epistemological questions that I have addressed in relation to each of the eight qualitative research methods introduced in this book. In addition, I have constructed a continuum of epistemological positions ranging from 'direct realism' to 'radical relativism' (see Figures 14.1 and 14.2) on which to place our eight methods. This facilitates a consideration of methods in relation to one another and provides a starting point for the selection of appropriate evaluation criteria. However, it is now time to acknowledge that the identification of epistemological positions is not as unproblematic as I have made it appear to be.

The classification of epistemological perspectives into distinct positions necessarily requires a degree of simplification and homogenizing of perspectives. A label such as 'realist' or 'relativist' is unable to capture the true complexities and ambiguities that characterize the various epistemologies. Furthermore, the categorization of any particular method(ology) is itself a matter of judgement. Most

approaches combine a number of features that are compatible with more than one epistemological position. In addition, most methods evolve over time and may modify their epistemological assumptions accordingly. Some approaches have evolved into distinct versions that may need to be classified independently from one another. As a result, qualitative researchers do not necessarily agree with one another's classification of methods. For example, while some authors (e.g. Reicher 2000) describe grounded theory as realist in orientation, others (e.g. Rennie 1998) argue that it involves a reconciliation of realism and relativism. Yet others (Madill et al. 2000) have suggested that there are distinct versions of grounded theory, some of which are realist and some of which are social constructionist in orientation. A third argument (e.g. Annells 1996) proposes that whereas grounded theory emerged from a post-positivist paradigm, it is now moving towards constructionism. Thus, while the consideration of epistemological issues is an essential part of conducting and evaluating qualitative research, it may not always be possible to identify and subscribe to clear-cut and unambiguous epistemological perspectives. However, the fact that epistemological considerations may give rise to ambiguity, lack of certainty and a certain amount of confusion should not deter us from engaging with them. Thinking, talking and writing about one's own and others' epistemological commitments encourages reflexivity, which in turn helps us to specify the status (and limitations) of our own and others' knowledge claims (for detailed discussions of the relationship between epistemology and psychological research, see Slife and Williams 1995; Bem and Looren de Jong 1997).

Conclusion

Evaluating qualitative research is not an easy task. In order to conduct a fair and meaningful assessment of the quality of a piece of qualitative research we need to understand the epistemological position from which the research was conducted. We need to know what kind of knowledge the research sought to produce and what kind of contribution to the field the researcher aspired to make. This is because the criteria we use to evaluate the research need to fit the type of research we are looking at. Evaluating qualitative research, therefore, requires qualitative research expertise as well as a good understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the various approaches to qualitative research. It is not a tick-box exercise, and I would argue that a critical and reflexive engagement with the criteria we use to evaluate qualitative research must form a part of any evaluation of a piece of qualitative research.

Discussion questions

1. How might we assess the quality of a qualitative study?
2. What is the relationship between epistemology and evaluation in qualitative research?
3. In your view, is there a tension between the openness and flexibility associated with

qualitative research, and a concern with assessing its quality?

Further reading

Elliott, R., Fischer, C.T. and Rennie, D.L. (1999) Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields, *British Journal for Clinical Psychology*, 38: 215–29.

Henwood, K. and Pidgeon, N.F. (1992) Qualitative research and psychological theorising, *British Journal of Psychology*, 83(1): 97–112.

Howitt, D. (2010) Ensuring quality in qualitative research, in D. Howitt, *Introduction to Qualitative Methods in Psychology*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.

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.

Reicher, S. (2000) Against methodolatry: some comments on Elliott, Fischer and Rennie, *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 39: 1–6.

Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Chapter 15

Review and conclusions: where next for qualitative psychology?

Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- the arguments associated with the 'critique of methodolatry'
- different ways of thinking about what constitutes qualitative research
- the complex relationship between 'research' and 'practice' in psychology
- possible future directions for qualitative psychology

In Chapter 1, I suggested that we think about the research process as a form of adventure. I proposed that far from being 'recipes', qualitative research methods are best thought of as ways of approaching a question, and that this involves a

creative, rather than mechanical, mode of working which inevitably brings surprises, changes of direction and some uncertainty to the research process. And yet, it could be argued that my decision to present eight distinct qualitative methodologies in consecutive chapters in Part 2 of this book implies that research methods are 'recipes' after all, whose 'instructions' we must learn to follow correctly in order to produce 'good' research. After all, a text devoted to 'methods' can easily appear to privilege the 'how (to do)' over the 'what (to do)'. This attitude has been referred to, and critiqued as, 'methodolatry' (see Curt 1994; Janesick 1994; Reicher 2000; Chamberlain 2000). In this final chapter I want to revisit the question of the extent to which qualitative psychology ought to be thought about in terms of distinct methodological procedures. I shall review the critique of 'methodolatry' in qualitative research and introduce some alternative ways of thinking about the qualitative research endeavour. The discussion will move on to
problematize the divide between 'research' and 'practice' in psychology and consider the role of qualitative research in applied psychology. The chapter concludes with some ideas for future directions in qualitative psychology.

The critique of 'methodolatry'

Chamberlain (2000, 2011, 2012), a prominent critic of 'methodolatry', has expressed concern about the use of 'off-the-shelf methodologies' (2012: 59) in qualitative psychology for some time. He argues that too many qualitative researchers seek guidance from manualized methodologies which they can use ready-made, much like a recipe. He is concerned about the development of codified practice in the field of qualitative psychology and the

emergence of methodological 'brands' which are adopted wholesale by researchers with a resulting homogenization of research practice within each 'brand'. He warns against the increasing standardization of qualitative methodologies as this encourages their 'unthinking and uncritical adoption' (2012: 61). In order to counteract this trend, Chamberlain recommends that researchers do not start with the identification of their chosen methodological approach, but rather with a theoretical engagement with their topic which, he argues, would then allow them to develop 'specific methods-in-context that would provide relevant in-depth data that was amenable to appropriate analytic interpretation and insights into the phenomenon under investigation' (2012: 61–2) (see Chamberlain et al. 2011 for an example of research taking such an approach). Here, Chamberlain echoes Kvale's (1996a: 278) conceptualization of methods as 'the way to the goal'. As every research project has a different goal, it follows that,

Every piece of research is unique, in what it seeks to do and how it seeks to do it. So methodological ideas and concepts, like theoretical ideas and concepts, are there to stimulate, to be drawn on and utilized, to be adapted in context; they are not there to be followed slavishly. The use of methodology should never become methodolatry.

(Chamberlain 2012: 62)

I think these are wise words. As has been argued in earlier chapters (see Chapters 1 and 2), the importance of choosing our goal (in the form of the research question) cannot be overestimated. After all, it is our research questions that motivate our research activity and which determine the

direction of our research. Research methods are not recipes but ways of approaching questions, and the value of our research depends on the skill with which we manage to match our methods to our questions in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. The motivation required for sustained research involvement cannot come from an interest in methodology alone. Indeed, it is likely that '[T]he best methodologies of qualitative and quantitative research have come from those engaged in active research in which methodology has been subordinated to the ardent desire to know and communicate something significant about human life' (Orum et al. 1991: 23).

Pluralism and integration

Qualitative psychologists have responded to the critique of methodolatry by considering the use of several qualitative research methods within the context of one and the same study. They have begun to challenge the assumption that due to the epistemological differences between qualitative methodologies, researchers must necessarily choose between them. Frost (2009b: 32) argues that '[T]he mono-method approach provides detailed insight into individual experience from a particular epistemological framework but leaves the qualitative researcher open to accusations of "methodolatry" (Curt 1994) and a pre-occupation with tensions between qualitative methods (Willig 2000).' An alternative to 'methodolatry' is methodological pluralism, which Frost (2009a, 2009b, 2011) has been promoting in recent years. Frost (2009b) argues that the combination of qualitative approaches within the context of one study allows for a multi-layered understanding of the data from which an audience can then select those aspects which have meaning

and value to their area of interest. If different methods of analysis tell us about different aspects of the data, then the use of more than one method can be expected to generate a wider range of insights. A pluralist approach is based on the assumption that there is not one single truth that can be discovered about something (e.g. about a social phenomenon or about an experience) but rather that there are a number of interesting and important observations we could make about it. Different methods provide access to
different insights. For example, grounded theory methodology helps us to map social processes and their consequences for participants; however, it is not designed to help us shed light on the inner workings of an individual participant's psyche. Phenomenological approaches help us to enter the world of our research participants and gain access to (some of its) quality and texture; however, such approaches do not allow us to draw firm conclusions about why their experience is as it is. Case studies allow us to get to know a particular case very well and to begin to understand how and why it came to be what it is. However, they are less good at providing a panoramic view of a phenomenon and at identifying similarities and patterns across contexts. Discursive psychology is good at revealing the action-oriented nature of language and its achievements within specific contexts; however, it cannot tell us anything about the individual's inner experience. Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) does offer insights into the relationship between discourse and subjectivity; however, it does not provide us with the tools to study non-linguistic dimensions of experience. Narrative approaches and memory work help us to understand how participants construct meaning and make connections between the past and the present, and how this may shape their experience of themselves today; however, such methods

cannot tell us what actually happened to our participants and how these events affected them at the time of their occurrence. The types of insights generated through the use of thematic analysis and visual methods depend upon the particular research design within which they are deployed. No method is without limitations and no method can tell us everything about a phenomenon. Methodological pluralism argues that, therefore, we should not have to choose between them. Lyons and Coyle (2007), Frost (2009a, 2009b) and Willig (2012a: Part 2) present interesting examples of what can be achieved by using different qualitative methods of analysis in order to produce different interpretations of one and the same data set.

In addition to the idea of a fully-fledged pluralistic approach (whereby the same data set is analysed repeatedly using a number of entirely different qualitative methods), researchers have also begun to advocate forms of *binocularity* (see Frosh and Saville Young 2008) whereby data is examined through more than one lens during the course of data analysis. For example, Frosh and Saville Young (2008) present an initial discursive reading of their interview transcripts which is then followed by a psychoanalytically inspired interpretation which seeks to deepen the researchers' understanding of what motivates participants to talk about their experiences in just the way that they do. Similarly, Eatough and Smith's (2008) approach to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) involves moving between different levels of interpretation, starting off with a descriptive phenomenological account which is then followed by a level of analysis that involves critically probing and then theorizing the data, thus offering a deeper hermeneutic reading. Smith et al. (2009) also advocate the use of several levels of interpretation in IPA (see Smith et

al. 2009: 104–5 for a good example of this). Another example of binocularity is Langdridge's (2007) critical narrative analysis (CNA) which integrates aspects of phenomenological and narrative approaches.

The difference between fully-fledged pluralism and binocularity is that the former is happy to stay with competing readings of the same data, while the latter uses different approaches to complement one another in order to produce a more complete, 'thicker' reading. In the former case, the researcher chooses to let the readings sit alongside one another, leaving it to the reader to decide which one(s) to respond to and in what way(s), while in the latter case the researcher attempts to integrate the various readings in a way that allows them to tell a coherent story about the phenomenon under investigation. Those who prefer to stay with competing readings would argue that human experience itself is complex, multi-layered, multi-faceted and often contradictory, and that this should not be smoothed over in our analytic treatment of it. For example, Holstein and Gubrium (2000b) advise that instead of seeking theoretical integration of perspectives, qualitative researchers should engage in a process of shifting between perspectives as they move through a cycle of interrogation of the data, temporarily deferring one perspective only to return to it again a little later. They compare this process to a 'skilled juggling act' (p. 495) and to 'shifting gear' (p. 502). Similarly, Frosh (2007) argues that there are dangers associated with the desire to 'make sense' of one's data because, he argues, qualitative interpretations that 'make sense' of human experience do not, in fact, reflect the nature and quality of human experience which is always and necessarily (at least somewhat) fragmentary and contradictory. By contrast, those who opt for

a binocular approach would argue that the use of a combination of methods of analysis allows the researcher to generate a better, fuller understanding of human experience. Here, the aim is to make more sense and to produce a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Colahan et al. (2012) produce a helpful account of a study which adopts a dual focus methodology in order to better understand the experience of 'satisfaction' in long-term heterosexual relationships. The authors explain how the combination of IPA and FDA in a cycle of analysis helped them to explore the interplay between language, culture and experience.

These researchers describe the process by which they moved between these two methodologies in order to 'follow two strands of emerging knowledge' (p. 55) to produce 'two complementary interpretative stories' (p. 51) which together shed light on how their participants experienced relationship satisfaction within a particular social and discursive context.

The pluralistic researcher will need to decide how much coherence and integration they wish to pursue in their research, and to be clear about this when disseminating the outcome of their research endeavour.

What makes research 'research'?

Once we move away from an 'off-the-shelf', approach to the use of qualitative methods, we can broaden our view of what constitutes 'qualitative research'. Once we let go of the idea that qualitative research as a genre is defined by the use of one of the available qualitative methodologies (e.g. those introduced in Part 2 of this book), we can revisit the question of what makes research 'research'. After all, in everyday life

we constantly try to find out things and gain an understanding of what is going on around us, and yet we do not refer to these activities as 'research'. We can probably agree that for a quest for understanding to become 'research', we need to make sure that it is systematic, carefully designed, based on a sound rationale, and that its remit is clearly defined. As argued throughout this book, there needs to be a clear and explicit question driving any research endeavour. However, once these conditions are met, a quest for knowledge can be pursued in contexts other than those formally identified as 'research settings'. For example, psychologist practitioners who work with people who present with psychological difficulties and/or emotional distress over a period of time are very likely to develop and refine their understanding of what may cause or at least mediate their clients' experiences. Even though they do not conduct any formal 'research' into their clients' experiences of psychological distress, and although they will not be thinking of their clients' accounts of their experiences as 'data', the psychologists' encounter with clients will generate new ideas and understandings which are informed by their interpretation and analysis of their clients' stories. The concept of the 'scientist-practitioner' (Barlow et al. 1984) aspires to capture and promote a research orientation for practitioners, both in terms of encouraging practising psychologists to keep up to date with and apply new insights gained from the latest published research, and in terms of continuously evaluating and developing their own practice. It could be argued that the traditional conceptual separation of 'research' and 'practice' is not helpful, and that many important new insights have, in fact, emerged from systematic reflection on practice. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the work of Sigmund Freud, who was not primarily a 'researcher' in the formal sense but whose theories explaining

the psychodynamics of his patients have been hugely influential in psychology. Kvale (2003: 22) offers some very interesting reflections on the psychoanalytic interview as inspiration for qualitative research, citing Freud's ([1923] 1964: 235) description of the psychoanalytic session as 'a procedure for the investigation of mental processes which are almost inaccessible in any other way'. Having reviewed the contribution of practice-driven knowledge generation to psychology as an academic discipline, Kvale (2003: 30) concludes:

It is paradoxical that, within the discipline of psychology, some of the most lasting and penetrating knowledge of the human situation has been produced as a side-effect of therapeutically helping patients to change their lives. One implication of the knowledge potentials of the therapeutic situation may be a move from treating professional practice merely as the application of scientific theories toward also regarding professional practice as a powerful site for producing knowledge of the human situation.

These arguments suggest that it may be a good idea for qualitative psychologists to broaden their definition of what constitutes 'research', and to consider the inclusion of practice-based forms of systematic knowledge generation within its remit. Case studies (e.g. McLeod 2010) are probably the most obvious 'method' which allows such an integration of 'research' and 'practice' to take place; however, other approaches such as grounded theory, phenomenological methods or narrative analysis are also highly suitable. For example, Miller and Willig (2012) used grounded theory strategies to analyse pluralistic therapy sessions conducted by the first author over a period of time, while Kemp's (2011)

phenomenological reading of his clients' accounts and conduct generated the beginnings of a new theory of addiction. Narrative therapy (Epston and White 1992) approaches clients' accounts of their experience as narrative structures which can be identified, reflected on, problematized and changed. It could be argued that any qualitative approach to data analysis could potentially be used in order to systematically interrogate and reflect on psychological work that is done within an applied setting.

Where next for qualitative psychology?

The term 'qualitative psychology' has emerged relatively recently (see Smith 2003; Parker 2005). It could be argued that the use of this term indicates that qualitative research in psychology is beginning to encompass more than simply the use of qualitative methods. What exactly constitutes 'qualitative psychology' (other than the use of qualitative research methods, of course) is not yet clear. I would like to think, though, that some of the developments described in the preceding sections (pluralism, integration, practice-led 'research') form part of a movement away from 'qualitative methods' and towards 'qualitative psychology'. This aspiration chimes with Chamberlain's (2012) call for an approach to qualitative research in psychology which prioritizes research questions and which puts methods in their place, treating them as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Qualitative psychology, therefore, ought to provide a space free from 'methodolatry' where researchers, practitioners and service users can come together in order to draw on their combined knowledge and skills in order to find answers to questions about the human condition. Such a vision of qualitative psychology would then require us to

become increasingly tolerant of uncertainty because our research journeys would become increasingly unpredictable. Doing qualitative research would mean embarking upon a quest for knowledge rather than following a predetermined research protocol. It would feel more like joining an expedition into unknown territory than baking a cake in a familiar kitchen! From this perspective, engaging in qualitative psychology involves formulating a qualitative research question and then allowing this question to guide one's search for answers, drawing on those qualitative methods and methodologies which may provide us with some relevant insights into the phenomenon of interest. It involves considering a wide range of options for data collection and analysis, as well as for potential collaborations. And it involves creativity and openness as well as critical reflexive consideration of how the researcher's use of research strategies 'will add to the project, work together and combine into a unified project that achieves its goal' (Chamberlain 2012: 62). In practice, then, the future of qualitative psychology would be characterized by methodological pluralism, collaboration and an integration of 'research' and 'practice'.

A word about technology

Qualitative analysis is a time-consuming process that requires a high level of commitment from the researcher. Even a small-scale qualitative study is based upon many hours of painstaking exploration of the data (see Appendices 1–3). Larger qualitative studies, such as PhD theses, may involve line-by-line analysis of hundreds of pages of interview transcripts. A frequently asked question concerns the use of computer programs in the analysis of qualitative data. To

what extent can the use of computer software speed up the process of qualitative analysis? And would this allow us to analyse larger data sets? As a result, can qualitative research begin to incorporate objectives such as representativeness and generalizability?

There are now a number of computer programs for qualitative analysis available. Flick (1998) puts the figure at around 25; however, new programs continue to be developed. The most well-known software packages are ETHNOGRAPH (http://www.QualisResearch.com), NUD*IST (http://www.qsr.com.au), ATLAS (http://www.altlasti.de) (see Seale 2000) and MAXqda (see Silver and Fielding 2008). These programs allow researchers to attach codes to segments of text and to create data files. Researcher memos can also be recorded and filed. Retrieval of data, on the basis of files or features of files, allows the researcher to inspect the data from a variety of perspectives and with different questions in mind. Some programs (e.g. ATLAS) move beyond coding and retrieval of data and offer additional features that facilitate theory development. These include visual displays of the hierarchical relationships between codes and the construction of conceptual diagrams or networks. Computers can certainly speed up the process of data exploration. The easy retrieval of data files and inspection of analytic memos on screen removes the need for physical cutting and pasting, photocopying of extracts, colour coding and manual sorting. In addition, such programs allow the researcher to retrieve files that share certain features based on codes, keywords or descriptive labels in order to identify patterns within the data without having to search through the entire data set. See Silver and Fielding (2008) for a detailed discussion of the various features and functions of computer-assisted

qualitative data analysis. However, it is important to remember that the computer can be no more than a tool in the service of the researcher; it has no creative abilities of its own. As Flick (1998: 256) puts it, 'it is of course not the programs which develop the theory – just as it is not the word processor that writes an article'.

The use of computer packages is not appropriate for all types of qualitative research. They are most widely used in thematic analysis or grounded theory research, particularly where researchers work with a large volume of data (e.g. see Joffe 2012). I would argue that computer-assisted qualitative research is most compatible with realist research. Research which adopts hermeneutic or social constructionist orientations is less amenable to the use of computer software. For example, for discursive analyses concerned with the ways in which meaning is constructed through language and how this varies across contexts, code-and-retrieve operations are unlikely to be particularly helpful. In such analyses, attention is paid to the variability and flexibility of discursive constructions and practices. This means that the same word(s) can mean different things in different contexts, that meanings are socially negotiated and that absences can carry significant meanings. While computers can still be useful in purely practical terms (e.g. for storage of quotations in files, for inserting analytic comments into transcripts, for cutting and pasting extracts into research reports, etc.), it is not advisable to rely on simple codes in the analysis of discourse (but see Silver and Fielding 2008 for a discussion of the use of computer-assisted discourse analysis). This is because codes tend to take the form of labels which rely on common-sense meanings, which are themselves the object of deconstruction in discursive analyses. Researchers who use methods that are

hermeneutic, reflexive and interpretative (e.g. IPA or memory work) also need to take a cautious approach to the use of computer packages. When discussing the use of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, Howitt (2010: 416) observes that 'many researchers do not regard its use as essential since cutting and pasting, etc. on a good word processing program will allow much the same flexibility'.

However, it is worth keeping abreast of developments in research-related computer technology. For example, the emergence of software that can store and replay sound recordings is likely to benefit researchers who are interested in discourse and conversation (for a discussion of such programs see Kvale 1996b; Seale 2000). The use of this technology would make transcription redundant (audio programs such as Adobe Audition can be used to manage digital data files) and it would allow the researcher to pay more attention to the non-verbal aspects of speech (such as intonation, pitch, volume, etc.). Furthermore, the presentation of a research report in the form of a CD-ROM rather than an article, a book or a thesis, would facilitate the inclusion of more text and raw data, thus increasing opportunities for reader evaluation.

It follows that it is of utmost importance that a qualitative researcher's decision to use a computer package is based upon an assessment of the compatibility of their chosen program with the approach to interpretation (s)he wishes to take.

Conclusion

In concluding this book, I want to step back and reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research in order to clarify what it is that such research has to offer researchers and practitioners in psychology. Such considerations are important for those who are in the process of deciding whether or not qualitative research methods are appropriate for their research purposes. They also help qualitative researchers to develop and maintain realistic expectations about what a qualitative study can, and what it cannot, deliver.

Qualitative research provides the researcher with an opportunity to study meanings. It allows the researcher to tap into the perspectives and interpretations of participants. In this way, it facilitates the generation of genuinely novel insights and new understandings. Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis may be thought of as ways of listening and their strength may be said to lie in their sensitivity to diverse forms of expression. In addition, such methods are able to tolerate and even theorize tensions and contradictions within the data. Unlike much quantitative analysis, which tends to discard 'outliers', qualitative research pays attention to exceptional cases and idiosyncracies in order to gain a more complete understanding of a phenomenon. Qualitative research tends to be open-ended in the sense that the research process is not predetermined or fixed in advance. As a result, unjustified assumptions,

inappropriate research questions, false starts, and so on, can be identified, and the direction of the research can be modified accordingly. Kvale (1995: 27) invokes the notion of 'craftsmanship' when he describes the validation process in qualitative research:

Validation comes to depend on the quality of craftsmanship in an investigation, which includes continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings. In a craftsmanship approach to validation, the emphasis is moved from inspection at the end of the production line to quality control throughout the stages of knowledge production.

However, qualitative research does not provide the researcher with certainty. It tends to be concerned with complex social and psychological processes that involve the negotiation of meanings and interpretations among participants, including the researcher. Even those qualitative researchers who work from within a realist paradigm need to address the role of reflexivity in the research process. Although they may attempt to avoid the imposition of meanings through approaching their data without preconceptions or expectations, they recognize that researcher objectivity is an ideal rather than a reality. Alternative interpretations of the data are always possible. Furthermore, qualitative research does not allow the researcher to identify generally applicable laws of cause and effect. Qualitative studies tend to work with small sample sizes in depth, which means that they can generate

insights about the dynamics of particular cases. They cannot, however, make claims about trends, regularities or distributions in a population. Similarly, qualitative research is concerned with description and explanation but not with prediction. Since qualitative studies explore phenomena within their natural contexts, they are not able to control some variables so as to focus on others. As a result, qualitative research tends to be holistic and explanatory rather than reductionist and predictive (see also Chapter 9 for a more detailed discussion of generalizability in qualitative research).

Finally, since different qualitative research methods work from different epistemological positions, it is not always possible to compare or integrate their findings even when they are concerned with similar subject matter. Understanding a study's results and evaluating it requires a clear understanding of its epistemological base. Qualitative researchers who are experts in one particular methodology are not necessarily good judges of other types of qualitative research. This means that the qualitative research community is characterized by a certain amount of fragmentation and division, which does not facilitate collaboration and communication among its members. However, the recent trend towards pluralism and dual focus approaches heralds an opening up in this regard, and there are indications that qualitative psychologists are increasingly moving beyond 'methodolatry' and methodological orthodoxies in the pursuit of a fuller understanding of the human condition.

Discussion questions

1. What is involved in the 'critique of methodolatry'?
2. To what extent can methodological pluralism counteract 'methodolatry'?
3. How do we know that we are 'doing research'?

Further reading

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Online

Learning Centre

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at ***www.openup.co.uk/willig<http://www.openup.co.uk/willig>*** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

Appendix 1

What influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs? A grounded theory study exploring the experiences of heroin users

Sarah Dryden

Reflexive preface

This is a shortened account of research undertaken using a grounded theory approach. When embarking on this research the first thing I became aware of was how much literature there was regarding the origins, developments and application of grounded theory! An important initial step required considering numerous debates regarding quantitative and qualitative research, specifically epistemological perspectives. In my first draft I found I had written an essay as part of my methodology section about the history of grounded theory. Looking back, this was my way of making sense of the

enormous amount of reading you can do about grounded theory but also really understanding the approach (or at the very least my interpretation) of grounded theory I was using.

However, don't let this put you off. Once grasped, grounded theory guides just about every aspect of your research. Prior to using grounded theory I had not used a method that seemed to be embedded in every part of the research process and not just the act of analysing the data. For me this is a real strength of grounded theory.

I am hugely appreciative of all the people who took part in the research; it was a privilege that they shared very personal and valuable experiences with me and they were central to the writing of my thesis. Hopefully the account below provides one insight into how grounded theory can be applied. The field of drug use and addiction is vast. Grounded theory allowed me to explore how people decided to want to stop using drugs, by taking a step back from what can be done about it and instead listening to how meaning is attributed by the interviewee.

Abstract

The provision of drug treatment for people who use drugs, such as heroin, is a key priority in the UK (NTA 2006). A critical focus of the UK 'recovery agenda' relates to rebuilding lives through reducing the prevalence of drug use, which places emphasis on the role of drug treatment (HM Government 2010). Importantly, understanding the role of the individual can facilitate the delivery of drug treatment (Tsogia et al. 2001). Addiction research has been criticized for lacking a qualitative focus that encompasses the client's view (Orford

2008; Wilkinson 2008) and how they make sense of their drug use (Etherington 2008). The aim of the current research was to understand what influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs, and how this relates to their experience of drug treatment.

Interviews (n = 15) and a focus group (n = 9) with people accessing treatment for heroin use were undertaken and analysed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) to provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences of drug use and treatment. From the analysis, five main categories emerged: *life with drugs*, *realization*, *treatment influences*, *client influences* and *life after drugs*. The core category identified was 'realization'. Realization was defined as the personal recognition and acceptance of the impact that drugs had upon an interviewee, resulting in a person actively 'wanting' to stop using drugs. Interviewees reported realization to have the most important influence on their decision to want to stop using drugs, with treatment providing the tools to make this a reality. The role of treatment as a supporting mechanism for realization is discussed, with a shift in focus from how treatment modalities stop people from using drugs to how the individual is pivotal to this process.

Introduction

People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others.

Blaise Pascal (1623–62)

The current research explores the lived experiences of heroin users to understand what influences their decision to want to stop using drugs. A qualitative approach was adopted to allow an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. The major contribution of the research to the field of addiction is the understanding of how people attribute meaning to their decision to want to stop using drugs, and how this influences their experience of drug treatment. The rationale for focusing on an individual's decision to want to stop using drugs relates to the fact that the majority of people who enter treatment have the goal of becoming drug-free (McKeganey et al. 2006) as well as reflecting one of the main objectives of drug treatment (NTA 2009).

Why do people use drugs?

Theories of addiction propose explanations of why people use drugs and subsequently become addicted. These include the moral model which describes addiction as related to personal choice and responsibility (Albery and Munafo 2007; Ogden, 2007); the biomedical model which views addiction as a lifelong disease determined by the intrinsic characteristics of an individual (Donovan and Marlatt 2005; Ogden 2007); and neurobiological theories which describe the effects of drugs on the brain (Teeson et al. 2002; Albery and Munafo 2007).

Relevance to health psychology: biopsychosocial model

Addictive behaviours are of interest to health psychologists due to the relationship between the psychological, social and physical factors associated with them (Albery and Munafo 2007). The biopsychosocial model (Engel 1977) has become

a prominent model in the field of addiction, as well as being a foundation of health psychology.

The biopsychosocial model encourages focus on the whole individual, providing recognition that drug use is multi-dimensional (Donovan and Marlatt 2005). From this perspective the client should be central to the focus of the drug treatment system. The biopsychosocial model challenges the traditional biomedical model, primarily due to the latter's lack of recognition given to the role of behavioural, social and psychological factors.

The lack of conclusive agreement regarding the mechanisms underpinning addiction demonstrates the complexity in the development drug use. Ogden (2007) concludes that due to such complexities it is not feasible for one individual theory or model to fully explain addiction.

Deciding to stop using drugs

What does it mean to stop using drugs?

The terminology used to describe a person who is in the process of stopping or has stopped using drugs is particularly controversial. Such terminology includes recovery (The Betty Ford Institute Consensus Panel 2007; Laudet 2008), abstinence (WHO 2011) and drug-free (NTA 2011). What appear to be missing from these definitions are the processes involved in an individual trying and wanting to stop using drugs.

While the current research considers the role of treatment (assisted), it is acknowledged that previous research shows

that people can stop using drugs 'naturally' without the need of a formal treatment (e.g. Biernacki 1986), and indeed that treatment supports 'natural recovery' through supporting self-determined change (Edwards et al. 2003).

Stopping using drugs: 'Why is this decision made?'

Early explanations of 'natural recovery' include Winick's (1962) 'maturing out of narcotic addiction' hypothesis. He argued that up to two-thirds of people 'grow out' of drug use 'naturally' by the time they reach their mid-thirties. Although a number of later studies have supported this (e.g. Waldorf 1983; Biernacki 1986; Prins 1994) the consensus is that this is only one potential explanation. 'Quantum change' was an alternative explanation proposed by Miller (2004) which explains recovery as a sudden transformation affecting emotions, cognitions and behaviour.

Research has also considered intentional factors underpinning the change process (DiClemente et al. 2004). Bagozzi (1992) argued that the act of 'trying' was an important component in predicting whether behaviour change was successful or unsuccessful. Additionally, models of behaviour change have examined how decisions based on a cost benefit analysis of current and proposed behaviour can facilitate change (DiClemente 2004). One example is the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska and DiClemente 1984) which is the most widely cited model in relation to addiction.

Despite these different explanations as to how and why people stop using drugs 'naturally' or 'intentionally', according to McIntosh and McKeganey (2002), there is consensus that people reach a 'turning point' signifying that

the decision to stop using drugs is made or 'consolidated'. Turning points have been described as 'hitting rock bottom' (Maddux and Desmond 1980; Biernacki 1986), a 'rational decision' (Biernacki 1986), an 'existential crisis' (Coleman 1978) and an 'epistemological shift' (Shaffer and Jones 1989).

Identity and recovery

A significant focus of research relating to 'turning points' has concerned the role of identity (how a person views themselves) and a person's sense of self (e.g. Biernacki 1986; McIntosh and McKeganey 2002; Etherington 2008). The foundations of this conceptualization can been found in Goffman's (1963) work concerning stigma, where he coined the term 'spoiled identity'.

A significant contribution to understanding the role that identity plays in the recovery from drug use was made by Biernacki in 1986. He proposed that the decision to stop using drugs happens when a person's drug using identity conflicts with and causes problems for their other identities unrelated to drug use. In turn this signifies the need to restore or 're-awaken' an old identity and/or establish a new one. McIntosh and McKeganey (2002) built upon the work of Biernacki (1986), arguing that there was insufficient understanding of the cognitive processes involved in the decision to stop using drugs, specifically in terms of the perceptual changes a person has about themselves and their future.

The research reviewed so far highlights the importance of not marginalizing the role of the individual in stopping using

drugs. In addition to these contributions, it is important to acknowledge that nationally and internationally emphasis is placed on the role that drug treatment plays in people stopping using drugs.

Drug treatment

In the current research, the rationale for considering the relationship between the individual and the treatment system relates in part to the considerable political spotlight on addiction and treatment provision. The aim of drug treatment is to provide interventions which reduce the harm that drug users cause to themselves, reduce the number of drug users, rebuild lives and benefit the wider society by addressing issues such as criminal involvement and anti-social behaviour (Audit Commission 2002). 'Models of Care (MoC) for the Treatment of Adult Drug Misusers' (NTA 2006) is a national framework for the commissioning of best practice adult drug treatment provision in England.

During the past decade Britain has made a significant investment to address drug use through enhancing access to and delivery of drug treatment (e.g. HM Government 1998; NTA 2010). The most recent *Drug Strategy*, published in 2010, aims to create a recovery system that not only gets people into treatment but ideally achieves permanent abstinence from drugs (HM Government 2010: 18).

Effective drug treatment

To be defined as being in effective treatment a person must have been receiving one or multiple interventions for at least 12 weeks, or have completed their treatment with a planned

outcome (NTA 2006). A treatment episode of at least 12 weeks is reported to be associated with better outcomes for an individual (Gossop et al. 2001). Effectiveness is demonstrated through reductions in drug use, offending, deaths associated with drug use as well as improvements in health and social functioning (NTA 2006). NTA critics (e.g. Robinson 2005; Campbell and Best 2007; McGrail 2007) argue that there is an overemphasis on numbers and targets and opiate-based treatment, with a lack of recognition of the value of quality and an understanding of what works for those who are drug-free.

Treatment effectiveness: the evidence

The 2007 clinical guidelines published by the Department of Health state that 'the effectiveness of well-delivered, evidence based treatment for drug misuse is well established' (DH 2007: 11). NICE (2007) recommend substitute prescribing as the most effective treatment for heroin addiction in conjunction with 'talking therapies'. Research both internationally and nationally has explored the phenomenon of drug use to establish an evidence base in relation to treatment effectiveness (e.g. Simpson and Sells 1983; Ward et al. 1992; McLellan et al. 1997; Gossop et al. 2001; Prendergast et al. 2002; Friedmann et al. 2004).

In considering treatment effectiveness, concern has been expressed relating to how treatment can be improved and modified to meet individual needs (Prendergast et al. 2002), with importance placed on the fact that no single treatment modality is preferable or effective for all (Gossop 2003). Gossop (2003) believes that there is an ethos of 'one size fits all' but that it is not as simple as treatment outcomes being

defined as 'success or failure'. In addition to this, research (e.g. Hser et al. 2004; Miller and Miller 2009) has emphasized the importance of not only addressing substance use but other related needs such health, employment, medical and family issues.

In summary, while treatment may have a role in supporting people to stop using drugs, it is important to highlight that concern has also been expressed regarding the low number of people leaving treatment drug-free (DrugScope 2009). Considering the literature reviewed it appears important to consider the role of both the individual and the treatment system in supporting people to stop using drugs.

Rationale for current research

The current research aims to contribute to the existing qualitative literature in this field by extending the understanding of factors pertinent to the decision to stop using drugs. The rationale for this is supported by the recognition of the value of research with a qualitative focus (e.g. Orford 2001, 2008) to understand how people make sense of their drug use (Etherington 2008). Specifically, Orford (2008) emphasized the importance of research that encompasses the client's view as a primary focus, as it is frequently secondary with more of a reliance on objective measures. While previous qualitative research has emphasized the role a client has in their decision to stop using drugs (e.g. Biernacki 1986; Prins, 1994; McIntosh and McKeganey 2002), the focus has been on the concept of personal attributes with less emphasis on how these interact with the role of treatment. Additionally, research concerning drug treatment has generally examined the effectiveness of

particular treatment modalities (e.g. Gossop et al. 2001; NTA 2006).

From the literature reviewed it is clear that client factors, drug use, as well as the treatment provided to address use, are key priorities in the UK. Furthermore, if client and treatment factors are important for people to stop using drugs, this would appear to imply that research needs to consider a person's experience of drug use and treatment to understand their decision to want to stop using drugs, alongside acknowledging that if treatment does not impose change on people it may be an aid in the 'natural' recovery process (Edwards et al. 2003). Drug dependency does not have a clear-cut 'remedy' – rather, it appears there is still much to understand about how clients' decisions in relation to their drug use interact with the provision of treatment.

Research question

The question proposed in the current research is: *'What influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs?'*

Aim

The central aim of the research is to answer this question from the perspective of service users, to understand the meaning attributed to this decision based upon their experience of drug use and drug treatment. Furthermore, the researcher aims to generate a theoretical explanation in response to the research question to inform debate regarding treatment provision, to promote a client-focused system. In order to achieve this, a qualitative approach is used to gain an in-depth understanding of heroin users' experiences.

Methodology

Introduction

This section outlines the research paradigm employed, inclusive of the rationale for using a qualitative approach, and the methodology chosen. As several adaptations of grounded theory have emerged, the specific version and epistemological perspective adopted are described, which were fundamental to the manner in which the data were analysed.

Epistemological and ontological perspective

The current research was influenced by a constructivism epistemology utilizing a qualitative framework. Constructivism is characterized by having a relativist ontological position which assumes multiple subjective realities exist. This was in keeping with the phenomenon under investigation as from the interviewees' accounts it was evident that their conceptualization of wanting to stop using drugs had been reconstructed through their experiences of drug use. In the current research, while a relativist position was adopted in relation to the data collected, the analysis was underpinned by both a relativist and realist position.

The current research wanted to understand how an individual 'makes sense of their world' (relativist) (Willig 2001; Merriam 2009) as well as producing an accurate representation of participants' construction of meanings (Willig 2012). This creates some tension with the philosophy underpinning a relativist ontological position in relation to the analysis of data. A relativist position does not make claims in relation to accurately and truthfully representing the

participant's subjective world (Willig 2012), and therefore in part reflects a realist position taken in the current research in relation to the data analysis. For a relativist position, analysis is a reflection of the researcher's interpretation of the data (Willig 2012). In keeping with the relativist ontological position of constructivism the researcher conducting the current research agreed that her interpretations influence the analysis, however when analysing the data the researcher aimed to maintain the accuracy of participants' meanings and interpretations. To achieve this, the researcher reflected on her own assumptions about participants' meanings, and following analysis discussed the results with a service user group and interviewees. Willig (2001) acknowledges the difficulties experienced by researchers in adopting a singular epistemological perspective, concluding that it may not be possible for a researcher to 'identify and subscribe to clear-cut and unambiguous epistemological perspectives' (Willig 2001: 149). Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the data and analysis in terms of having a relativist or realist position, meaning that it is possible to analyse relativist data with a realist perspective. In summary, it could be argued that the position taken within the current research portrays a more moderate, less relativist form of constructivist epistemology.

The decision to employ a qualitative approach relates to the nature of the research question and the aims and objectives of the current research. The researcher considered a number of qualitative methods. Grounded theory was chosen as it allowed the researcher to provide an understanding of participants' meanings of drug use to identify how these related to their decision to want to stop using drugs. Additionally, as grounded theory is designed to focus on

'processes' and 'change', this facilitated being able to capture the nature of decisions that were made by interviewees. If an alternative method had been employed such as a quantitative framework or even another form of qualitative analysis, it might not have been possible to be immediately responsive to the emerging findings of the research. This is particularly underpinned by the very nature of the iterative process of data collection and analysis advised in grounded theory. Furthermore, grounded theory is compatible with a range of epistemological perspectives, and thus can be used flexibly to suit the research as well as the researcher's epistemological beliefs (Chamberlain 1999).

Reflexivity

Epistemological reflexivity

The researcher considered the role of her values and assumptions which could be seen as being informed by her professional and academic background. Adopting a grounded theory approach also facilitated personal development through learning and understanding a new methodological technique.

As reflected by the epistemological position adopted, it was acknowledged that there is interaction between the participant and researcher during face-to-face interviews. It was accepted that the researcher was not neutral and already held beliefs and assumptions regarding the drug treatment system. She approached the interviews acknowledging this and asked questions neutrally, accepting that people may have had different experiences, and endeavoured to remain non-judgemental throughout interviews. Reflective practice

and supervision were used to identify and discuss potential assumptions.

From a relativist position, it is probable that different interpretations were made by participants in relation to the questions asked and exploration of participant's responses. During interviews the researcher checked the meaning of particular words to direct interpretation and help avoid misunderstanding. These approaches form part of the theory-testing element of grounded theory. Reflecting the relativist and realist position adopted to analyse the data, the researcher endeavoured to balance interpretation with description of interviewees' accounts.

Epistemological reflexivity also concerns the development of the research question. While the research question should be focused, it should be open-ended to allow theory to develop (McCann and Clark 2003). In the current research, grounded theory was particularly influential in the formation the research question. A more comprehensive discussion is provided in Box A1 preceding the results section.

Personal reflexivity

In acknowledgement that my own assumptions, interests, beliefs and experiences have the potential to influence the research process (Willig 2001), I reflected on how this may have contributed to the research. My early memories of becoming aware of drug use were through peers, watching television programmes and reading newspaper and magazine articles. While undertaking an MSc in health psychology I applied for a research job which reflected my interest in drug

use and this eventually formed the basis of the current research.

Over an eight-year period, I collected quantitative data on drug use, treatment access and outcomes. I recognized that I was feeling frustrated which was caused by wanting to understand more than what was presented in the 'numbers' and 'targets'. It was as a result of these frustrations that I decided to undertake the current research. This also appeared to have an important influence on my epistemological perspective.

In terms of the interview process I was aware of the importance of my reactions, while fostering an empathic rapport, I endeavoured to remain as neutral as possible. Radley (1999) considers the importance of the interviewer and interviewee relationship. The participant's perception of the role of the interviewer (e.g. as representing health care or having psychological expertise) may influence what participants believe they should say. To address this, Mathieson (1999) proposes that rather than an 'interviewer-participant' role, a move to 'narrator-listener' is advisable, thus enhancing rapport as listening equates to engagement rather than distance. I endeavoured to achieve this through trying to adopt an informal style when greeting the participant so as to reduce any barriers as well as placing emphasis on the fact that interviewees were the experts and my role was to listen to what they had to share.

Finally, personal reflexivity involves considering how the research may have affected the researcher, personally and professionally (Willig 2001). Reflections on the interview process highlighted how the word 'interview' may be

interpreted by participants. The word appeared to conjure up a mixture of meanings for participants and in some cases anxieties. One option to address this would have been to share the interview schedule with participants. In the future, this will inform my research work. In addition, the experiences interviewees shared with me have increased my compassion for people who use drugs.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Ethical considerations

Participant distress during interviews was acknowledged as a potential ethical consideration. The researcher had contact details of drug services that could provide additional support if needed.

Data collection took place at a drug service or the department of employment of the researcher, depending upon choice and convenience of the interviewee. In accordance with good practice and confidentiality the researcher discussed duty of care (BPS 2008). Informed consent was gained prior to the start of each interview or focus group.

Design

Qualitative methodology was employed using semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Grounded theory was used to generate a theoretical explanation from the data which could be tested against data subsequently collected. In accordance

with grounded theory, an analytical approach whereby data collection and analysis are closely related and conducted simultaneously was employed. This allowed for data collection and participant selection to be shaped by ongoing analysis in order to refine the emerging concepts, themes and theory.

Theoretical sampling

Recruitment was driven by both purposive and theoretical sampling. Purposive sampling was initially used to recruit people at various stages of treatment and to obtain a range of experiences. Following initial interviews theoretical sampling was employed. In keeping with the principles of theoretical sampling, data collection and analysis were performed simultaneously, with the researcher remaining open to new data. Theoretical sampling allowed the researcher to check out hypotheses from the data analysis. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved.

Participants

Participants were recruited from multiple adult drug services and a service user group in the south-west of England. Participation was voluntary and did not impact upon the treatment that participants were already receiving.

A total of 15 interviews took place as well as a focus group consisting of nine participants. The sample included:

- male and female clients of varying ages;
- clients receiving prescribing and non-prescribing treatments;

- clients who had successfully or unsuccessfully completed treatment (as defined by the NTA 2011).

The inclusion criteria for participants to take part in the research were:

- current or previous heroin use;
- experience of being in structured treatment (NTA 2006);
- aged 18 or over;
- ability to give informed consent to take part (BPS 2006).

Procedure

Interviews and focus group

For initial interviews drug services were asked to provide clients with an information leaflet relating to the research unless there were circumstances in which clinically they felt it was inappropriate (e.g. it would impact upon client's progress). Later interviews, which were informed by theoretical sampling, required the researcher contacting services specifically to enquire if they had clients with specific characteristics. Examples of these characteristics included asking services for clients who were stabilized on a substitute prescription, or those who were not taking any substances, prescribed or otherwise. This allowed the researcher to explore the emerging model and ensure that categories had achieved theoretical saturation.
For clients who were recruited at a service user meeting, written information was provided by the service user group coordinator, and the researcher subsequently attended a

meeting to answer questions relating to the research, before participants decided to take part.

Along with the information sheet, participants received a recruitment letter which was completed to indicate an interest in further information or express an interest in taking part. This provided the researcher with permission to contact the participant to provide additional information and establish whether they were interested.

A second copy of the information leaflet was provided and discussed at the interview. As some interviews took place at the service a participant was attending it was important to be clear that transcripts would not be shared with service providers and that participating clients would not be identifiable by the service.

The initial interview schedule was semi-structured and allowed participants to tell the researcher their account from when they started to use drugs to the present day. The interview schedule was subsequently modified and informed by analysis. All interviews were face to face and utilized neutral, open-ended questions and prompts (Smith 1995). Reflection was used during the interviews by the researcher to check understanding of the content of participant's responses.

Following the first 11 interviews it was felt that saturation had been reached with respect to participants' journey into treatment. A focus group was facilitated by the researcher to predominantly discuss the decision to stop using drugs and treatment experiences. Prompts were based on evolving the theory. The remaining 4 interviews focused on realization and its role in lapse/relapse experiences.

Interviews were arranged at a convenient time with the participant and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded using an MP3 player and transcribed with the agreement of the participants. The decision to record interviews allowed the researcher to focus on the interview process itself without being distracted by the need to write copious notes and without impacting on rapport-building as well as ensuring that no spoken material was missed.

Dissemination of emerging findings

Following the analysis of the first 11 interviews, the evolving model and results were fed back to a group of service users to validate findings and discuss any gaps and further areas to explore, as identified from the interview analysis. Following a presentation of findings, service users were asked to discuss the extent to which these matched their experiences and whether they would change anything in the model.

Analysis

Data preparation

Interviews were transferred from the MP3 player to a password-protected computer file. Each interview was transcribed using Windows Media Player into a Microsoft Word document. Following transcription each interview was read while listening to a playback of the interview to check for accuracy – also allowing the researcher to become more familiar with the data. Each participant was given a unique participant number (e.g. P01) to ensure anonymity. During transcription identifiable names were removed and replaced –

for example, with [key worker's name] and lines of text were numbered throughout.

The use of grounded theory in the current study

Charmaz's (2006) less prescriptive appraisal of grounded theory, referenced as 'set of principles and practices' (Charmaz 2006: 9), was employed for the current research to analyse interviews and inform data collection. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original formulation of grounded theory was not chosen due to their views on the use of existing literature and data collection. From the researcher's perspective it was not feasible to conduct these in isolation from one another. Additionally, the original version of grounded theory had more of a positivist leaning which did not reflect the researcher's epistemological perspective.

Coding

Three forms of coding (open, theoretical and constant comparative) were used. Coding is the key element linking data with emerging theory, to both describe what is happening as well as identify the meaning
(Charmaz 2006). All data were coded in an Excel file where lines of data, labels and concepts were recorded along with line numbers. Each label was recorded along with the quote in an adjacent column in an Excel spreadsheet.

The stages of analysis were (adapted from Charmaz 2006: 10):

1. *Coding:* initially data were coded line by line by attaching labels to sort and compare interview

extracts, which was a continual process to make sense of the emerging findings.

2. *Memo-writing:* memos about codes and comparisons were made throughout the analysis to capture emerging hypotheses and to facilitate the theory-building and write-up, as well as to identify and record relationships between categories.
3. *Data collection:* this involved further data collection to develop more focused codes and advance memos. Coding also became more focused on meaning rather than summarizing statements.
4. *Analytical categories:* these derived from the initial coding and memo-writing in order to define ideas as well as forming preliminary analytical categories. Any gaps or questions identified about the data were documented to follow up in later interviews and the focus group.
5. *Theoretical categories:* these evolved as the analytical categories became more detailed as the depth of the analysis progressed.

Throughout the coding process comparative methods were used to compare experiences for similarities and differences. Subsequently this established relationships between categories (Murray and Chamberlain 1999). Categories were later merged if there were significant similarities or split for differences within the data category.

The analysis of data also identified a core category to explain the relationship between the categories that were constructed. As the core category emerged, subcategories were linked to it, and finally links were made between all categories to inform

theory generation. It is important to highlight that, although Charmaz (2006) suggests grounded theory be flexible, her formulation of it does not advocate a core category. She argues concepts that act as core variables adopt an objectivist's perspective as they are used to have explanatory and predictive power. However, Charmaz does acknowledge that in reality the distinction between constructionist and objectivist grounded theory is dependent upon the researcher undertaking 'grounded theory in whatever way they understand it' (p. 148). The decision to have a core category was based upon the fact that the core category helped to explain the role that interviewees' experience of drug use and drug treatment played in their decision to want to stop using drugs.

Data collection and analysis continued to allow the researcher to elaborate and refine categories until nothing new appeared from the data, in order to saturate categories (Charmaz 2006). Corbin and Strauss (2008: 144) describe 'the researcher being like a detective' in this process. The researcher endeavoured to remain open to new information rather than enforcing preconceived ideas. This also demonstrates that while initially grounded theory uses an inductive process, as analysis progresses, it moves to a more deductive approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006; Willig 2001).

Challenges

Throughout the research process the researcher found grounded theory challenging for a number of reasons, both related to the methodology and the topic being researched. At several stages analysis was revisited and coding checked to

ensure the best fit as well as to ensure that the meaning expressed by interviewees was being captured.

A key contention observed in grounded theory relates to the stage at which the literature review is undertaken. In the current research the researcher adopted Strauss and Corbin's (2008) approach by undertaking a preliminary but not extensive literature review, and strived to avoid allowing previous theoretical contributions to influence analysis. While previous experience influenced the identification of the original research problem, the research question developed through the process of undertaking the current research (see Box A1).

To conclude, a qualitative approach which facilitated insights into how participants made sense of their experiences was employed. This was underpinned by the researcher's moderate social constructionist epistemological perspective to develop a theoretical understanding of what influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs and how this relates to their experience of drug treatment.

Box A1 Development of the research question

The question addressed in the current research developed over time alongside the grounded theory analysis. The original research question posed ('*What are drug users' views and experiences of drug treatment?*') was broad and focused on treatment. From the initial interviews and analysis it was quickly apparent that the focus for

interviewees was not so much in relation to the treatment system but the role that the individual had in their experience of drug treatment. The researcher explored this further in the next interviews and the core category (realization) became more apparent. This highlighted that realization had the greatest influence on interviewees' decision to want to stop using drugs as well as their experience of treatment. This informed an amended research question which explored *'How realization influences decision-making to stop using drugs, and treatment outcomes'*. The 'How' was important at this stage for the researcher to understand the role of realization. During interviews the researcher avoided the word 'realization' and referred to the decision to stop using drugs. Further analysis comparing differences between interviews, highlighted the importance of the word 'want' for people to stop using drugs. It also revealed that 'treatment experience' was a more appropriate term than 'outcome', as all aspects of time in treatment were important and an outcome was part of this experience. The final research question *'What influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs?'* focused on the individual. An important emphasis is placed on the word 'want' which was central to the realization process to be discussed in the next section. While it is acknowledged that qualitative research explores 'how' in relation to people's experiences (Willig 2001), the researcher decided on a 'what' question as 'how' was implicit to the processes involved in wanting to stop using drugs.

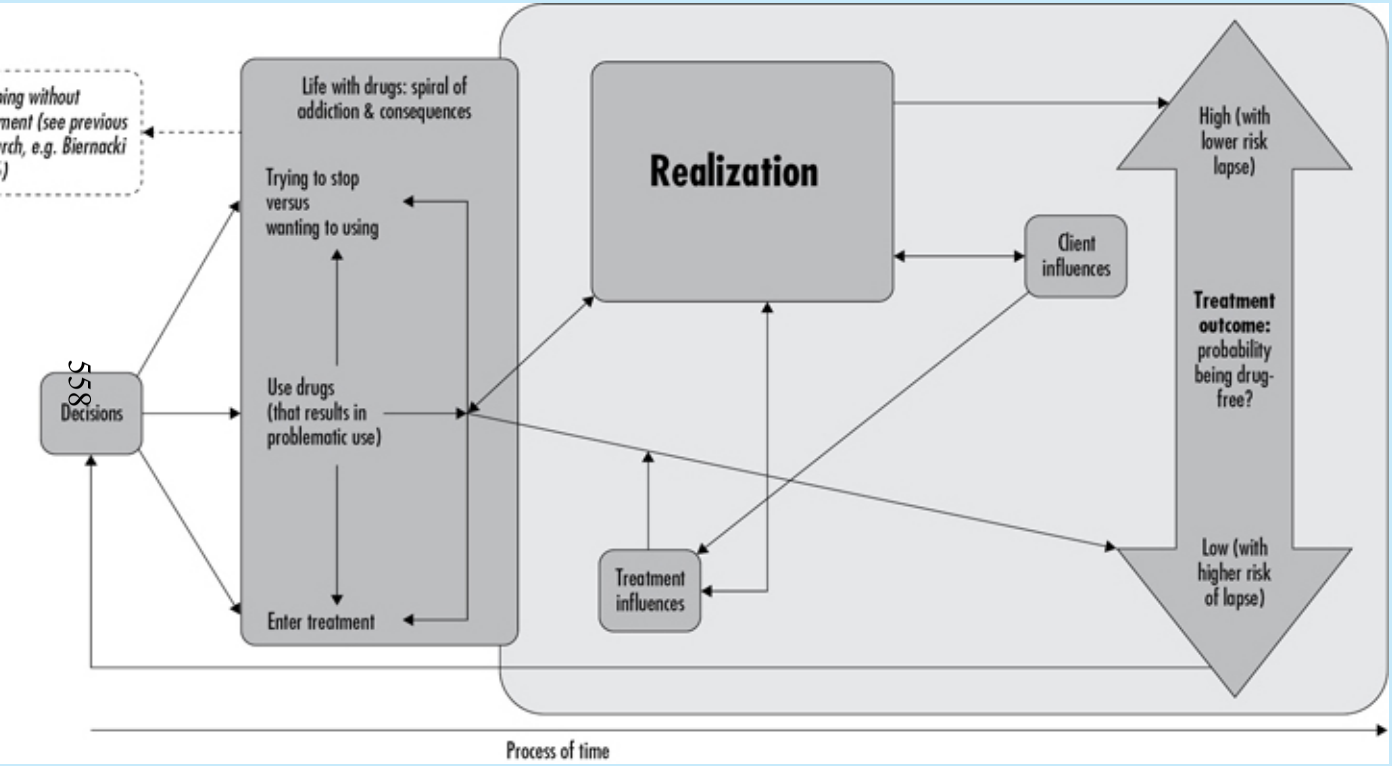
Results

'It's got to come from inside and treatment does help when you are ready for it to help. [P08, 500]

Introduction

The results section provides an account of the experience of the 15 people who took part in an interview and the 9 people who took part in a focus group, along with an overview of the model constructed through the grounded theory analysis (Figure A1). Extracts from interviews were chosen to illustrate the categories that emerged and to provide a voice for the participants. This provided a balance between the researcher's narrative and the raw data.

Figure A1 Grounded theory model: What influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs?


ing without
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)
Life with drugs: spiral of addiction & consequences
Trying to stop versus wanting to using
Use drugs (that results in problematic use)
Enter treatment
Decisions
Realization
Client influences
Treatment influences
High (with lower risk lapse)
Treatment outcome: probability being drug-free?
Low (with higher risk of lapse)
Process of time

Model overview

Figure A1 shows the theoretical model which explains how interviewees constructed meanings to explain their decision to want to stop using drugs. This includes five main categories: *life with drugs*, *realization*, *treatment influences*, *client influences* and *life after drugs (treatment outcome)*. As the current research focused on people who were accessing treatment, 'treatment outcome' is used in the model to include the theme 'life after drugs'.

Arrows are used in the model to show the direction of the proposed relationship between themes. In addition to the themes, explanatory processes are contained within the model, for example, 'process of time' and 'decisions', to account for the context of interviewees' experiences embedded within the themes. The model flows from left to right. At the bottom of the model is 'process of time'; this is used to emphasize the duration of drug use, which spanned many years. 'Decisions' is used to categorize the three key decisions made regarding the use of drugs, inclusive of the decisions made to use drugs, to stop using drugs (trying versus wanting) and to enter treatment. In the model, each of these decisions is incorporated within the theme *'life with drugs'*. Realization is located at the centre of the model to demonstrate how as a core category it explains and relates to the other themes. For example, experiencing realization was more likely to result in a high likelihood of a life without drugs through the interaction with treatment influences. As displayed by the arrow directly from 'life with drugs' to treatment outcome, without realization it is argued that a person has a low probability of a life without drugs and is more likely to make the decision to continue to use drugs.

The *Discussion* section will consider how the focus of treatment could be considered as a supporting mechanism for realization. While realization was believed to have the greatest influence on the decision to stop using drugs, interviewees did not believe it was sufficient to stop using drugs without receiving treatment. Receiving treatment made the realization to want to stop using drugs a reality.

Life with drugs

Interviewees who had not experienced realization were actively experiencing a life with drugs in a spiral of addiction. Life with drugs was linked to realization as the experiences that people reported influenced the 'facing up' process to deciding to want to stop using drugs.

Spiral of addiction

to start with it wasn't every day then it got to every day and all day and things like that. [P04, 134]

The spiral of addiction described the onset and progression of drug use. Interviewees described a variety of reasons for initially deciding to use drugs. Reflections on early drug use revealed a period of experimenting with multiple substances, with an increased frequency of use. For many the first time they became aware that they were in a spiral of addiction was during a period of time when they were not using drugs and they reported feeling 'ill'. 'Ill' manifested as having influenza-type symptoms, essentially drug withdrawal.

. . . that's when I knew I had a habit, you know cause I would try and leave it for a day two and I just couldn't I would be ill, so I knew. [P09, 565]

The longer a person experienced the spiral of addiction, the more determined they appeared to be to stop using drugs. This finding is subsequently important to explaining the realization process.

Consequences of drug use

you end up committing crime to support your habit and then you're not happy, you fall out with your friends and your family and you lose everything. [F1, 4]

Drugs made interviewees feel 'better' in the short term, both psychologically and physiologically and often the reverse in the long term. The consequences of using drugs were reported as being positive and negative, both of which fuelled continued use. Positive consequences related to the perceived enjoyment of using drugs, while negative consequences, such as withdrawal, resulted in further drug use to alleviate such experiences. Drug use resulted in interviewees experiencing health, social and emotional impacts.

A major consequence of living in a spiral of addiction was that using drugs became an overriding priority in interviewees' lives. Acquiring and using drugs controlled interviewees' lives and often felt like a full-time career.

. . . every day of your life doing that and you're chasing it all day everyday to get that bag . . . [P08, 506a]

Consequences acted as an important influence to the manifestation of realization as well as the delay in realization due to the way in which heroin controlled daily lives. The severity of the consequences of drug use often meant that people recognized that they had no other choice but to stop using drugs.

Realization

Realization was defined as the personal recognition and acceptance of the impact drugs had upon an interviewee. This reflected a cognitive and emotional shift resulting in a person 'wanting' to stop using drugs. The majority of interviewees described realization.

you've got to want to stop it's got to come from within. [P08, 506b]

Facing up/reflection

I couldn't remember the last time I was happy, naturally high on life and that's when my head started thinking [P01, 26]

Facing up was a reflective process characterized by recognizing and accepting the impact that drugs were having upon a person. The ability to reflect on drug use and the impact it had had was necessary in order for 'facing up' to contribute to realization. As well as a loss of drugs this could mean losing friends, a familiar environment and lifestyle.

Interviewees described times when they looked at their life in disbelief. This was critical to acknowledging and starting to accept the impact that drugs were having. Further drug use

blocked these emotions and cognitions, meaning that it could take a period of time for interviewees to feel that they had 'faced up' to their drug use.

The delay in facing up was evident throughout interviews. Interviewees acknowledged the need to make a change but taking control was difficult. Time, both in terms of duration of drug use and current age, contributed to this process.

It was a build up. Just sick of it on every level, it was not fun any more, I wasn't liking what I was having to do to get the money, I wasn't liking the fact that I wasn't doing anything with my life but getting money and scoring. [P14, 697]

The 'facing up' reflection process continued when clients stopped using drugs and there was a further appreciation of the impact that drugs had had on their lives.

Wanting to stop using drugs and get help

if you want to give up it's your choice it's no good doing it for someone else you gotta do it for yourself. [P06, 371]

The decision to access treatment happened prior to realization and subsequent to realization. However, there were distinct differences apparent between these decisions, predominantly characterized by the real 'want' and 'desire' to stop using and the 'belief' it was possible. To some extent 'facing up' is embedded within this theme, however, separation has been made as reflection through 'facing up' was more of a predecessor to 'wanting' to stop.

Some interviewees had stopped the use of all drugs, a few were in a cycle of frequent relapse and others were stabilized on substitute prescription. Interviewees discussed how prior to realization they had tried to stop for family, friends and partners (or were forced to through imprisonment), but not for themselves.

it got to the point that I wanted to do it and that's what I think people have to decide not what other people want them to do it or they're doing it for other people, you've got to do it for yourself' [P07, 441]

Even when interviewees had made the decision to want to stop using drugs following realization, there was a strong belief that this was not sufficient alone and they needed to engage in treatment to facilitate this change.

Stopping drugs is hard

when you are in so much pain from heroin withdrawal the relief from heroin is better than anything in the world. [P08, 504]

Despite the majority of interviewees reporting experiencing realization it was evident that stopping using drugs was hard and a potential barrier to realization. Stopping using drugs was complicated by the fact that it involved more than stopping drug use alone and required building other aspects of life as well. Even when a person had stopped using drugs, they often experienced new challenges such as dealing with difficult emotions or further realization of the impact that drugs had had upon their lives.

The role of other people was not only apparent when interviewees initiated their drug use but similarly when they were trying to stop using drugs.

you can't be around anyone that's using. [P02, 87]

The difficulties that interviewees had experienced in trying to stop using drugs was emphasized through the multiple attempts that they had made to stop using drugs. Following realization, while stopping drugs was reported to be hard, interviewees were less likely to have had an unplanned exit from treatment.

A key struggle that interviewees faced when stopping using drugs was managing the perceived 'boredom'. The focus of their lives had shifted from having to spend time funding their drug use and acquiring drugs, to collecting a prescription for substitute medication.

Treatment influences

Treatment influences explore how treatment can provide a supporting mechanism for realization, as well as how realization influences a person's experience of treatment. This theme considers factors that may support and inhibit the realization process. Treatment influences are the potential factors alongside realization that may make a difference to a person stopping using drugs and their treatment experience.

Supporting realization

It could be hypothesized that the role of treatment pre- and post-realization has different functions. Prior to realization

treatment was thought to support realization by increasing awareness of what services were available as well as options other than drug use. Through this process it is proposed that treatment may have a cumulative influence on realization. Then, following realization, treatment can support people who have decided they want to stop using drugs to become drug-free.

but I think if there is the right information available to people it can actually get things rolling like. [F4, 33]

All interviewees who had stopped using drugs believed that treatment had an important influence. Receptiveness to treatment and its benefits were more evident following realization, with treatment providing the tools to support a person to stop using drugs.

Without it [treatment] I wouldn't stop doing drugs, if they wasn't there I would be dead probably. [F7, 99]

The importance of having a multi-agency approach was valued. In particular non-statutory services were more likely to be aware of a client's wider life issues, while statutory services were seen as more medical in their approach. Additionally, access to service user support groups was positively regarded and important to supporting realization. It was felt that services often dealt more with the symptom (drug use) but that it was important to recognize and manage maintaining factors.

How to cope with the anxiety that you are suffering with what's going on, why you take drugs to deal with the reasons

you take drugs in the first place not just smother them up with methadone. [P10, 581]

Life on a script – supporting realization

They have people on maintenance scripts, they're write off for life and I think that's so unfair on the person. [P10, 574]

Substitute prescribing was the most widely discussed treatment. This acted as both a facilitator and barrier to wanting to stop using drugs. Substitutes were referred to as a 'medicine', and this interpretation fitted with the perception that withdrawal from drugs was akin to being 'ill'. Prior to realization prescribing provided a client with choice to use illegally or with a substitute and following realization to provide a structured method of reducing and stopping drug use.

I'm gradually going to reduce it [subutex], cos I started off on 8mg, and I'm on 6 now so, I'm reducing it slowly . . . I'll be glad to be not on anything at all. [P03, 119]

Methadone was a significant focus of life on a script. Prior to realization methadone was sometimes perceived as a cheaper means for not using heroin and as a backup. Clinic times were often early in the day and this left a large part of the day free, when interviewees struggled with boredom. In these cases a substitute prescription was not sufficient to manage the complexity of their drug use. This time had previously been filled by acquiring and using drugs.

. . . especially, like I said, when we especially go home ten past ten, or or . . . quarter to ten and have got nothing to do all day. [P05, 312]

Actively using illegal drugs and not attending appointments for treatment was reported by some interviewees. This was particularly evident before realization and provides an explanation for those who are more likely to attend appointments and adhere to a script.

I was using gear anyway so I didn't need it [treatment]. [P08, 515]

Positive attributions of receiving a substitute prescription included alleviation of cravings for heroin, reduced risk and eliminating the need to 'score' so that people could lead 'normal lives'.

I think if I had nothing it would be a lot harder having methadone it does help, I feel a lot safer, you know a lot of stuff you buy off the streets you don't know what's in it. [P07, 453]

Frequently interviewees' reported choosing to recommence the use of heroin in order to discontinue methadone, as the withdrawal process from methadone was perceived as prolonged when compared to heroin.

At least if you decide to stop you might suffer two three days and that's it. With the methadone it's just weeks and weeks and weeks' [P05, 290]

Therapeutic style/rapport – supporting realization

Therapeutic rapport was discussed as an important aspect to supporting realization. Therapeutic rapport may support realization by providing the opportunity to discuss a client's issues related to drugs and other concerns through facilitating the reflective process of facing up.

Working in collaboration with a client was valued highly. Additionally, service users appreciated feeling like an individual rather than being labelled as a drug user.

actually get to know the person quite well, rather than just saying oh you're a drug user I think you should be doing this, or doing that. [P02, 83]

The qualities of a key worker that were viewed positively related to a person who listens and is genuine in their approach, as this would facilitate disclosure and acceptance of advice and information by the client.

someone who's there who will listen and be there when they need someone to talk to. [P06, 388]

It was highlighted that if a service was not willing to listen a drug dealer would. This type of perception of a service and rapport could potentially have a negative impact on realization through limiting opportunities for self-recognition, failing to enhance a client's self-belief and as a reason for a client withdrawing from treatment.

I mean he's useless I wouldn't talk to him if you paid me because I think, he doesn't listen and he doesn't care, I shut down I just wouldn't open up. [P08, 546]

It is acknowledged that the mechanisms underlying staff rapport are subjective and difficult to assess, however, increased openness around this issue may reduce clients withdrawing from treatment and delaying realization.

Client influences

I nearly done it [stopped using drugs] until I find out well I found out . . . How can you stay clean when everything around you falls apart? [P05, 325]

Factors related to clients played a vital role in their personal realization and experience of treatment. Reluctance by interviewees to fully utilize available treatment and knowing how to 'play the system' acted as barriers to treatment effectiveness.

I didn't want to do the harder work. [P01, 34]

Interviewees emphasized that it was not just the drugs that were an issue but other aspects of their lives and psychological well-being as well as the environment that they lived in. These were among contributory factors for continuing to use drugs and perceived as a barrier to realization.

physically, I was well and then I was like I'm not addicted any more and then because I'd not done any work on my head as soon as I got out I just went straight back on it again. [P09, 171]

Understanding the client's perspective of reasons that may be inhibiting a successful outcome could support realization and treatment outcome.

Life after drugs/treatment (treatment outcome)

Life after drugs included being stabilized on a substitute prescription or not using any drugs, illicit or prescribed. For interviewees who had stopped using drugs there was a relief of not being in the spiral of addiction, but also worries and uncertainties regarding their future. Rather than life being dominated by the need for drugs, the focus was on continuing not to use and fulfilling other aspects of life.

Support/aftercare

I mean there should be more to do with the psychological and social side you know, the reintegration back into society, you know you might be clean and everything but you're not normal. [F7, 119]

A significant focus of aftercare included planning education. For many, drug use had commenced in the formative years of education, hence a focus on qualifications which would hopefully result in work and other aspirations.

you need more support afterwards. [P04, 209]

The transition from being in treatment was often difficult. The level of independence imposed by some services, informing clients that they were there if needed, left a feeling of isolation.

when you get clean afterwards you're left to it. [P04, 252]

The structured day programme was valued by all interviewees who had used it and provided an opportunity to gain qualifications and a new focus other than drugs.

I think a good way to go to like training courses so like to build up your confidence, so you've got something behind you. [F2, 126]

The facing up/reflection process continued throughout treatment and when people had stopped using drugs. It was emphasized that once stabilized on prescription people need to have support to deal with issues that had been covered up or blocked out by drug use.

you've got to start looking at all that stuff that's gone on haven't you, that you know you covered up with your drug use. [F3, 8]

Worry/uncertainty

you get all these emotions, you've never felt. [F2, 135]

A key issue for many was uncertainty regarding how they would spend the rest of their life. Due to worries and uncertainties life after drugs was the point at which people felt that they could most benefit from psychological support. Participants described how vulnerable they felt after stopping using drugs. Emotions that had been repressed through drug use were now surfacing which presented as a daunting experience and they did not feel equipped to manage them.

I mean I suppressed all these feelings and when I was in [name of current service] all of these feelings started coming back and it's quite heavy. [P15, 672]

A recurring issue was the fear and worry regarding lapsing back into drug use, in particular, concern that boredom, feeling depressed and exposure to those still using drugs could trigger future use. Previously drug use had been a mechanism to cope with escaping from difficult life experiences. This indicated a need to acquire new skills and coping mechanisms.

I'm not too sure but I feel personally I'm a bit scared like you know cause I don't want to mess up. [P08, 538]

Interviewees reported that lapses and relapses most commonly happened in the time that a person was trying to stop using drugs and prior to realization. After realization, a lapse was usually reported as happening early on and conceptualized as a setback whereby people quickly re-engaged in treatment after a period of reappraisal.

Conclusion

The holistic nature of the model presented is essential to understanding how realization influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs. Realization symbolized a turning point for interviewees and appeared to have the greatest influence on treatment outcomes. What was emphasized by interviewees' accounts was the potential that treatment has to support realization. The *Discussion* will further explore the representation of realization.

Discussion

The concluding section will appraise the grounded theory analysis, to understand how the findings relate to the existing literature and how the model constructed contributes to the understanding of what influences a person's decision to want to stop using drugs. An important recommendation from the current research is for drug treatment to consider the role of realization alongside the provision of drug treatment.

Links with existing research and theory

The current research contributes to the existing literature by considering the complementary role of the individual and the treatment system for the decision to want to stop using drugs to become a reality. The current research chimed with elements of existing theoretical understanding in relation to why people use drugs. It is inclusive of the moral model position that personal responsibility is an important component, and that continued use results in an acquired dependency, as suggested by the medical model (Ogden 2007). Importantly, as interviewees did not believe that they would become addicted to drugs, this could be seen to reflect 'unrealistic optimism' as proposed by Weinstein (1980). Social and environmental cues, as emphasized by the social learning model (Bandura 1977) were particularly evident in the phases of initial and continued drug use. Perhaps the most accurate reflection is provided by the biopsychosocial model which considers the multi-dimensional nature of drug use and the role of an individual's experience (Engel 1977; Donovan and Marlatt 2005).

Realization

The representation of realization was that it acted as a turning point in wanting to stop using drugs. Previous literature supports similar processes (e.g. Maddux and Desmond 1980; Shaffer and Jones 1989; Biernacki 1986; McIntosh and McKeganey 2002). Realization was able to reference the predisposing factors as well as the transformation process to wanting to stop using drugs.

Research concerning identity (e.g. Biernacki 1986; McIntosh and McKeganey 2002) represents a similar manifestation; however, in the current research identity appeared to symbolize part of the realization process in terms of not wanting to live a life with drugs. The concept of a 'spoiled identity' and 'realization' shared the recognition that lives had been affected by drug use and the perception of the future was different to the present. Both considered the drug user's perspective, the role of multiple attempts to stop using and the importance of distinguishing between 'should' and 'wanting' to stop using drugs.

By contrast to McIntosh and McKeganey (2002), realization was concerned more with the fact that wanting to stop using drugs was a catalyst to having a life without drugs rather than restoring/forming a new identity. Without realization it is argued that the recognition of a spoiled identity may not happen. Thus, it is more apt to consider 'realization' as a turning point.

In terms of other research, there was some congruence with Miller's (2004) concept of 'quantum change' and this could help to explain the experiential process that people described at a less conscious level. The difference in the current research was that interviewees did not necessarily encounter a

sudden experience and it was less spiritual. As age was referenced at several points by interviewees in the current research, it would offer support for the 'maturing out of addiction' hypothesis proposed by Winick (1962).
In addition, Bagozzi's (1992) 'theory of trying' facilitates understanding within the current research of the role of previous attempts to stop using drugs.

Evaluation of current research

A challenge confronting qualitative research is demonstrating credibility and quality. Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) recommend that research quality is determined according to importance of fit, integration of theory, reflexivity, documentation, theoretical sampling and negative cases, sensitivity, and negotiated realities and transferability.

Integration of theory was felt to be satisfied, as demonstrated in the results section, through discussing the relationship between each category, which was based upon memos recorded by the researcher during the research process. Additionally documentation of the research process and decisions made by the researcher in relation to data collection and analysis are reflected in the methodology section. To demonstrate sensitivity to negotiated realities, the researcher presented the findings to a group of service users to understand and ascertain any differences between the researcher's interpretations and those of the research participants.

To satisfy 'importance of fit' the categories generated through the analysis were developed to reflect the meanings participants constructed. The five categories reflected the

process experienced by interviewees from initially using drugs to becoming drug-free.

To adhere to the 'importance of fit', multiple concepts were identified within the data, and explored and tested for similarities, differences and contradictions. As cited in the methodology section, theoretical sampling was used to develop and modify the emerging theory. Cases that did not fit (negative case analysis) provided a helpful distinction between those who had experienced realization and those who had not.

While qualitative research does not claim to be generalizable, transferability that extends the current research context is an important consideration. A review of existing literature proved valuable in terms of comparing previous research with the current research and has suggested that the results could be transferred to other individuals. This was particularly evident through the identification of a turning point referred to in this research as 'realization'.

Finally, as initially addressed in the methodology section, researcher reflexivity is an important criterion for constructionist qualitative research (Henwood and Pidgeon 1992; Willig 2001). When constructing the links between categories in the model the researcher reflected on her professional knowledge and understanding of what was emerging from the data. This was particularly in relation to the core category 'realization' as this initially appeared to indicate a professional 'helplessness', suggesting that as health professionals we cannot always stop people using drugs and it is for the individual to make this decision. However, through further data collection and analysis,

interviewees' accounts revealed how treatment *could* provide a supporting mechanism for realization.

Appraisal of research findings: strengths and limitations

The current research supports the importance of both the client and treatment, in that it is the dynamic between the two that produces change. This reflected a major strength of the current research as it considered experiences from the perspective of the service user.

It is acknowledged that the current research does not consider the role of realization for people who had not accessed treatment. Thus, it is not possible to conclude whether interviewees' lives would have been different if they had not engaged in treatment or if this would have slowed down the realization process. For this reason it is important that the findings are not interpreted outside of the treatment system.

As interviews were retrospective, the current research may be considered limited for not having a prospective design. However, as evidenced by the experiences of interviewees, drug use typically spans many years and it was not considered feasible for the current study to employ longitudinal follow-up.

A further limitation is that the role of realization was only considered in a small sample, as well as being limited to heroin users, rather than other drugs and types of behaviour change. Future research could expand upon the current research and explore the applicability of realization to other behavioural change to create a more substantive theory.

Recommendations: application to practice and policy

4.5.1 Treatment supporting realization: national policy

Based upon the findings of the current research it is proposed that treatment could provide a supporting mechanism for 'realization'. Realization requires a person-centred journey so that treatment can support people to want to stop using drugs, without the assumption that everyone who enters treatment wants to be drug-free. However, national guidance (NTA 2010) demonstrates a 'top-heavy' approach which may result in a target rather than a client-focused treatment system. The current research suggests the importance of a having a 'bottom-up' approach influenced by the client.

Concern in relation to the relatively low number of people leaving treatment drug-free (DrugScope 2009) may not be directly related to the interventions but to clients who do not want to stop using drugs. Thus, realization could in turn facilitate understanding of outcomes and subsequently inform targets.

Treatment supporting realization: spiral of addiction

Interviewees discussed how treatment may be able to support future realization by making clients aware of their options and what is available. Interviewees found such input beneficial as even if they did not stop using drugs, even brief periods of not using provided an insight into life without drugs and supported the belief that it was possible to stop.

The spiral of addiction demonstrated a gradual progression of drug use, suggesting an opportune time for services to

intervene before an addiction 'takes hold' of a person. One mechanism for doing this could be through collaboration with existing service users. Interviewees frequently commented that other service users noticed their addiction before they realized what was happening. However, it is recognized that at these early stages of drug use people are less likely to believe that they will become addicted.

Treatment supporting realization: treatment access

While access to treatment was viewed positively the areas that interviewees stated required further consideration were general practitioner (GP) engagement with people who use drugs, facilities within rural communities and access to residential rehabilitation. Importantly, the target set for people to be seen within three weeks (NTA 2005) was viewed as a positive mechanism for supporting realization as it promoted accessibility.

Treatment supporting realization: assessment

A key challenge is whether realization can be triggered within people. Interviewees felt strongly that the decision to want to stop using drugs had to come from within and therefore did not perceive external influences as directly mediating change. However, through understanding the processes involved within realization, it was evident that interviewees believed that treatment potentially presented both barriers and facilitators to realization.

Treatment providers and policy-makers need to understand that for people to stop using drugs they need to want to stop. The value of exploring this with clients avoids assumptions

relating to the reason a person has accessed treatment. It was evident that there was a division between people's experiences of wanting to stop using drugs and thinking they should stop using drugs. For those who have not experienced realization, focusing on factors facilitating the spiral of addiction could help to support the facing up component of realization. For people who report wanting to stop using drugs, an exploration of responses regarding 'what this means' could help to ascertain whether people are *trying* to stop using drugs, believe they *should* stop, or *want* (i.e. realization) to stop using drugs. In turn this may help to facilitate rapport through demonstrating listening and understanding, which were important ways of supporting realization.

Treatment supporting realization: treatment modalities

Non-pharmacological interventions and service user support groups were found to be beneficial to supporting realization through facilitating understanding of drug use. This emphasized the importance of interventions other than substitute prescribing. It was also highlighted that clients had needs extending
beyond physiological dependency on substances. A substitute prescription being withdrawn often focused on people missing appointments or using on top, but of greater importance is the reason why this is happening. From interviewing clients, the substitute prescription almost appeared to act as a distraction from underlying issues. Substitute prescribing was a tool but not the reason that people wanted to stop using drugs, as shown by the personal nature of realization. Thus, an increased emphasis on the other available interventions could help to support a person to

want to stop using drugs. The researcher felt that non-prescribing interventions were marginalized by interviewees in comparison to substitute prescribing, although psychological or counselling interventions were those more likely to foster the importance of a person 'facing up' to their drug use.

In relation to inpatient detoxification, a potential barrier to realization related to gaps in preparation for discharge. Inpatient detoxification provided an environment removed from drug use, allowing an insight into how it felt not to be using drugs and an opportunity to explore life without drugs. However, the maintenance of this was often short-lived when interviewees struggled to adjust to being back in their usual environment. To support realization interviewees recommended having appointments booked for discharge as well as the opportunity to explore being in the 'outside' world before inpatient detoxification was completed in order to facilitate transition.

Within all modalities therapeutic rapport was considered as important to support realization. Good therapeutic rapport was a mechanism through which client factors could be discussed to consider the role they had for drug use and subsequently how they were a barrier to realization. To facilitate therapeutic rapport interviewees believed that the provision of support when clients were collecting their substitute prescription could address any unmet need and in turn this could reduce the overemphasis on substitute prescribing.

Treatment supporting realization: afterwards

Facing up and realization to some extent continued after stopping using drugs which signified the importance of continuing to support people who had used drugs. Interviewees described the benefits of aftercare services in terms of facilitating confidence, training and opportunities for employment. Psychological support was reported to be particularly important once a person had stopped using drugs as they started to experience emotions that had been blocked through drug use.

Treatment supporting realization: summary

While one of the main priorities of drug treatment and national strategy is for people to stop using drugs, this needs to be considered alongside the goal of the client, to ensure there is not a mismatch. The concept of realization contributes to the national strategy by providing an explanation of what influences a person to want to stop using drugs. Part of the challenge is to create a treatment system that acknowledges that stopping using drugs is about doing it for yourself and not necessarily something that is imposed. This is suggestive of a reconceptualization of the role of treatment. Rather than treatment providing interventions to enable people to stop using drugs, a more helpful conceptualization is how clinicians can support people to *want* to stop using drugs.

Future research

Future research could include focus on realization in those who have not accessed treatment. This would expand understanding of the actual role that treatment has in supporting realization and the meaning that those who have not accessed treatment attribute to wanting to stop using

drugs. This may also contribute to a clearer understanding of factors other than treatment that could support realization.

Further exploration of the meaning of realization for wider behaviour change would enhance the understanding of the broader applicability of realization. If Blaise Pascal's quote is considered in this context then realization may not be unique to heroin use. Behaviour change is a priority across health care in the prevention and management of long-term conditions related to other substance use such as alcohol and smoking.

Finally, a prospective and longitudinal study would allow the process of realization to be monitored over time, thus enhancing understanding of what happens in a person's long-term future and the role of realization in a person staying drug-free beyond the time that participants had experienced in the current research.

Overall contributions

The current research has endeavoured to contribute to the existing research base through understanding what influences a person to want to stop using drugs and the dynamic interaction between the individual and drug treatment. Interviewing allowed an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences, revealing how realization was a catalyst for people to stop using drugs which can be supported by treatment. Realization provides an understanding of why treatment appears to produce drug-free outcomes for some and not others. The role of treatment in supporting realization is demonstrated by interviewees reporting that they benefited from treatment even if it did not lead to them being drug-free,

as it supported their realization so they could stop using drugs.

Conclusion

This research has shown that while drug treatment was valued by interviewees, the most important influence on a person wanting to stop using drugs was the personal experience of realization. Treatment is not solely about an intervention producing an outcome; it is about how the individual interacts with the intervention to produce the outcome. This suggests that the experience a person has of treatment may be a by-product of whether or not they have experienced realization. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that realization is complicated; it is not something a person can *receive*, like substitute prescribing, it has to *manifest within a person*. Therefore there needs to be greater acknowledgement, particularly at a policy level, of how treatment provision can support realization. This research has shown that treatment through therapeutic rapport, substitute prescribing and non-pharmacological interventions can support people before and after realization. Despite numerous theories and interventions it is clear that the processes involved in people wanting to stop using drugs are not simply about providing treatment to stop people using, it is about the individual and their personal decisions.

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Appendix 2

The experience of body dysmorphic disorder: an interpretative phenomenological analysis and photo elicitation study

Joanna Silver

Reflexive preface

This study aims to explore the experiences of people suffering from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a condition marked by a distressing preoccupation with an imaginary or minor defect in a facial feature or a localized part of the body. This research was originally conducted as part of my doctorate in counselling psychology and was supervised by Dr Jacqui Farrants.

My desire to research BDD is motivated by my work as a facilitator at a BDD support group, which has given me the

opportunity to talk to many inspiring people who suffer from BDD, and see first-hand how debilitating BDD is. From conversations with support group attendees I am disturbed by how long it takes people to receive a diagnosis of BDD, how many people have been initially misdiagnosed with other conditions, and how people often feel misunderstood. It saddens me to hear how little support and knowledge there is for people who suffer on a daily basis with BDD and how people with BDD are often met by a lack of understanding by the public and clinicians alike. Such feelings have made me determined to find out more about the complexity of the lived experience of BDD that is noticeably absent from most of the available literature.

In 2008–10, I conducted some qualitative research into BDD and believe this was the first published narrative analysis and thematic analysis to explore BDD (Silver and Reavey 2010; Silver et al. 2010). These studies gave me an enthusiasm and thirst for qualitative research in BDD, and increased my passion and desire to explore BDD further. As current research on BDD is extremely limited, I feel it is essential to give my participants a 'voice' and increase understanding of BDD.

Abstract

This research aims to provide insight into the lived experiences of BDD by using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and photo elicitation. Ten participants who identified themselves as suffering from BDD took photographs and provided pre-existing photographs that were important to their experiences of BDD. Participants also kept a notebook to write feelings about their photographs and

BDD. In a semi-structured interview, participants spoke about their photographs, written data and BDD experiences. Participants' photographs were analysed with participants in the interview and the verbal data produced was analysed by the researcher using IPA. Four master themes emerged from the data: 'the self as an aesthetic object', 'striving for the "good enough" self', 'the conflicted self' and 'the imprisoned self'. It is argued that this research gives a complex and embodied account of BDD that is noticeably absent from the current literature. This research suggests that photographs are a useful way of researching BDD. Future research could explore using photographs to treat BDD.

Introduction

BDD is defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association 2000) as a condition marked by an excessive preoccupation with an imaginary or minor defect in a facial feature or a localized part of the body. The diagnostic criteria specify that the condition must be sufficiently acute to cause a decline in the patient's social, occupational, or educational functioning. While Cash and Henry (1995) claim that having a negative body image is so common that it can be viewed as a 'normative discontent', Cash, et al (2004) argue that what distinguishes BDD from more 'normal' appearance concerns is the severity of emotional distress and psychosocial impairment found in people with BDD.

Phillips and Diaz (1997) report that over 90 per cent of people with BDD engage in compulsive behaviours. Such behaviours are time-consuming and difficult to resist and are designed to stop a feared situation, such as being laughed at for being

'ugly' (Phillips et al. 2010). Phillips (2004) gives examples of common compulsive behaviours found in BDD including camouflaging, mirror gazing and skin picking. Veale (2000) reports that many people with BDD have cosmetic surgery and 'DIY surgery'. In contrast to cosmetic surgery, which is usually conducted by a surgeon, in 'DIY surgery' a person attempts to radically alter their own appearance by themselves. For example, a man with BDD used a staple gun on both sides of his face to keep it taut, believing his skin was 'too loose' (Veale 2000).

Veale and Neziroglu (2010) state that BDD is under-recognized and under-diagnosed. Community surveys using self-report measures report a BDD prevalence rate between 1.7 and 2.4 per cent (Reif et al. 2006; Koran et al. 2008; Buhlmann et al. 2010). However, the use of self-report measures to identify people with BDD is problematic. While Andersen et al. (2007) argue that individuals are more comfortable disclosing problematic behaviours via self-report measures than via face-to-face interviews, it cannot be concluded that a person has BDD unless their 'defect' is looked at. It is possible that in self-report studies, people with BDD will not report suffering from an 'imagined defect' as they may think their 'defect' is noticeable and 'real'. On the other hand, it is possible that some people may report suffering from BDD but may have 'defects' that another person may not perceive as 'imagined'.

A study of psychiatric inpatients suggests that shame prevents people telling health care professionals about BDD symptoms. Grant et al. (2001) found 16 of 122 consecutive psychiatric inpatients met the criteria for BDD. However, no inpatient had received this diagnosis from their treating

psychiatrist even though 13 patients considered BDD their biggest or a major problem. Participants stated that reasons for not reporting BDD symptoms included shame, embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation and fear of being misunderstood.

Phillips and Diaz (1997) and Phillips (2005) suggest that the experiences of BDD are very isolating as people with BDD are often single, avoid dating and are socially isolated. Phillips et al. (2005) found in a study of 176 people with BDD that participants' psychosocial functioning as measured by scores on the Social Adjustment Scale – Self Report, were 1.6 standard units poorer than community scores and were significantly poorer than for patients with major depression, dysthymia and an acute or chronic medical condition. This study used self-report and interviewer-administered measures with strong psychometric properties and established norms. However, Didie et al. (2006) argue that these findings may actually underestimate social impairment, as people who do not work or have a partner would not receive a score on the Social Adjustment Scale – Self Report primary relationships scale and work subscale, therefore possibly excluding the more severely ill participants. The distressing nature of the experiences of BDD is evidenced by the high levels of suicidality found in people with BDD. In a prospective four-year study, Phillips and Menard (2006) found that suicidal ideation was reported by a mean of 57.8 per cent of the participants per year, which is approximately 10–25 times more than that found in the US population. Suicide attempts were reported by a mean of 2.6 per cent of the participants per year, which is an estimated 3–12 times more than that found in the US population.

Information on the experiences of BDD can be found in Fuchs's (2002) paper about the phenomenology of shame and the body in BDD. In this paper, he draws upon Merleau-Ponty's ([1945] 1962) distinction between the 'objective body' and the 'lived body'. Whereas the 'objective body' is the body as a physiological entity, the 'lived body' refers to one's pre-reflective experience as a whole, in as much as it is conveyed by the medium of the body (cited in Fuchs 2002). Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 1962) wrote that a person does not just possess a body, but that they are their body. Fuchs (2002) showed that while the body is usually experienced as a 'lived body', in situations of shame, bodily illness, or when examined by the gaze of the 'other' the body can lose its pre-reflective automatic coherence with the surrounding world and
instead be experienced as an 'objective body'. Fuchs argues that BDD is the paradigm of a 'shame disorder' and suggests that in BDD shame becomes evident in the gaze of the 'other' which the sufferer feels on his or her body and is unable to bear. As people with BDD often believe their 'defect' is noticeable and prominent, Fuchs suggests that the 'defect' is judged to be at the centre of the gaze, making any spontaneous bodily performance unattainable.

Although Fuchs's (2002) paper helps explain the experiences of BDD, the theoretical nature of it means that it gives a universal account of BDD as opposed to focusing on the particularities of people's experiences. While the quantitative studies reviewed give some insight into the levels of distress suffered by people with BDD, it is argued that qualitative studies may give more insight into the experiences of BDD. The researcher is only aware of two qualitative studies that have looked at BDD (Silver and Reavey 2010; Silver et al.

2010). McLeod (2001) states that qualitative research focuses on personal experiences and the meanings that people give to their experiences.

It seems that there is still much more to be learnt about BDD. What is it like to suffer from severe embodied distress on a daily basis? Moreover, how should clinicians treat BDD? It is argued that to provide insight into the lived experiences of people with BDD, it is essential to listen to the experiences of those with the condition.

Method

Participants

Following ethical approval from City University, a homogenous, purpose sample of one pilot participant (male) and 10 participants (seven females and three males) was recruited from advertisements placed on BDD websites, internet support groups and by word of mouth. All participants identified themselves as suffering from BDD.

Design

A qualitative design, using IPA and photo elicitation was adopted. IPA was used as this approach explores how people make sense of their subjective life experiences (Smith et al. 2009). Photo elicitation, which Collier (1967) describes as the technique of using photographs in research interviews,[1] was used in this study as Frith and Harcourt (2007) found that interviews conducted in conjunction with photographs have been found to yield more detailed and precise information than information generated by spoken interviews only.

Furthermore, users of BDD websites, such as BDD Central, commonly communicate feelings and thoughts about their appearance by using visual methods such as photographs and drawings (www.bddcentral.com).

Procedure

Before participants took part in the study they were asked about the extent and distress of their preoccupation about appearance, using questions outlined in the BDD Diagnostic Module for Adults (Phillips 2005). These questions were to ensure that participants considered that they were not just 'normatively' dissatisfied by their appearance concerns, but were preoccupied and distressed by appearance concerns. As there are high levels of suicidality found in people with BDD, all participants were screened for suicidality (Phillips and Menard 2006). Participants' general practitioner (GP) details were also taken so that they could be contacted if a participant was judged to be at risk of harm. No participants were judged to be at risk of harm.

Thereafter, the study was outlined to participants who were asked to take approximately 10-12 photographs and find approximately 4 pre-existing photographs relevant to their experiences of BDD. It was emphasized that participants did not have to take photographs of themselves and they were encouraged to represent their experiences in different ways. Participants were also informed that they should write down their feelings when taking the photographs, when the photographs were developed, and any feelings or thoughts relevant to their BDD experiences. Participants signed a consent form to say they understood the task and were

provided with a disposable camera and notebook, although they were permitted to use any form of camera.

Participants brought their photographs and notebook to a semi-structured, tape-recorded interview held at a location convenient to them. They then signed another consent form giving permission to participate in the research. In line with the procedure described in Radley and Taylor (2003), participants were asked to arrange their photographs. Participants spoke about each photograph in an order of their choice and described how it represented their experiences of BDD, referring to their notebook as applicable. When participants had spoken about all their photographs, in line with the procedure described in Frith and Harcourt (2007), they were asked how they found the process of creating a photographic record of their experiences and whether any photographs were particularly important for them. Participants were asked whether any images were missing from their collection and were given the option to describe them. After participants had spoken about their photographs, they answered some further questions about their experiences of BDD. The interviews lasted between one and two hours.

After the interview, participants were debriefed. They could choose whether to consent to their photographs being used in the research, although it was explained that this was not compulsory as I was interested in the conversations elicited as a result of the photographs. No photographs of this type have been used in this report.

Immediately after the interview, as recommended by Brocki and Wearden (2006), I wrote self-reflexive notes in my research diary about my initial thoughts and feelings and

embodied aspects of interactions with participants. Additionally, I took new photographs and found pre-existing photographs of my own to give the reader an insight into my experiences of conducting this research.

Analytical approach

Participants' photographs were analysed with participants in the interview and the verbal data were analysed separately by the researchers, using IPA, following the procedure outlined in Smith and Osborn (2003). Each interview was transcribed verbatim and participants' names and identifiable details were changed to preserve confidentiality. Initially, the first transcript was carefully read and initial notes were written in a margin. Emergent themes were identified from these notes. When all emergent themes were identified for a transcript, they were examined for patterns and connections and placed in clusters. After themes had been placed in clusters, the superordinate theme was named. This process was carried out for each individual transcript and care was taken to treat each case in its own right, and bracket ideas emerging from previous cases. When every transcript had been analysed, patterns across cases were looked at and master themes made up of constituent themes for participants were documented.

Analysis

After analysing the data using IPA, four master themes emerged. These were identified as:

1. The self as an aesthetic object.
2. Striving for the 'good enough' self.

3. The conflicted self.
4. The imprisoned self.

The analysis will be illustrated by the use of participants' quotations. In the transcripts . . . denotes omitted material.

Master Theme 1: the self as an aesthetic object

Veale and Neziroglu (2010) state that seeing the self as an aesthetic object consists of acute self-consciousness and being excessively aware of one's body image from an observer's perspective. All participants view the self as fundamentally flawed, ugly and wrong. Lucy, who believes she is 'ugly', 'not even worth to be seen' and has 'manly features' perceives herself as being separate to the rest of humanity and compares
herself to 'the Tree Man or the Elephant Man'. Similarly, Jenny, who believes that she is 'truly hideous', 'repulsive' and 'fundamentally flawed' compares herself to non-human entities such as the 'Raggy Dolls' reject bin'. To illustrate this she took a photograph of a rubbish dump and explained that:

This picture is obviously a sort of sideline, bins and trash that was dumped behind it. I put it is unwanted, another analogy is a garden weed, a pest, it's natural, and grows like any other vegetation, but it is not wanted. Or better still a carrot, or a potato that grows, but it's irregular in shape, colour and so on and so it's not good enough to sell with the other class one or class two goods. Yer that's how, not even Sainsbury's basics or Tesco's value, the scrap heap, it's functional, because I am a functional person, but not cosmetically up to the basic normal standard for selling to the public.

This quotation reinforces the idea that Jenny believes there is something intrinsically wrong with her. While she is functional, she sees herself as a worthless commodity that is inferior to other goods, unwanted, and barely fit for purpose.

Participants identify their appearance with the self. Danielle explains:

My worth is judged on my weight and my appearance, completely, completely a hundred per cent, and that's why when I get a spot or something, it's like OK your skin is no longer perfect, so you are worthless. You have no worth, and it's that extreme. One tiny little blitch does that . . . I only see the exterior, and I know I am a good person, I'm a nice person, bla bla bla, I know it. I don't know it, I mean I do know it, but I don't really care.

This quotation suggests that while Danielle sees herself as a good person, this is irrelevant to her as appearance is at the centre of a domain. Danielle sees a lack of perfection as evidence of worthlessness. Thus one 'tiny little blitch' can have a fundamental effect on her sense of self. She later explains that 'when I get a spot I feel like all the bad things I see about me are being shown to the whole world', suggesting she believes her appearance has a moral dimension as outside flaws reflect inner flaws.

As participants place great value on appearance and view themselves as aesthetic objects, they try to control the way they look. Hannah explains that, 'I feel the need to be in immense control of my features, how I move my mouth, how I move my body and if there's anything spontaneous I struggle with it a bit.' This quotation suggests that Hannah is

continually monitoring every aspect of her self. Similarly, Danielle believes that the self must be controlled as she is like an object on display. This continual monitoring interferes with her enjoyment of sex as she has never had an orgasm with a man as 'all that is going through my head is oh, you look fat, suck in your stomach more, tense this'.

Participants think that others also judge and scrutinize the way that they look. Jenny believes that she is a special aesthetic object that is automatically rated, evaluated and compared by others in a mechanical and crude manner. She brought in a photograph of a magazine article entitled 'What Men Really Think of our Bikini Bodies' as she believes that at the 'root' of her BDD is her belief that she can never 'match up' to what men want from women. She explains this below:

I feel like I am constantly in a line up, um, yer, a bit like you get in Miss World type contests. And that every time, um specifically with men, every time, they see me it's like some sort of computer program starts in their head which rates you, evaluates you, compares you and um, puts you in a ranking and that's what. Yer, um, and I have put here, I want to be what they look for, yet they scare me, constant rejection scares me. I can't bear to be around them because I feel their eyes and minds evaluating, rating me and I am under scrutiny. I said that my flaws are for all to see and I am hideous, yet this makes me terrified of men because they are not people but examiners, obviously I believe that they are people. And no matter who I am inside, I am this vulgar figure that if only they could see under my clothes, examine me like only I get to know, they'd literally throw up in disgust.

In this quotation, men are described as 'they' and 'examiners', suggesting they are perceived as fearful and totally 'other'. Their gaze is so strong she can literally 'feel' their eyes and minds evaluating her and she is terrified of being rejected by them. Jenny describes herself as a 'vulgar figure', which is dehumanizing. Her comment that men would physically vomit if they saw under her clothes shows the strength of her belief that her appearance is hideous and offensive.

As participants view themselves as a 'special' aesthetic object that is negatively judged by the 'other', most participants desire to be masked and hidden. Danielle uses clothes to hide the self and took a photograph of a woman in a hijab and burka, explaining that:

This is ideally what I would love to wear so no one would be able to see me and I don't have to be exposed and people don't have to see me. I feel that when I talk to people all they are thinking is 'fat ugly pig'. I hide in my winter coat, shapeless and black, and when the seasons and the weather changed just now I was in total shock and felt lost, exposed, vulnerable, fat, disgusting and hideous.

This quotation shows Danielle's desire to be entirely invisible to the gaze of the 'other'. The word 'exposed' suggests that without being entirely covered up, the self feels unprotected and vulnerable. Danielle's quotation also shows how she thinks that others place appearance at the centre of a domain and view her as an ugly aesthetic object, thinking 'fat ugly pig' when they speak to her. The changing of the seasons from winter to summer seems to be catastrophic as shown by

the six adjectives 'lost,' 'exposed', 'vulnerable', 'fat', 'disgusting' and 'hideous'.

Hannah, who often feels 'masculine' and has a 'pathological fear' of being mistaken for a man, wears dresses that are 'several sizes too big' to hide the self. She explains that:

I guess I am always waiting to be found out or something . . . You know sometimes I try and wear dresses and things almost cover the ugly kind of manly feeling and if someone says 'oh, you're looking pretty or I like your flower' I just think, ah, it's like covering the soil kind of thing.

This quotation implies that Hannah is waiting for her 'real self' to be revealed. It suggests that she believes the flowers she wears mask the 'soiled' natural self. Flowers are a traditional symbol of femininity and are contrasted with soil, which is natural and dirty. She later explains that many of her clothes are white and she wonders 'if I am hoping the white will sort of purify the kind of you know gross stuff underneath'. It thus appears that clothes are not just used to 'hide' the inner self, but there is also the hope that they will remove the 'soil' in what may be a symbolic renewal and removal of the bad parts of the self.

Master Theme 2: striving for the 'good enough' self

While all participants are aiming for the 'good enough' self, this means different things for them. Amy states that 'I want to just be normal . . . just so that I don't even be noticed', whereas Danielle said that 'I wish I could be thin and beautiful and, yeh it's that idea of, like what is perfect and

what is right. Thin is right and anything other than thin is not right.' Jenny explains why she wants a 'good enough' self:

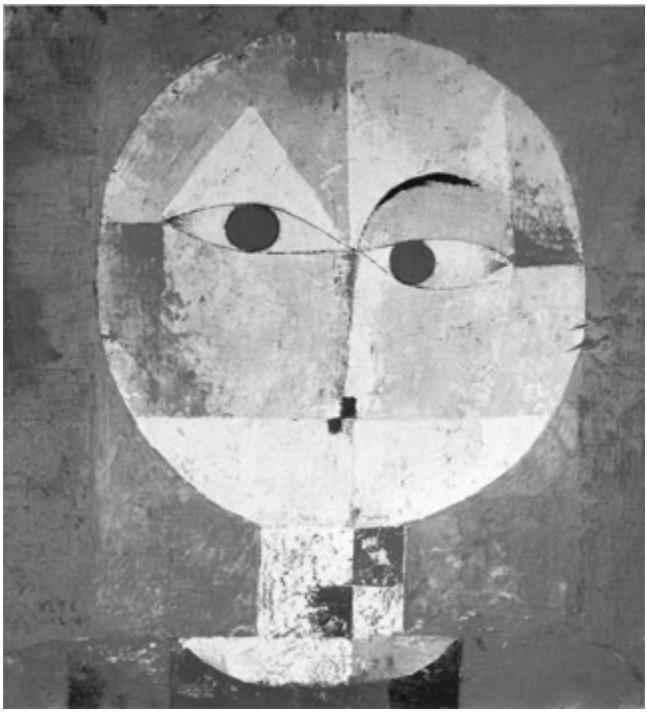
If it was put on sale to the public, um members of the public would nearly always pick another good looking one instead, um, and it would be left on the shelf, which is how I kind of feel about myself. This is my BDD constantly striving to look better, to be good enough for the shelf that someone will want to take me home, and choose me. Only the flaws get greater and more numerous as my natural life goes on, a bit like that carrot or potato, I become older, wrinkler and more and irrevocably blemished and scarred.

This quotation suggests that Jenny sees herself as completely inferior to others, and is a passive object that is left on the shelf, surpassed by other more attractive vegetables. While Jenny is thus striving to look 'good enough' to be chosen and taken home by others, nature seems to be against her as her flaws 'get greater' and 'more numerous' as she ages. As her flaws increase uncontrollably, so they become more permanent and immutable as is shown by words such as 'irrevocably blemished' and 'scarred'.

Most participants feel responsible for not looking 'good enough' and believe that they have a responsibility to 'fix' their appearance in some way. Louise explains the link between looking wrong, responsibility and shame, stating that: 'there is that imperative sometimes in you to think that there's something wrong with how you look, it's your responsibility to put it right, and you should be ashamed if it's not right somehow'.

As a way of making the self 'good enough', Hannah performs 'DIY' surgery during which time she sees the self in tiny parts and not as a whole. She took a photograph of the painting *Senecio* by Paul Klee to describe this:

It's the idea of it's all in these little squares, and it's like I am kind of like I am going to deal with that tiny bit now and that just assumes immense proportions and it's weird how you could spend hours on like 1 sort of cm squared and I think it was just the eyebrows . . . It's just that kind of fracturing, both on, maybe internal the psyche as well but also in terms of I don't think I have any real perspective. I think very much of my face as. I refer to it, I always refer to it as my skin, as like a separate thing, and sometimes I am like my skin is sabotaging me and then, um, in itself it's also broken down I think of the eyebrows, the nose, and then there's the chin which is always a bit of an issue.



Senecio, 1922, Paul Klee

Source: Wiki Paintings

This quotation suggests that Hannah does not see her face as a whole, but instead sees it as made up of separate sections that are ‘broken down’ and ‘dealt with’ during ‘DIY surgery’. The contrast between ‘tiny bit’ and ‘immense proportions’ suggests that each section ‘assumes’ a power and magnitude that are disproportional to its size and Hannah says she has little perspective when she looks at her face. She refers to her skin as ‘separate’ and ‘sabotaging’ of the self, which suggests that her skin is actively working against the self.

Hannah describes the process of her 'weird botched own surgery' which is done with her hand, 'the architect of your destruction'. She took a photograph of her room after the surgery, which she describes as being like 'some drugs den' with 'the old needles'. This suggests that her behaviours are addictive, and they are later described as 'sullied' and 'shameful':

I am usually incredibly neat. But then, as the panic rises it's just like everything that's spread, it's like cotton buds which I tend to use because I hate having my fingers sort of on my face so often I like blot things or put on . . . I think with the picking bit it's um sometimes you are not thinking anything much at all, you kind of go into this zone which I often do with you know my face if I sort of am squeezing something or picking or cutting, it's kind of just really intense. And I can just zone in completely, and it's only when I suddenly sit back and I am like 'oh my God' you know there's this massive red patch, you really haven't made things better but you have made a hundred times worse. And that's why I have the Savlon and the scissors because often they are, you know if I can feel it sometimes when I have to get it, and then the scissors, and then inevitably there is kind of blood, and kind of blot, and then Savlon, and then. I found it quite sordid looking at these.

In this quotation, when Hannah is 'squeezing', 'picking' or 'cutting', she describes going into a 'zone' where she is 'not thinking anything much at all'. This suggests that she goes into an almost trance-like state when trying to 'fix' the self and make it 'good enough'. It is only afterwards when she is confronted with 'this massive red patch' that has worsened her skin that she is aware of the damage she has done. The

aftermath of the 'DIY surgery' is described in such as way that Hannah is depicted as both surgeon and patient and she seems to follow a routine procedure. She seems to find her rituals shameful as she said she
found looking at these photographs 'sordid' and 'gross' as they forced her to look at her behaviours without being able to 'glaze over' and use euphemisms. Instead, she talks about having 'hacked into' herself, which suggests that she has transgressed the self in some way, in the same way that one may hack into a computer that does not belong to you.

Master Theme 3: the conflicted self

Several participants talk about a battle between the 'BDD self' and the 'non-BDD self'. Louise finds the relationship between BDD and 'me' difficult and confusing:

I have a habit of talking about BDD as if it's like a monster that attacks me from the outside, whereas in actual fact I know it's me but putting those two thoughts together is quite difficult because it feels like it's something that ambushes me.

This quotation suggests that Louise personifies BDD and perceives it as a monster that is trapping and working against her, making her a victim of an external force. At other times Louise does not feel ambushed by BDD and the 'real me' can emerge. Louise took a photograph of her guitars, which represent the creative side of the self and stated that:

I was explaining it to my friend as being like two balloons that are inside you, and there is only so much, so that if one gets bigger the other one has to shrink. So the creative me gets bigger, then the BDD me has to get smaller, because the

creative me, is like the real me that is driving the bad thoughts out. And I feel when I play music I play it well, when I write something and I write it well, and if somebody reads it and it means something to them then I fell validated and important, outside of how I look. So inevitably that makes the BDD kind of shrink up, and like a slug you put some salt on because there's no, it's taking away its key beliefs. But when the BDD gets bigger it tells me I am useless, it tells me that nothing that I do is ever going to have any point if I don't look right, then what's the point in writing a poem, what's the point in writing a song because it's just an ugly person doing it, and nobody will care. So the two things can't co-exist together.

This quotation suggests that there is a huge split and battle between the creative, 'non-BDD self' and the 'BDD self'. The use of the present tense in this quotation suggests that this is something that she wrestles with at present. She sees the creative self as the 'real me', which suggests that she attempts to separate the 'BDD me' and the 'bad thoughts' from her self-concept. When the 'BDD self' is dominant, she is unable to create. However, when she is creative, the BDD thoughts lessen. The metaphor of two balloons conveys the idea that the 'BDD self' and the 'non-BDD real self' are wholly opposed. In the same way that a balloon can be blown up, but also can be fragile and burst, perhaps both parts of the self have potential to increase in size and importance, but also are fragile and susceptible to bursting. When Louise feels validated, for reasons that are not based on appearance, she uses a simile comparing BDD to a slug that 'shrinks up' in salt. This suggests that at these points BDD is not powerful, as a slug has no choice but to be destroyed by salt. However, when BDD is more dominant, it is seen as powerful,

imprisoning and controlling and 'tells' her that appearance is at the centre of a domain.

Other participants describe a battle between different parts of the self. Jane, a human rights campaigner, describes her experience of BDD as being a 'massive contradiction' that causes her many confusing internal battles between the 'sane and insane part of the kind of head' as caring so much about her looks 'goes against my personality, it goes against all my ethics and morals'.

Master Theme 4: the imprisoned self

Mirrors are, or have previously been, an integral part of the BDD experience for most participants. Louise gets imprisoned in the mirror during 'stuck in the mirror' phases. She took a photograph of a mirror as a prompt to describe this experience:

My longest mirror time period was 11 hours that I was at the mirror . . . And during that time when I am stuck I can't do anything, I can't pick up the phone, I can't walk to open the door if someone comes round to try and help me, I can't drink anything or eat anything or go to the bathroom. I am just stuck there completely, to the point where my closest friend eventually had to have keys to my house and he'd come round and let himself in, if I had managed to text him and tell him what was going on. And he would just come and bring me water and make me sit down, and make me drink water just to rehydrate myself,
because by then I'd physically be in a horrendous state. Um, and I'd just be exhausted and if you stand in the same position for hours and hours you don't think about what that would be

like, exactly the same position really and usually I am just doing my hair or something over and over and over again. And you get, you ache, you completely ache all over, and you get so exhausted you almost can't even see what you are looking at any more at all.

In this quotation, the repetition of 'can't' shows how basic functioning is stopped during these periods. The image of her friend who will 'make' her sit down, and bring her water has connotations of a parent nursing a child, or a nurse helping a fragile patient, and shows how it requires another person to take control of the situation. The physical effects of mirror gazing show the interaction between the mind and the body, and the description of her standing in the same position for 'hours and hours' suggests that during this time she is almost physically frozen. Louise explains how the 'longer I've stayed there, the more distorted everything becomes' as time has a negative effect on her perception of self. She later explains that her desire to stay in the mirror is to stop the 'torture' of feeling that she does not look 'good enough'. However, this causes her to be very late for work and social arrangements, making her feel that she has 'failed for the day'. It seems that the mirror is like another omnipotent force controlling and trapping her.

Participants are in agreement about the devastating impact that BDD has on lives. Hannah explains that she cannot have romantic relationships as her absolute 'need' and addiction to mirrors would interfere with such a relationship, as would her fear of the unmodified self being exposed. Louise stated that 'BDD makes people vulnerable to having bad relationships but I also think that those relationships can then make the BDD worse.' Unlike her previous disruptive relationship,

Louise explained that she is currently in a relationship with an 'amazing, brilliant' man. Her photograph of her current partner behind a glass window was a prompt for talking about the difficulties in this relationship:

It's like my life is just there, my life that I could have, my future life that I could have it's just there but I can't quite get to it because I just find myself pounding against the BDD. . . . You know it separates us because it's really difficult to have a normal relationship when you have BDD, and no matter how lovely and supportive the other person is, it's really really difficult to have a fully functional and happy relationship. And the BDD wrecks things, the skewed thinking wrecks things, the rituals wreck things, the lack of confidence wrecks things. It makes you insecure and therefore he's standing there saying 'I love you, I can't care that you've got BDD, I think you are beautiful and brilliant and wonderful, I want to spend my future with you.' And you can see that's right there for you to have, and you, you just keep fucking it up, because you still are trapped inside your mind.

The metaphor of Louise imprisoned behind the glass where her boyfriend is suggests the potential for a different, future life that is so near, but yet so difficult to reach, as she is 'pounding' against the BDD. 'Pounding', a violent, harsh word, suggests both the continual battle between her potential and the BDD, and her determination to fight BDD. BDD is seen as 'separating' her and her partner and continually 'wrecking' things, as is shown by the angry repetition of 'wrecks'. It is almost as if BDD is a third powerful outside person in this relationship robbing her of happiness. The image of her partner standing saying 'I love you' is a symbol of hope and change. However, while the future is visible,

Louise says that ‘you just keep fucking it up, because you are still trapped inside your mind’.

Several participants talk about the overall experiences of BDD and explain that BDD has imprisoned the self, stopping them from reaching their full potential. Tom describes BDD as an intruder that has ‘robbed’ him of a great deal. Similarly, Louise describes BDD as a ‘crippling thing’ that has ‘taken away a lot of good things’. While she functions, she feels she is ‘aiming for the gutter’ and does not have a ‘proper life’ as so much ‘energy goes on surviving’. Chris explains that ‘Yes, it’s just taken everything, it’s ruined everything. It’s destroying all my hopes and my goals.’

Discussion

Theoretical insights and application to clinical practice

While literature on BDD (e.g. Phillips 2005) shows that people with BDD view the self as ugly, it is argued that the qualitative methods in this research further extend our understanding of the experiences of people with BDD. Participants used rich metaphors and similes to describe what it feels like to have such
an ugly, flawed and shameful self. For example, Jenny compares herself to a garden weed, explaining that a weed ‘grows like any other vegetation, but it’s not wanted’. Shinebourne and Smith (2009) suggest that metaphors provide a safe bridge for articulating novel expressions of feelings and experiences. I believe that participants’ metaphors gave me, a researcher who does not suffer from BDD, the ability to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Additionally, the embodied emotional responses of some of the participants to their perceived 'ugliness' could be seen in interviews. Lucy, when presenting a photograph of her face, said 'I can't even look at it' and sneered at her photograph, whereas Hannah found looking at a photograph of herself so distressing that she had to turn the photograph over.

My findings support Veale and Lambrou (2002), who argue that people with BDD view themselves as an aesthetic object. It is argued that the writings of Sartre ([1943] 1958) are helpful in making sense of participants' experiences of themselves as objects and their difficulties relaxing. Sartre argues that when the body is experienced as invisible and is 'passed-by-in-silence', ordinary, uninhibited action is possible. However, when one is aware of the 'gaze' of the 'other', one feels self-conscious and the body loses its spontaneity and naturalness. Participants' awareness and control of their appearance suggest that the body is not viewed as invisible, but instead is highly visible and disconnected. Furthermore, it seems that participants do not experience their body as a 'lived body' but instead as an 'objectified body'. Perhaps because of experiencing their bodies as object-like and visible and continually scrutinizing the self, participants found it difficult to experience ordinary uninhibited action.

This study supports Veale (2000) who states that people with BDD often carry out 'DIY surgery' as a means to change their appearance. Featherstone (1991) and Shilling (1993) suggest that in late post-modernity the body has become a project to be 'worked on' as the appearance of the body is related to the construction and maintenance of self-identity. It seems that my participants viewed 'DIY surgery' as a way of

'working on' the self. However, Hannah's rich embodied description of 'DIY surgery' suggests that the complex experiences of this may not be solely motivated by the desire to improve appearance.

Frank (2002) describes how, within consumer culture, advertisements often fragment the body into different parts which can all be worked on and improved. Similarly, like other participants who do not view their body as a whole, but in parts, Hannah states that during 'DIY surgery' she perceives the self as fragmented as she experiences her skin as being broken down into different parts. She also experiences her skin as separate to and sabotaging the self. It is argued that psychoanalytic theories might be useful in making sense of these experiences.

Lacan ([1966] 1977), a psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, provides an illustrative metaphor that may increase understanding of 'DIY surgery'. He proposes that a baby does not experience their body as integrated, but instead experiences it as a variety of parts, organs, sensations, needs and impulses. During the 'mirror stage', which occurs when the baby is between about 6 and 18 months, Lacan argues that the baby looks at his or her image in the mirror and sees a coherence which is not seen when (s)he views his or her actual body. Lacan states that while the baby is delighted to see a unified self in the mirror, (s)he is also angry that the self is not experienced as unified. To resolve this, the baby tries to identify with this imagined unified image. Lacan argues that when people are in psychotic states of mind, they experience themselves and their bodies in fragments which feel outside of themselves and threatening. Thus, when in a psychotic state of mind, the sense of self is not experienced as unified.

It is possible that the lack of integration that Hannah is experiencing is similar to that described by people who are in psychotic states of mind. In the same way that the infant tries to identify with the unified image in the mirror, so perhaps Hannah's desire to obtain totally smooth skin during 'DIY surgery' may represent an attempt to integrate the different parts of the fragmented self. Parker (2003) additionally suggests that the desire to smooth the skin is a frantic attempt to establish a sense of psychic containment and a comforting, protective covering. To understand our clients' unique experiences, we must therefore not assume that the sole motivation for undertaking 'DIY surgery' is to improve appearance. Instead, we must ask clients about personal, nuanced and embodied accounts of 'DIY surgery' and enquire about the meaning of such surgery.

My research suggests that my participants' relationship with BDD was confusing and was experienced as a battle between the 'BDD self' and 'non-BDD self'. This fascinating phenomenon has yet to be explored in the BDD literature. Spivack and Willig (2010), who found that some adolescent inpatients with anorexia nervosa experienced both an 'anorexic' and 'non-anorexic self', suggest it is useful to help clients integrate both parts of the self, instead of encouraging a battle between parts of the self. Similarly, the difference between the 'BDD self' and 'non-BDD self' in my research suggests that clinicians could help
clients to integrate the 'BDD self' and 'non-BDD self'. Mountford and Waller (2006) state that drawing an 'anorexic gremlin' is a useful way of exploring the anorexic self. Given the link between BDD and the visual, it is possible that clients with BDD could draw or photograph a representation of their 'BDD' and 'non-BDD self'. Additionally, role-play and

writing could be used as a means to explore and integrate different parts of the self for clients with BDD (Costin 2006).

The finding in this research that mirrors are central to most participants' experiences of BDD supports Phillips's (2005) claim that people with BDD have a special and torturous relationship with mirrors. Veale and Riley (2001) found a number of different motivations for mirror gazing in people with BDD including the need to know exactly how they look, a belief that resisting gazing will make them feel worse, and the wish to hide their appearance. However, the use of open-ended questions and photographs in this research suggests that the phenomenon of mirror gazing is more complex than is suggested by Veale and Riley These findings suggest that as clinicians, it is important to listen to clients' unique experiences and to not only ask participants about their cognitions when at the mirror, but also about the embodied experiences of mirror gazing.

Evaluation and critique of the research study

This study was evaluated with reference to Yardley's (2000) four criteria for evaluating qualitative research. Yardley's first criterion is that the research should show sensitivity to context. I have shown sensitivity to theory by providing an introduction that reviews relevant theoretical literature. I have tried to show sensitivity to participants' perspectives by asking them to take photographs of and write about what *they* considered relevant. I have shown sensitivity to the data by thinking about alternative interpretations of the data.

Yardley's second criterion is commitment and rigour. I have continued to facilitate a BDD support group while conducting

the research. I have also attended closely to each participant during data collection and analysis.

Yardley's third criterion is transparency and coherence. In this research, I have been explicit about every aspect of the research design, data collection and analysis and have provided participants' quotations. I have kept a 'paper trail' of the research and have produced a research diary and reflective photographs.

Yardley's final criterion is importance and impact. I hope that this research will 'give voice' to my participants and allow clinicians to better understand, identify and treat people with BDD.

This research does have limitations. While the research gives one possible interpretation of my participants' experiences of BDD, the findings cannot be generalized to all people with BDD. My research excluded participants who were suicidal and required participants to take photographs, keep a notebook and attend an interview. Given that many people with BDD are housebound, and may have found the idea of taking photographs anxiety-provoking, the nature of my research may have meant that the most severely affected people with BDD, who may have had different experiences, did not take part. Further studies could investigate this, perhaps by using methods that do not require participants to meet a researcher face to face.

Methodological reflexivity

I consider the photographs gave me a privileged insight into the worlds of my participants and like Reavey (2011) I think

that photographs enabled participants to 'show' their experiences instead of just telling me about them, enriching my holistic understanding of participants' experiences of BDD.

Several participants stated the benefits of using photo elicitation. Danielle commented that photographs enabled her to 'pigeon hole that feeling I have about myself and just put like an image to it . . . it's useful just like to gain some kind of insight into the whole disorder and yeh, and understanding'. Chris explained that photographs 'make it clearer to someone without BDD what it feels like, um, how it ruins your life'.

I feel that using photographs gave participants agency. Participants spoke about their photographs in an order of their choice. Louise explained that the photographs enabled her to think carefully about the key aspects of her experiences. She states that 'the only other way to do it would be like with very specific questions, but then they would be your questions, so it wouldn't be an opportunity for me to tell you what I thought was important'.

The photographs meant that the interview was an embodied experience as participants sometimes physically interacted with the photographs, giving insight into their feelings. Sometimes photographs were turned over or moved away as looking at them was too distressing. At other times, looking at photographs evoked feelings of sadness and loss. For example, Hannah brought in a photograph of herself as an infant to illustrate that she is now 'never this unselfconscious'. When looking at the photograph, she was tearful and felt a 'pang' as she seemed 'really happy' in this past photograph as compared to her present feelings. Reavey

(2011) argues that participants, when confronted with a photograph from their past, can imagine their emotions or embodied states such that the past can enter the present moment and create a new and more complex narrative.

For some participants the research had a therapeutic effect. Jenny said that it was 'almost quite cathartic really to write some of the stuff in the notebook'. Lucy found taking and talking about her photographs an empowering experience. She stated that taking photographs of herself enabled her to 'face these problems' and 'actually go, right, you know what, I am going to beat you'. Lucy later explains:

I guess it's the more the thing of you are forced to see what you don't like which in itself is healing cos you have to face them and you have to look and then that in itself makes you you think, well what is wrong with the picture?

Participants' positive feedback about the visual methods used in this research suggests that photographs may not only be a useful way of researching BDD, but could also be used in the treatment of BDD.

Personal reflexivity

In this section, I will explore how I have shaped and influenced the research and will discuss the impact that the research has had on me. In the same way that participants' photographs gave me insight into their lived experiences, I hope my photographs let the reader into my 'lived experiences' of being a researcher.

Finlay (2006) demonstrates that as we look closely at another's embodied experiences, we can reflectively examine our own embodied experiences. During interviews, I wondered whether participants were scrutinizing me in the same way they scrutinized themselves and other people. One occasion when I experienced my body as being particularly visible was when Jenny took a photograph of a mole on her stomach, which she found 'repulsive,' 'ugly' and 'disgusting' and said that she did not know how she would cope if she had moles on her face. As she said this, I was conscious of having moles on my own face
and arm. This gave me a small insight into what it is like to experience the body as an 'objectified body' as opposed to a 'lived body'. I took a photograph of some of my moles under a magnifying glass, as during this time I felt that my body was somewhat under a magnifying lens.

Source: © Joanna Silver

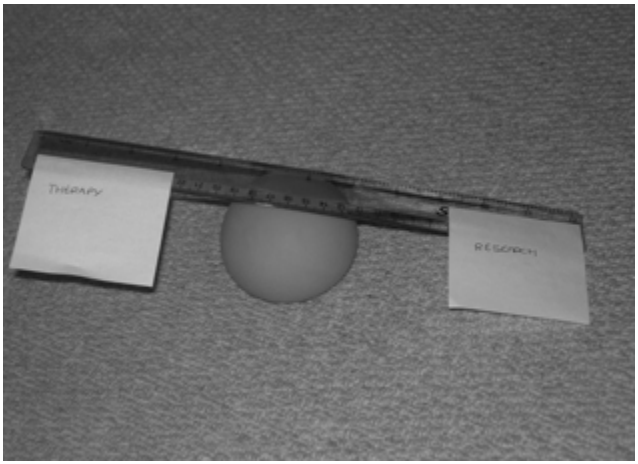
In the interviews, I endeavoured to bracket my theoretical knowledge of BDD and tried to adopt a 'phenomenological attitude' by closely listening to participants. At times, I felt sad and moved by participants' distressing experiences and my embodied feelings such as butterflies in my stomach when I heard particularly distressing accounts made me feel empathy towards participants. I found it hard in several interviews to hear participants call themselves 'hideous' and 'disgusting' when the evidence I saw was so much to the contrary. As a trainee counselling psychologist, specializing in cognitive behavioural therapy, my natural instinct was to gently challenge participants' assumptions. However, I was mindful that my role was to be a researcher and not a therapist and I was aware of the delicate balance between research, which may have a therapeutic effect, and therapy.

The next photograph depicts my impression that I managed to make my research interviews therapeutic without becoming therapy. I was immensely privileged that participants were so open with me. When listening to the audiotapes of my participants I felt moved by their powerful responses and felt in awe of my participants' bravery and honesty. Consequently, after hearing their experiences of feeling unheard or misunderstood by others, in writing this research I have felt an immense duty to do my participants' justice by ensuring that participants' voices are heard.

The next photograph, where I am carrying a paperweight, represents the responsibility that I feel to ensure that my research makes a difference to people with BDD. While sometimes working on this research has seemed overwhelming, most of the time it has been intensely exciting. I particularly enjoyed seeing the research grow and develop.

The first photograph below of different jigsaw pieces represents how I sometimes felt that I had many different ideas that did not quite fit together. However, like the second photograph of a completed jigsaw, over time my ideas have fitted together to form a coherent research study. The original photograph of the completed jigsaw entitled 'Illustration of Square Jigsaw Pieces' was taken by weknow (www.featurepics.com/online/Square-Jigsaw-Pieces-1395151.aspx).

Having listened to my participants' accounts, viewed their photographs and analysed their words, I am in complete agreement with Veale and Neziroglu (2010: 55) that 'there is an enormous richness of phenomenlogy in BDD that is not found in standard textbooks of psychiatry or descriptive psychopathology'.



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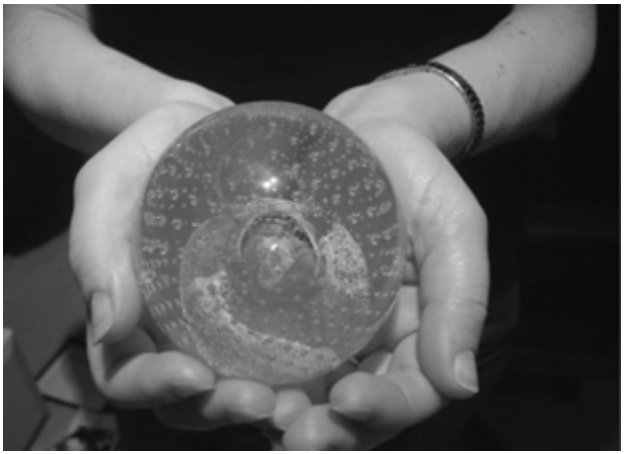

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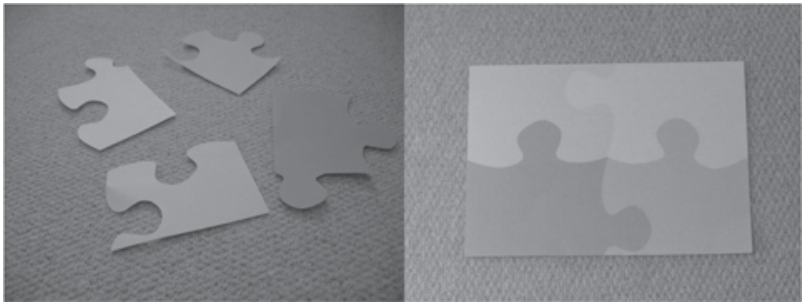

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1 Reavey (2011) shows that already existing images can be used during interviews and images can be generated within the context of the research. Sometimes authors refer to photo elicitation to describe both approaches, whereas other authors distinguish between photo elicitation (the use of already existing images) and photo production (participant-generated images). In this research, I will use the term photo elicitation to refer to both approaches.

Appendix 3

Constructing self-harm at the turn of the twenty-first century: a Foucauldian discourse analysis

Caroline Silcock

Reflexive preface

This research formed part of a professional doctorate in counselling psychology and my first substantive attempt at in-depth qualitative research. My undergraduate degree had a heavy emphasis on cognitive and positivist psychology, and I found the entire learning experience quite flat and uninspiring. It was not until some five years later, when I returned to study an MSc in health psychology, that I encountered social constructionism and critical psychology. This way of thinking was at first a frustrating and alien concept to me, but I was also intrigued. I slowly began to understand and appreciate this philosophy, and a radical shift

in my worldview took place. What I had initially seen as a somewhat pedantic argument became an increasingly freeing and welcome contrast to what I had studied before, and I began to realize the exciting possibilities of applying this viewpoint to my research. I found something satisfying about questioning the status quo and something incredibly important about deconstructing the power relations inherent within the profession of mental health, and the effects of these upon the people we are supposed to be helping. This study grew out of an interest in the use of labels and diagnoses, and the impact of these upon both the service users and the mental health professionals involved in their care. Underlying this was a sense of injustice in the way self-harm was being viewed and stigmatized, and indeed in the whole concept of mental illness, and the dilemma and implications involved for myself within a profession founded on such notions. This piece of work was most certainly a journey for me. It was fascinating and frustrating in equal measures, but ultimately it developed my identity as a practitioner and researcher. By undertaking research using a methodology not viewed as 'mainstream', and identifying oneself as a qualitative researcher, you are embarking on more than just an empirical project. For me, this was a beginning not an end. It started a process that shifted my philosophy, the perspective with which I view the world, which has inevitably changed my approach and the research questions I feel are most important. That process was certainly not easy, it can't be rushed and at times it can feel overwhelming, but it's a journey I'll never regret taking.

Abstract

This research explores how self-harm is constructed within available discursive resources in contemporary western society. A Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was conducted on a sample of professional documents, transcripts from six interviews with people who self-harm, and a focus group of five health professionals. This study presents one of the major discursive themes generated: 'risk and danger'. Constructions of self-harm as a risk for suicide positioned people engaging in this behaviour as unstable and unable to make reasonable and rational decisions in their own best interests. Health professionals within this theme were positioned as responsible for providing safety and containment, which required them to understand the behaviour within a psychological discourse. Such constructions were strongly resisted by participants who self-harmed, who often reconstructed the behaviour as an act of survival; however, utilizing them
also allowed the behaviour to be taken seriously by health professionals – therefore seen as 'genuine' – subsequently allowing access to treatment. The struggles evident in the participants' constructions of their self-harm behaviour were strongly apparent, resulting in a constant shifting between discourses, as each subsequent position was found to be disempowering.

Introduction

Self-harm is a complex and poorly understood behaviour, and it poses a great challenge to health service providers within the UK. It is generally considered to have a poor response to treatment and has been identified as one of the highest risk factors for suicide (Singh et al. 2002; Hawton 2004; NICE 2004), yet there remains a reported stigma and negative

stereotyping of this behaviour among those who are on the 'front-line' of treatment provision (Greenwood and Bradley 1997; Warm et al. 2002; Kapur 2005), and a high level of dissatisfaction with services among those who self-harm (Persius et al. 2003; Hume and Platt 2007; O'Donovan 2007). This indicates a potential conflict between how people who self-harm understand their behaviour and how the professionals involved in their care understand it.

The definition of self-harm can be quite confusing and different terms are used throughout the literature, including: self-injury, cutting, self-mutilation, deliberate self-harm, self-wounding, parasuicide, self-inflicted violence and self-injurious behaviours. Much of the research undertaken has been on self-harm as presented to accident & emergency (A&E) hospital departments, where the line between self-harm and suicide has for the large part been blurred. It is often portrayed as a dangerous and perplexing problem (Nock et al. 2007; Prinstein 2008) and a growing public health concern (e.g. Hawton et al. 2007). Described as an 'escalating epidemic' (Plante 2007: xiii), particularly among young people in the UK (Fortune et al. 2008), self-harm is viewed as costly 'in terms of both individual distress and also service provision' (Boyce 2004: 868). As a result, it has become of increasing concern to clinicians and researchers, prompting the production of national clinical guidelines and policy documents which inform and impact upon the treatment of people who self-harm.

A wider definition of self-harm may encompass more socially acceptable behaviours, such as: excessive drinking, smoking, dieting, body piercing and tattoos, compulsive shopping and working, and plastic surgery. Some researchers have

proposed a view of self-harm as existing on a continuum (e.g. Turp 2003; Douglas et al. 2004), from the less physically harmful and more acceptable behaviours (compulsive shopping or decorative body piercing) at one end, through 'compromised self-care' and 'mild self-harm' (Turp 2003: 29), to severe self-harm and suicide at the other. It appears that western society at the beginning of the twenty-first century understands 'self-harm' as forms of injury that are not socially condoned and are therefore problematic (Babiker and Arnold 1997).

Self-harm has evolved over history and cultures, often bearing both religious and spiritual significance whereby suffering is required as a form of religious cleansing and redemption, and self-harm is a step to greater wisdom and enlightenment. Body mutilation and 'blood-letting' have been seen as important healing practices in many societies, and are often associated with identity and rites of passage within communities (Babiker and Arnold 1997). Body modification rituals have been well documented 'culturally sanctioned behaviours' across the world for more than 20,000 years, linked to 'healing, spirituality, and social orderliness . . . woven into the fabric of social life' (Favazza 2009: 21). Quite plainly, self-harm has existed for many thousands of years, but has not always been viewed as an illness, disorder or negative behaviour.

Despite guidelines to improve the management and treatment of those who self-harm, several studies have suggested that the attitudes of mental health professionals responsible for providing care still need to change (Warm et al. 2002; Kapur 2005). Kapur (2005: 498) states that there remain people who view those who self-harm as an undeserving population who

'divert resources from those with "serious" physical or psychiatric illness', with them often being perceived as 'difficult patients' (Schoppmann et al. 2007). According to Duffy (2006: 263), 'positive attitudes to the self-injurer' are a vital aspect of treatment, yet such attitudes are not commonly reported.

The majority of research in this area consists of clinical studies investigating the management and prevention of suicide and self-harm, from the clinicians' rather than clients' viewpoints. Studies have mostly used clinical cases in hospital or presentations to A&E departments but, as Hawton (2004) points out, many cases of self-harm occur in the community. There has also been a noticeable lack of engagement
of service users and of qualitative studies in general. Such qualitative enquiry would enable a more in-depth exploration of meaning and experience, particularly from the perspective of people who self-harm, a perspective which is sorely lacking.

This study aims to explore how health professionals and people who self-harm make sense of self-harming behaviour through the use of FDA (Parker 1992; Kendall and Wickham 1999; Willig 2001) – specifically, how people understand and construct self-harm through the use of language, and how these constructions impact on their subjectivities (thoughts and feelings) and behaviours. Foucault's ideas have had great importance in questioning dominant understandings and taken-for-granted 'truths'. By drawing upon his ideas, researchers have been able to deconstruct and question everyday knowledge, and to shift the focus from the individual to the social contexts the individual is embedded

within. By doing so, the wider processes involved in power and control can be observed, and a greater attention can be given to the *meaning* of behaviour (for that individual within their social context) as opposed to separation and categorization as 'mad'. Given the lack of knowledge and previous research in this area, such an intensive and focused qualitative approach was considered important.

Evolution of the analysis

This study started out with intentions of conducting a discourse analysis informed primarily by the work of Foucault. Although this remained the case, as the analysis began I became increasingly influenced by feminist writers in this area, particularly those with interests in constructions of childhood abuse and female pathology, such as Reavey, Warner, O'Dell, Gavey, Burman and their colleagues (e.g. Burman et al. 1996; Reavey and Warner 2003). This reading enabled me to make sense of the data, particularly within the second section of analysis (interviews with people who self-harm), providing a framework for understanding the analysis. The work of Parker et al. (1995) and Rose (1998) also influenced me, particularly through informing my understanding of discourses surrounding mental illness and 'madness', the internalization of pathology and the individualization of psychology. I found myself wanting to write more on the historical development of modern-day discourses, to explain how certain constructions and social structures have been made possible, which would be more in line with a Foucauldian analysis; unfortunately, time and word constraints resulted in this study focusing instead upon the *consequences* of utilizing constructions, as opposed to

how these constructions became known as knowledge in the first place.

Method

Aims and design

FDA, through its emphasis on social processes and constructions, is able to analyse a wide variety of materials. In order to understand the resources that people who self-harm draw upon to shape their constructions it is important to gain an understanding of expert discourses. As such, official documentation regarding self-harm, such as publications, research papers and leaflets, were analysed in addition to interviewing health professionals working in this area. However, the main focus of this study was to understand how individuals (as opposed to social and institutional structures) construct meaning, so the data was gathered mainly from interviews (Willig 2001).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-harm participants, while a focus group was conducted with health professionals. The aim was to offer a variety of methods (to improve the quality and range of the data) and to enable the health professionals to talk more openly about their experiences. My concerns were that an interview situation would constrict discourses surrounding views of self-harm, and that they might become less inhibited with their views in a group of other health professionals. Research has shown that focus groups are 'well-suited to exploring "sensitive" topics, and the group context may actually facilitate personal disclosures' (Wilkinson 2008: 187).

FDA is heavily based upon the work of social theorist, historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault. Although not interested in discovering an objective 'truth', FDA is interested in exploring how truth is established and attained within discourses (Hook 2001). In contrast to the discursive focus on individual action, FDA is more concerned with the *discursive resources* available within society, and how discourse constructs subjectivity and the self. This study is primarily interested in the relationship between the constructions generated through discourse, an individual's subjective experience and their subsequent behaviours: FDA is a perfect method for exploring and analysing these relationships.

Participants and procedure

The sampling process followed an idiographic form of inquiry, aimed at detailed understanding of individual cases. Rather than trying to find a representative section of the population, I employed purposive sampling to find 'a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant' (Smith and Osborn 2008: 56). The participant sample in this study was not restricted by gender, given the research trend towards studying females, and focused upon people who have self-harmed on more than one occasion. Given the research bias towards adolescents, respondents were excluded from the study if they were under the age of 18 and, although English as a first language was not a prerequisite, given the focus on discourse they needed to be able to speak English well enough to converse about their experiences.

I sourced a variety of texts to gain a range of expert discourses available on self-harm within society, particularly focusing on how self-harm was being constructed and conveyed to others. Three sources were selected that were viewed to have an influence on training and policy within mental health, and two documents were taken from each source (see Addendum 1). To find appropriate documents within each source, searches were conducted on the internet and in libraries. For government documents, the internet search term 'Government self-harm UK' was used: this located *Truth Hurts*, a two-year national inquiry conducted in 2004 by the Mental Health Foundation and the Camelot Foundation in partnership with the government, to investigate self-harm among young people in the UK (executive summary). The second document was taken from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), which is linked to the Department of Health, to provide evidence and national guidelines for good practice in relation to health. NICE has developed guidance for the management and prevention of self-harm, which was accessed via its website (www.nice.org.uk) under 'clinical guidance'.

A search was carried out on the Royal College of Psychiatrists' website (www.rcpsych.ac.uk) for 'self-harm' which produced a number of results, including the document *Working with People Who Self-harm: Information for Staff in Emergency Services* (2007a). Secondly, a leaflet called *Help is at Hand: Self-harm* (2007b), designed for 'patients, carers and mental health professionals' was sourced. Locating suitable training texts proved a more difficult task. After searching in libraries, on library databases and an internet search engine, it became apparent that the more general medical and nursing texts did not contain any reference to

self-harm and if mentioned it would be within chapters on 'suicidal patients' and 'risk assessment'. Because of this focus on risk and suicide, I decided to narrow my search to include these terms and found the *Handbook of Emergency Psychiatry* (Petit 2004), which contained a chapter on suicidal ideation/attempts (again the only reference to self-harm). This same trend became apparent when searching training texts in counselling and clinical psychology. Self-harm was either not mentioned, or mentioned as a reference to (and as part of) suicidal behaviour. Searching within my own textbooks in counselling psychology training, I found a chapter on self-harm within the text *Case Formulation in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: The Treatment of Challenging and Complex Cases* (Sidley 2006).

To recruit the health professional participant sample, an internet search for treatment facilities identified a residential unit for young people who self-harm, and five mental health professionals (two psychiatric nurses, a psychological therapist, a service manager and an occupational therapist) who worked together at the unit took part. For the focus group, my position was as group facilitator rather than interviewer, and a series of questions was used to help shape the group discussion (modified from Wilkinson 2008: 192). These were tentative and the schedule was flexible to allow participants to discuss their experiences and understandings as much as possible. The group discussion was tape-recorded and detailed process notes written to keep track of the interview.

For the self-harm participant sample, adverts were placed in the community (as opposed to hospitals) via support groups and online self-harm forums. This study used 'self-harm' as a

generic term to encompass all aspects of self-injury, poisoning or mutilation, with or without suicidal intent. I purposefully did not define a list of self-harm behaviours as I was more interested in recruiting participants who considered themselves to self-harm and to explore their constructions, rather than limiting the study to my definitions of what this may be. A total of six participants were finally interviewed, which included only one male participant: the age range varied from 19 to 40 years.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken face to face with each individual at a location of their choosing.[1] Each interview was tape-recorded and a flexible agenda used to guide the process (see Addendum 2).
This remained a tentative guide with open-ended questions to enable the participant to tell their stories as much as possible. To facilitate open discussion and exploration, general questions were used to start off the interview in order to 'break the ice' and allow the participant to feel more at ease. These led into more sensitive areas concerning self-harm behaviour and the feelings and thoughts surrounding these. The questions generally focused on helping the participant talk about their experiences of self-harm, how they understood their behaviour, how they experienced other people's responses to their behaviour, and how they felt and behaved in response to this.

Data handling, coding and transcription

Each interview was tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim using a system of Jefferson Lite (Parker 2005). Adopting such a style allowed key elements to be retained including certain non-lingual aspects, without the complexity

and depth necessary for conversation analysis. Extracts from the transcripts reproduced here use three equally-spaced points (. .) to indicate omitted material and two closed-up points (. . .) to indicate a pause. All transcripts were made anonymous and certain identifying details changed to protect the confidentiality of participants. Each interview was between 50 and 75 minutes in length.

To prepare the transcriptions and texts for analysis, every document was coded in an attempt to make the data more manageable. Each document was grouped and labelled according to its source: interview transcripts were assigned a letter (I); the health professional focus group was labelled FG; the expert discourse texts were divided into three sources, and each source assigned a letter: the Royal College of Psychiatrists' papers (P); the government documents (G); and core training texts (T). Each document within a source was then assigned a number, for example, the *Truth Hurts* government document was labelled G1, and interview number 3 'I3'. For each transcript or text, every page was numbered and divided into sentences, each of which was given a number.

Analytic procedure

The analysis process was guided by Willig's (2001) six stages. There are a number of different analysis procedures available, such as the 20-step analysis described by Parker (1992), however, I chose this method as it focuses on linking discursive constructions to an individual's subjectivity and behaviour, while also exploring the wider social implications of resources and positioning (Willig 2001). So although not a 'full' Foucauldian analysis, I believe this was sufficient for

the aims of this study. It is also important to note that these steps were utilized as a 'roadmap' and guide rather than set in stone, and the final analysis evolved as the process unfolded.

The first phase in this procedure was to familiarize myself with the texts and transcripts by reading and re-reading them. Each document was annotated with detailed notes relating to each of the six stages: discursive constructions; discourses; action orientation; positioning; practice; subjectivity. The first stage involved looking for ways in which self-harm was being constructed, by highlighting all text that referred (directly or indirectly) to 'self-harm' – for example, references to self-harm as 'it' ('it's something I've been involved in for years now'), or references to behaviour that wider literature constructs as self-harm, such as suicidal behaviour. The second stage identified the constructions within wider social discourses; these discourses were noted in different coloured ink on the transcripts and enclosed in a box, to help separate them out. Next I examined the function of constructing self-harm in that particular way at that particular moment within the text, by asking myself 'What is the participant doing with their discourse at that moment and how does it relate to other constructions within the text?'. In the fourth stage, I identified how people were being located within a discourse in relation to others and what 'ways of being' were made available. In the last two stages, I looked at what was made possible (or prevented) from these constructions and positionings, in terms of actions and psychological/social experiences (i.e. thoughts and feelings).

Summaries of these analytic notes were made for each source, labelled as 'AnSum' followed by the appropriate document code – for example, AnSum.FG for the focus group note

summary. Each summary contained sections for each analytic stage as detailed above, plus a final section for additional thoughts and comments and a summary of overall impressions presented at the beginning. The section for 'discursive constructions' contained initial labels generated for constructions identified with corresponding excerpts from the text, which were identified by page number followed by line number in brackets (e.g. all text
which constructed self-harm as 'stigma' was listed under this label and identified by page and line number, such as 20(5), which would identify a quote on page 20, line number 5). The expert text documents were then merged to form summaries for each source (e.g. 'government' texts). These merged summaries were labelled 'Csum', followed by the source code – for example, 'Csum.T' for the training texts' summary. The overall aim was to produce a comprehensive list of identifiable constructions and discourses for each source, and eventually outline key analytic themes.

Due to the small number of participants in this study, and characteristic of all small-scale qualitative research, generalization from findings is limited. However, the aim is not to generalize but instead to gain detailed understandings of selected populations that are currently neglected in research; the hope is that such detailed study may increase our current understandings, inform further research and point the way for improvements in practice. Additionally, since I am interested in the availability of discourses to participants, large numbers were not deemed necessary: if a discourse is available to one person it will potentially be available to others too.

Ethical considerations

Since this research concerned a sensitive topic such as self-harm, ethical considerations became even more salient. Steps were taken to ensure that participants were as fully informed about the aims and procedures involved in the study as possible, and understood what to expect and what the research was attempting to do. Upon agreeing to participate, it was emphasized that they could stop the interview at any time and refuse to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable or they did not want to answer. They were informed they could withdraw at any time, without prejudice, and that confidentiality would be maintained throughout: all recorded data was kept anonymous and assigned a code (e.g. I3 for interview number 3) which was referred to throughout, including in research notes, transcripts and computer storage of recordings. For the focus group, I set 'ground rules' at the beginning of the session to establish a group understanding of confidentiality and to agree not to discuss any information or details discussed outside of the group context: 'participants should be requested to respect and preserve the confidentiality of others' (Wilkinson 2008: 192). Contact details of counselling organizations and emergency psychiatric services were available, but this did not turn out to be necessary for any participant. Ethical approval was granted for this study from the ethics committee at the university.

Analysis

The analysis consists of two sections: the first presents themes generated from both the 'expert texts' and health professional focus group (to map out available discourses and constructions). The second highlights how people who self-harm understand their behaviour and draws upon

available constructions, including any possibilities for resistance.

Constructions of self-harm identified within the analysis are grouped within wider discursive 'themes', a collective descriptive term used to delineate related constructions and discourses. The main constructions are identified within each theme, which includes commentary on how these have been achieved and what function they appear to serve. Consideration is also given to subject positions made available by these constructions and the possible effects these are likely to have on subjectivity and action.

The identified themes should not be seen as static categories existing independently from one another and the same examples from the data can be seen to appear in several themes. As noted by other qualitative researchers (e.g. Harper 2003), my analysis and interpretations are one out of many possible alternative readings. My own interests and motivations have inevitably caused me (consciously and unconsciously) to focus on aspects of the texts that I found of greatest relevance. Since a social constructionist framework informs this research, I have not attempted to achieve any scientific/objective 'neutrality' but instead striven towards transparency and reflexivity in the analysis process, to increase the quality of the work and enable readers to make their own informed decisions regarding my analytic reading.

Participants are described as struggling with different discourses, at times utilizing and then resisting conflicting constructions of self-harm. I see these struggles as representative of the dilemmatic nature of social thinking, as described by Billig et al. (1988), and explore the often

conflicting and contradictory nature of everyday speech when individuals struggle between ideologies. I attempted to avoid the tendency towards attributing intentions to individuals in their speech (as conscious and purposeful), with an understanding that discourse is complex and dynamic. An individual may both utilize and resist discourses, and take up or refuse to take up subsequent discursive positions, but the effects that follow go far beyond individual intentions. Individuals cannot be separated from the wider social and institutional structures that they are embedded in; hence, I am more interested in analysing the *consequences* of discursive utilization than accounting for such consequences in individualistic terms.[2]

Expert discourse – mapping and mobilizing the discursive territory

The full analysis generated constructions that were grouped into three major discursive themes (pathology; risk and danger; choice addition and morality). However, due to word restrictions, I have chosen to focus on one of the main themes in detail: 'risk and danger'.

Self-harm was referred to in the text as specific types of behaviour that cause physical harm and are directed towards the self. Some distinguished self-harm from suicide while others referred to them as the same or linked together on a continuum, or as self-harm as a risk for suicide. The focus group mainly referred to young people when talking about self-harm, however it should be noted that they worked within a self-harm unit for young people.

Risk and danger

Self-harm within this theme could be seen as indicating a risk for suicide. As already noted, self-harm and suicide are often closely linked, and while some of the expert texts clearly stated that self-harm is not suicide, others referred to self-harm as 'suicidal behaviour', 'suicidal ideation', and 'parasuicide'. When linked to suicide in this way, self-harm becomes an indicator that the person's life is at risk and, as such, needs to be taken seriously: 'the risk of killing yourself increases after self-harm. Everyone who self-harms should be taken seriously and offered help' (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2007b).

Even when defined as 'not lethal', the behaviour is still seen as 'a key risk factor for completed suicide', with *all* forms of self-harm needing to be taken seriously as potential risk.

This aspect of risk was also seen within the focus group discourse, with the words 'crisis', 'danger' and 'risky/ risk-taking' being used to describe the behaviour and people who self-harm as 'doing dangerous, crazy things' and regularly using A&E services. Self-harm was also perceived as affecting the therapeutic approach in terms of paying more attention to, and having more responsibility for, clients' safety:

[I don't think] I would approach someone that self injures, with the exception of the safety aspect, perhaps any differently than I would with any other client.

I get in early in the morning to make sure they're still there and they haven't done anything.

Suicidal behaviour such as 'overdoses' was mentioned within discussions of self-harm and they were often linked, which became a site for struggle within the group. Some strongly resisted the construction of self-harm as a 'failed suicide attempt':

I firmly believe that erm, if you want to kill yourself you kill yourself, you don't have a, y'know, a failed suicide attempt.

if I want to kill myself, I'll think of a way of doing it where actually it's gonna be the quickest way possible.

At these times self-harm was constructed as a way of surviving instead, with no intention to die; while others continued to link self-harm with suicide by an internal ambivalence over wanting to live or die, and as providing relief from internal pain, which served to reposition people who self-harm as suffering an internal struggle with pain, at risk from death and in need of external help:

people aren't that black and white, absolutely want to die, absolutely want to live, I think there is a huge internal kind of struggle, ambivalence.

I see suicide, or an attempt at suicide . . . as another way to obtain relief.

Self-harm could be identified as existing on a continuum, with more serious (severe) behaviour linked to suicide at one end, with less serious (superficial) behaviour at the other. The more serious behaviour was constructed as recognizable by observable 'danger signs': 'Those who are most likely to harm themselves badly: use a dangerous or violent method;

self-harm regularly; are socially isolated; have a psychiatric disorder' (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2007b). This can be seen to position certain populations as more at risk of suicide (through self-harming) than others. For instance, age, gender, sexuality, frequency and severity of self-harm, social isolation and a mental health diagnosis were all constructed as mediating suicide risk. Interestingly, because the risk for suicide was reportedly greater in men who self-harm, women's self-harm tended to be constructed more as 'attention-seeking'.

Within the expert texts, regular use of words such as 'crisis', 'danger', 'self-destructive', 'high risk' and 'life-threatening' all emphasized the construction of risk. Responsibility was seen to fall on the health professionals to look for and recognize these 'danger signs' and to take any presentation of self-harm as a serious risk for suicide. Self-harm was linked to a lack of safety (increasing its construction as dangerous and out of control), with the health professional's role to provide and ensure this safety:

If a person who has self-harmed has to wait for treatment, he or she should be offered an environment that is safe, supportive and minimises any distress. For many patients, this may be a separate, quiet room with supervision and regular contact with a named member of staff to ensure safety.

(NICE 2004)

Correspondingly, the person who has self-harmed is positioned as unsafe, vulnerable and in need of external help and containment: someone to provide them with safety and

remove them from danger. This suggests an inability to provide this for themselves or to control their own behaviour: 'What helps . . . Asking if there is anything you can do to help them feel safe (e.g. removing the sharps bin from the cubicle!)' (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2007a).

This is also linked to the construction of self-harm as an 'urge' that takes over, causing the person to feel unsafe, which contributes to their position as out of control, unstable and powerless. This falls within a wider discourse of addiction, portraying self-harm as something lying dormant within the person ready to be 'triggered' by an external situation. Health professionals can then potentially trigger the behaviour, making it vital that they both understand and respond appropriately, and take the risk and danger of the behaviour seriously. This was reflected within the focus group, members of which expressed concern that they could cause harm for the people they cared for and the need for them to provide them with safety as part of their job:

I'm constantly aware of is this gonna trigger them self-harming, and I feel like I'm continually just trying to walk that line and I don't always know where it is.

I do want to keep them safe and their safety is a priority.

This emphasized the struggle described by health professionals between doing their job (and being therapeutic) and not 'triggering' the underlying behaviour, which also highlighted the client's vulnerability and instability:

a lot of the girls experience genuine dissociation, there's that fine line in the therapeutic sort of thing as well, erm not

pushing anything too overwhelming, but still trying to do, hopefully, something in that session.

The link between mental illness and risk was particularly emphasized, with important implications for the construction of self-harm behaviour. By linking mental illness with more serious self-harm and risk, the positioning of people as unable to make reasonable and rational decisions in their own best interests was strengthened. Those with a mental illness were positioned as at higher risk for suicide, unable to ensure their own safety and therefore who, 'require an inpatient psychiatric hospitalization to provide safety' (Petit 2004); whereas those who cut 'superficially' with no 'intent to die' were positioned as young and therefore: 'because of their age and their inability to grasp fully the severity of their actions, often pose a serious challenge'.

Hence, even when self-harm was seen as non-life-threatening, those who self-harm were still positioned as unable to understand the risks in their behaviour, therefore requiring external provision of safety. This risk was constructed as present regardless of the person's underlying intentions, which become irrelevant. This could be seen in the focus group, who struggled over the intentions of people who self-harm within their care, where an internal ambivalence over wanting to live or die (within people who self-harm and those who commit, or attempt, suicide) could be seen to obscure the relevance of the intentions. The professional's duty subsequently becomes that of providing containment, and they have the power and authority (and ethical obligation) to do so, preferably with the person's consent, but without if necessary. In this way, health professionals are positioned as able to make reasonable judgements regarding safety, and to

forcibly detain people who are considered unsafe and at risk (and therefore unable to make reasonable decisions).

Interview transcripts

Utilizing and resisting discourse: positioning, action and subjectivity

Participants referred to self-harm as specific types of behaviour, predominantly cutting but also burning their skin, pulling hair and banging themselves against hard objects. The interviews were found to contain many of the same discourses and constructions mapped out in the previous section; however, rather than utilizing these in a straightforward fashion, participants could be seen to struggle with them in a dynamic and complex way. This section will focus upon the major struggles encountered, describing instances of resistance and how taking up various discourses affected positioning and subjectivity, and corresponding opportunities for and limitations of action.[3]

Risk and danger

Every participant strongly resisted the construction of self-harm as 'risk' and 'danger' that occurred within a wider discourse of suicide. They all emphasized a distinction between self-harm and suicide, constructing them as qualitatively very different, with the former an act of survival and way of *preventing* suicide. Self-harm was constructed within a psychological discourse as a way of stopping negative, internal feelings from escalating to a point where they may eventually cause a person to commit suicide. One participant constructed self-harm as allowing her to 'make

sense' of the world again, which prevented her from feeling a need to escape (through suicide):

when everything gets too much and . . . you know, everything inside and outside is just like, horrendously awful . . . that kind of, something about that . . . brings everything back to a place where the world makes sense again, and I don't feel like I need to . . . get off it. (I4)

Self-harm as a 'failed suicide attempt' was strongly resisted, along with the resulting position as 'attention-seeking', and the individual was reconstructed as having no intention to die:

it was something that was thrown at me a lot in those days, oh you're attention-seeking, you're just you know pretending that you're going to kill yourself and, and I was like, I used to get very upset and say no, if I wanted to kill myself I'd take an overdose. (I4)

Self-harm was instead constructed as a source of refuge and safety. Within this discourse of survival, taking away self-harm was reconstructed as *removing* instead of providing safety:

C: Where does it lead when other people try and talk to you about it?

I3: How can you do that? Why do you have to do that? Let me help you. Can I see? (pause) Give me all the things that you use erm, let me wrap you up in cotton wool, let me make you feel safe, but you don't, because to take away that . . . is to take away . . . that is like a safety barrier, the things that you use, razors, glass, whatever it is, that's your safety

barrier, so for someone to take that away makes you feel . . . very uneasy, very on edge . . . and quite isolated because they now know, so they're conscious of watching you and how you behave, and that's not what you wanted.

Preventing self-harm was then reconstructed as the 'risk'. Within this reconstruction, self-harm was portrayed as the *only* thing able to 'satisfy' or stop the urge to harm, which was constructed as having 'taken over' the person, almost like a type of 'possession'. If left unsatisfied, this urge was constructed as
potentially growing to the point whereupon the person was no longer in control, and subsequently in danger of more severely harming themselves and/or committing suicide:

it's a horrible feeling and it builds up inside, and I feel like I'm losing control but it also feels like I'm being pushed somewhere where things are so awful that if I don't do something I might actually end up opting out completely . . . then all I can think about is hurting myself to get rid of this awful feeling, and I know when I do I'll feel better . . . but also I try to do it before it goes too far, because once I go past a certain point, the longer I leave it, the more likely I am to do more damage . . . if they shut me in a room and said, there's nothing in here to hurt yourself with erm . . . I don't know what I would do. (I4)

Alongside a risk for suicide ('risk to self'), self-harm was also resisted as 'risk to others', for instance when it was constructed as a symptom of internal instability or 'dangerousness':

she knew straight away that I was (on) a psychiatric wing and she said, can you come in, and from then on it went downhill because I mean I was no *threat to anyone, but suddenly she left me in this room and all these policemen piled in and they were like, have you still got this thing on you? And I did still have the broken glass in my pocket and I said, oh I'll take it out, and they wouldn't let me, and it was like, kind of . . . grabbed me and then . . . and it was a, that was a completely terrifying experience, and they were like, oh it's another nutter. (I4)*

Here, this participant resists a construction of danger and repositions herself as the one who is terrified and at risk from *their* behaviour, which she constructs as resulting from prejudice within a discourse of mental illness. Many participants resisted being positioned as in need of safety and protection at all, or being unable to make rational decisions:

I was always very independent, I always stood on my own two feet, I never asked them for anything . . . I don't ask for money, I've always had a job since I was 16 . . . I do my washing, I cook, I go out if I want to, I don't ask for permission . . . so in that way I'm, I am very independent. (I3)

I don't think that just because someone is self-harming it means that they've necessarily taken leave of their senses, or that they've, erm, lost the ability to make rational decisions about how somebody's erm capable of preserving themselves, so . . . I think . . . some kind of acceptance that self-harm is something that people do and it can actually be done . . . fundamentally safely. (I6)

Other people's reactions to self-harm as 'risk' were also resisted, often constructed as unhelpful and ridiculed for being 'over the top', positioning them as lacking understanding and thus undermining the construction of risk as 'real'. This also reconstructed other people's behaviour as the 'horror', rather than self-harm:

I mean there are some really awful stories of health care professionals and various other people and things they say and do, and there's stuff about like stitching people up without anaesthetic . . . I just thought, I didn't think these things really happened (laughs) I thought these were like urban legends, I didn't realize that people actually were stupid enough to say something like that. (I1)

Just as behaviour that was constructed as 'overreacting' to risk was resisted, so too was behaviour that did not take self-harm 'seriously'. Despite a construction of risk being resisted, it was also utilized when self-harm was constructed as attention-seeking, positioning others as reacting flippantly to this risk:

and he finished the session by saying, so you're not going to jump in front of a bus then . . . and I walked out and I went to my doctor's appointment that afternoon and I ranted solidly for like 20 minutes, and I was just like, I'm so mad! (I1)

(my family) they're like, oh what do you do that for, or . . . and that's it, or . . . don't be so stupid, that kind of thing . . . then a couple of years ago, everything came to a head and they found out . . . the severity, kind of what it was about . . . and they've been more intrigued into finding out about it, and not just being so, dismissive. (I2)

For this last participant, constructions of self-harm as 'serious risk' enabled other people to take her behaviour more seriously, which resulted in them making attempts to understand and reacting more compassionately. Within these discussions participants were positioned as in need of safety and containment, needing to be cared for and checked on by others, and self-harm constructed as a 'cause for concern'. Positioning oneself as 'unsafe' within a discourse of risk could also be seen to make accessing help and support easier:

(my friend) would often say to me, oh ring if you need me, day or night whatever, and it's not something you can ring someone about, it's really hard, how do you ring someone up and say ..I want to cut myself . . . I only ever did ring her once and that was about 2 o'clock in the morning, and, I just said . . . I don't feel safe, and she was here within minutes. (I2)

One participant also utilized a discourse of risk to demand specialist services and help for self-harm, which she constructed as being currently unavailable. This enabled responsibility to be shifted onto others to provide help and support for self-harm, positioning people who self-harm as in need of this external help in order to stop the behaviour:

as much as it's on the increase and it's on the rise, what are people doing to combat it? They put up banners and try and help people that have HIV, put up banners to try and stop people getting sexually transmitted diseases, well, what's helping us? What are they setting up to help us? Nothing. (I3)

'Helpful' behaviour from professionals was constructed as helping them to manage the risks of self-harm, within a non-judgemental and accepting environment, rather than

'overreacting' with alarm and fear. Such a construction allowed participants to retain a position of control within a discourse of risk, and to continue the self-harm behaviour, while still being taken seriously and the behaviour taken as 'genuine':

I think it's always going to alarm people who are sort of parents of children who do it, but . . . but it's . . . it doesn't have to be something that makes people scream and shout about it, it could be something where they say, right, then you need to actually make sure you've got a bottle of antiseptic by your bed because, if you're going to cut yourself, then you have to be able to tend to the wound properly erm, and you know, you have to be prepared to check it carefully, on a regular basis . . . so that if something starts to go wrong, that you've got to seek help, and if they did that in a sort of non-judgemental way, I think it might help. (I6)

Discussion

Through a careful and systematic analysis of expert texts and interview transcripts with both health professionals and people who self-harm, constructions of the object 'self-harm' were identified. Such constructions resulted in the production of largely disempowering positions, with important consequences for action and subjectivity. Self-harm was constructed as 'risk' (for suicide) and 'danger', and therefore to be taken seriously by health professionals who were positioned as responsible for providing safety and containment. Within this construction, self-harm could be triggered by the behaviour of others, requiring professionals to understand the behaviour and respond appropriately (to prevent this happening). People who self-harm were

positioned within this construction of risk as unstable, out of control and in need of external containment, and as unable to make reasonable and rational decisions in their own best interests.

The constructions identified here have far-reaching, largely negative implications for people who are labelled by their behaviour as 'self-harming'. This analysis demonstrated complex discursive processes, whereby constructions were both utilized and resisted. The dilemmas inherent in utilizing conflicting constructions created a tension, resulting in a constant shifting between constructions and subsequent positioning. Participants strongly resisted a link between self-harm and suicide, particularly when this construction positioned them as mentally unstable and dangerous/out of control. By constructing self-harm as risk and danger, they were positioned as needing containment, increased surveillance and protection. Participants strongly resisted this disempowering position and reconstructed the *prevention* of self-harm as the risk (not the self-harm itself).

However, by utilizing this discourse a potentially dangerous and overwhelming urge was constructed with a need to be satisfied, once again positioning them as unstable and out of control. Although resulting in a disempowering position, a dilemma occurred when constructions of risk enabled the behaviour to be taken seriously (as opposed to being seen as attention-seeking and childish) and therapeutic help and support were made available. Despite still utilizing discourses of risk and danger, participants resisted the most damaging aspects of this and repositioned themselves within it to allow greater control and less judgement.

Health professionals are also enmeshed in these dilemmas. A medical discourse 'constructs pathology in ways that mean that the doctor is genuinely frightened for the safety of the patient, and for his or her
own safety' (Parker et al. 1995: 117). However, by resisting constructions of self-harm as risk, they face being positioned as unethical and unprofessional, having certain ethical and moral obligations within a 'duty of care' which requires they react to risk and provide clients with safety. This potentially adds to a construction of fear when faced with self-harm, resulting in responses that are more compatible with professional responsibility such as hospitalization and enforced containment. By not being seen as responding to risk, they may also be positioned as uncaring and as encouraging a damaging and harmful behaviour to continue. People who self-harm may themselves construct the lack of prevention as uncaring and unethical, as they are equally bound up in such discourses of damage and recovery.

Any change at an individual level will inevitably remain within wider social constraints, however, this is not to say that individual action is ineffective; as Warner (1996: 113) illustrates, action at a 'local' level may be 'a starting point, not the end', but nevertheless by analysing the inherent tensions within available discourses we expose its instability: 'and therein lies the possibility of change'. This provides us with grounds for optimism even for those discourses that seem impenetrable to change and which are embedded within society as 'truth' and 'common knowledge'.

By focusing on individual approaches to practice, and through being more mindful of the impact of language upon possibilities for action and experience and the complex

interrelations of power within social and institutional practices, we can begin to instigate small but important changes. By working towards a greater destabilizing of what is held to be 'true' we are helping to free people from pathologizing positions. Constantly analysing the impact of our discourses, and looking for ways to destabilize and change current practices is a challenge for 'not only students and practitioners of psychology, but all of us who as professionals or as individuals [who] subscribe to psychological notions about ourselves and our relationships as part of contemporary cultural life' (Burman 1996: 3).

Addendum 1: Expert text sources

Government

Mental Health Foundation (2006) *Truth Hurts: Report of the National Inquiry into Self-harm among Young People – Executive Summary*, available at: www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/self-harm-inquiry/.

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) (2004) *Self-harm: The Short-term Physical and Psychological Management and Secondary Prevention of Self-Harm in Primary and Secondary Care*, available at: www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG016NICE guideline.pdf.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Royal College of Psychiatrists (2007a) *Working with People Who Self-harm: Information for Staff in Emergency Services*, available at: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/clinicalservicestandards/centrefor

qualityimprovement/self-harmproject/changeinterventions.aspx.

Royal College of Psychiatrists (2007b) *Help is at Hand: Self-harm*, available at: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfoforall/problems/depression/self-harm.aspx.

Clinical training texts

Petit, J.R. (2004) *Handbook of Emergency Psychiatry*. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

Sidley, G.L. (2006) Self-harm, in N. Tarrier (ed.), *Case Formulation in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: The Treatment of Challenging and Complex Cases*. Hove: Routledge.

Addendum 2: Interview schedule guide

1. Tell me a bit about your history of self-harm.
2. What does self-harm mean to you?
3. How do you make sense of your self-harm?
4. Can you tell me about your first experience of self-harm?
5. 5Have you ever approached anyone for help?
6. Do you think self-harm has changed the way you see yourself?
7. Do you think it affects how other people see you?
8. Is there anything else that you feel I should have asked, or that you would like to add?

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1 Each participant chose the location of interview, which I saw as very important in establishing a safe environment given the sensitivity of the discussion, and also in an attempt to address the power imbalance of interviewer and interviewee; however, I balanced the interviewee needs with my own, and put measures in place to ensure my own safety in this process.

2 Rather than becoming entangled in debates over individual agency (or free will and choice) or social determinants of action, I have taken a similar approach to Harper (1999) who challenges a need to take such a dualist approach to analysis (i.e. by discussing either individual intentions or the wider social effects of discourse) by viewing discourse analysis as an approach that sees 'acts of an individual [as being] *at the same time* social and [having] social consequences (and vice versa) [and] that effects occur at multiple levels and that meaning is in a very real sense overdetermined' (Harper 1999: 88).

3 My speech is indicated with a ‘C’ and that of the participants’ by their transcript label (i.e. I3). Emphasized speech is in italics.

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Index

A

Abstraction (i)

Action orientation (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi)

Action research (i)

and observation (i)

Adventure (i)

Addiction (i)

Agency (i)

Anonymity (i)

Appearances (i)

Association of Internet Researchers (i)

B

Biases (i)

Binocularity (i)

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) (i)

  definition of (i)

Breast cancer (i)

C

Calle, Sophie (i)

Case (i)

  definition of (i)

Case study

  clinical (i)

  definition of (i)

  descriptive (i)

  explanatory (i)

instrumental (i), (ii)

intrinsic (i), (ii), (iii)

multiple (i), (ii)

single (i), (ii)

Case study research

defining features of (i)

interactive (i)

naturalistic (i)

and phenomenological methods (i)

pragmatic (i)

Categories (i)

analytic (i), (ii)

core (i), (ii)

descriptive (i)

of meaning (i), (ii)

sub (i)

theoretical (i)

Charmaz, Kathy (i), (ii)

Chronic pain (i)

Code manual (i)

Codes (i)

- higher-level (i)
- lower-level (i)
- pet (i)
- theoretical (i)

Coding

- axial (i), (ii), (iii)
- in discursive psychology (i)
- frame (i)
- in grounded theory (i), (ii)
- open (i)
- paradigm (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v)
- in thematic analysis (i)
- template (i)

theoretical (i)

Cognition (i)

‘hot’ (i)

Cognitivism (i), (ii)

See also Critique of cognitivism

Comments

conceptual (i)

descriptive (i)

linguistic (i)

Comparative analysis (i)

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (i)

Computer software (i)

Conditional matrix (i)

Confidentiality (i), (ii)

Consensual objects of thought (i)

Consent

informed (i), (ii)

processual (i)

Constant comparative analysis (i), (ii)

Constructions (i)

conflicting (i)

discursive (i)

implicit (i)

Constructionism

contextual (i)

radical (i)

social (i)

Constructivism (i)

Content analysis (i)

Critical discourse analysis (i)

Critical language awareness (i)

Critical narrative analysis (i)

See also Narrative

Critique

of cognitivism (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

feminist (i)

of hypthetico-deductivism (i)

of inductivism (i)

of ‘male science’ (i), (ii)

Correspondence theory of truth (i)

Countertransference (i)

Criteria

exclusion (i)

inclusion (i)

Cross-sectional analysis (i)

D

Data elicitation (i)

Debriefing (i)

Deception (i)

Deduction (i)

Deductive approach (i), (ii), (iii)

Defended subject (i)

Demographic information (i)

Description (i)

Detective work (i)

Deviant case analysis (i)

Diaries (i)

research (i), (ii)

and research question

unstructured (i)

video-diaries (i)

Dilemmas (i)

Disclaimer (i)

Discourse (i), (ii)

biomedical (i)

counter (i)

dominant (i)

economic (i)

expert (i), (ii)

moral (i)

practices (i)

romantic (i)

Discovery (i), (ii)

orientation (i), (ii)

Discursive Psychology

definition of (i)

Double hermeneutic (i)

Drug treatment (i), (ii)

Dual focus approach (i)

See also Methodology

Duty of care (i), (ii)

E

Embodiment (i), (ii)

Empathy (i)

Empiricism (i)

empiricist epistemological position (i)

empiricist view of knowledge acquisition (i)

Emplotment (i)

Epistemology (i)

classification systems (i), (ii)

contextual constructionist (i)

definition of (i)

and methodology (i)

positivist (i), (ii), (iii)

radical constructionist (i)

realist (i)

standpoint (i)

Epoché (i)

Essence (i), (ii), (iii)

of phenomena (i)

Ethical concerns (i), (ii)

and diaries (i)

and internet research (i), (ii)

and interpretation (i)

Ethical guidelines (i)

and The British Psychological Society (BPS) (i)

and the National Health Service (NHS) (i)

Ethical research behaviour (i)

Ethics

of dissemination (i)

as rule-following (i)

Ethnography

and observation (i)

Ethnomethodology (i)

Ethogenic research (i)

Evaluation (i), (ii)

criteria (i), (ii)

guidelines (i)

reader (i)

Experience

lived (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

quality of (i), (ii)

structure of (i)

subjective (i), (ii), (iii)

texture of (i), (ii), (iii)

Experiments (i)

Expert status (i)

See also Researcher as expert

Extrapolation (i)

Extreme case formulation (i)

F

Falsification (i), (ii)

Features of speech (i)

Feminist scholars (i)

Foucauldian discourse analysis

definition of (i)

Foucault, Michel (i), (ii), (iii)

Framework

explanatory (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Frank, Arthur (i)

Freud, Sigmund (i), (ii), (iii)

Function (i)

G

Generalizability (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi)

See also Generalization

Generalization (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

analytic (i)

statistical (i)

Gilligan, Carol (i)

'Give voice' (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v)

Glaser, Barney (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

'God's eye view' (i)

Ground rules

in focus group research (i), (ii)

Group dynamics (i)

H

Haraway, Donna (i)

Haug, Frigga (i)

Heidegger, Martin (i)

Hermeneutic circle (i), (ii)

Hermeneutics (i)

biblical (i)

legal (i)

philological (i)

philosophical (i)

universal (i)

Holistic perspective (i)

Husserl, Edmund (i), (ii), (iii)

Hybrid approach (i)

Hypothesis (i)

Hypotheses

testing of (i), (ii)

Hypothetico-deductivism (i), (ii)

I

Idealism (i)

Identity (i), (ii)

spoiled (i), (ii)

Idiographic approach (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Imaginative variation (i)

Induction (i), (ii)

analytic (i)

problem of (i)

Inductive approach (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

to grounded theory (i)

Inequalities (i), (ii)

Intentionality (i)

Internal coherence (i)

Interpretation (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi), (vii)

critical realist (i)

definition of (i)

empathic (i)

levels of (i), (ii)

suspicious (i), (ii)

and types of knowledge (i)

and understanding (i)

and visual data (i)

Interpretative repertoires (i), (ii)

Investment

emotional (i), (ii)

In vivo terms (i)

See also Codes, and Labels

J

Jefferson, Gail (i)

'Jefferson Lite' (i), (ii)

K

Knowledge

approaches to the production of (i)

kinds of (i), (ii)

objective (i)

phenomenological (i)

socially constructed (i), (ii)

Kuhn, Thomas (i)

L

Labels

descriptive (i)

in vivo (i)

Lacan, Jacques (i)

Language

and construction of categories (i)

and construction of meaning (i)

and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (i), (ii)

and knowledge (i), (ii)

as productive (i)

and qualitative methodologies (i)

as social action (i)

see also Action orientation

as social performance (i)

and subjectivity (i)

turn to (i)

Linguistic variability (i)

Literature review (i), (ii)

M

'Male as norm' (i)

See also Critique of 'male science'

Material-discursive approach (i)

Materialism (i)

See also Ontology

Meaning (i)

concern with (i), (ii)

discursively constructed (i)

of experience (i), (ii)

experiential (i)

latent (i)

participant-defined (i)

struggle for (i)

and thematic analysis (i)

thematizing (i)

Media representations (i)

Member checking (i)

See also Participant validation

Memory work

definition of (i)

Memos (i)

Metaphors (i)

Methodolatry (i)

Methodology

definition of (i)

dual focus (i)

qualitative (i), (ii)

Mixed methods design (i)

Model

biopsychosocial (i), (ii)

explanatory (i)

theoretical (i)

N

Narrative

abuse (i)

chaos (i)

coherence (i)

cultural (i)

definition of (i)

interviewing (i)

love (i)

quest (i)

resolution (i)

restitution (i)

social (i)

therapy (i), (ii)

wreckage (i)

Negative case analysis (i)

Note-taking

in participant observation (i)

Notes

analytical (i)

methodological (i)

observational (i)

substantive (i)

Numeration (i)

Nurse-patient relationship (i)

O

Objectivity (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Observation

  focused (i)

  participant (i)

Ontology (i), (ii)

  materialist (i), (ii)

  realist (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

  relativist (i)

Open-ended questions (i)

  See also Questions

P

Paradigm

  shifts (i)

  social cognition (i)

Parker, Ian (i), (ii)

Participant validation (i), (ii)

See also Respondent validation

Perception (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Phenomenological reduction (i)

Phenomenology

descriptive (i), (ii)

hermeneutic versions (i)

interpretative (i), (ii)

transcendental (i), (ii), (iii)

Photo-elicitation (i)

definition of (i)

Photographs (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Photo-production

definition of (i)

Photovoice

definition of (i)

Pilot work (i)

Pluralism (i)

methodological (i), (ii)

Polarization (i)

Polytextual thematic analysis (i)

Popper, Karl (i)

Positions

disempowering (i)

epistemological (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi)

see also Epistemology

expert (i)

ontological (i)

pathologizing (i)

relativist ontological (i)

subject (i), (ii), (iii)

Positioning (i), (ii), (iii)

Positivism (i)

inductivist (i)

Post-structuralism

feminist (i)

Potter, Jonathan (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v)

Power (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v)

and language (i)

relations (i), (ii), (iii)

Pre-cognitive aspects of experience (i)

Pre-reflective consciousness (i)

Processes (i)

historical (i)

psychological (i), (ii), (iii)

social (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi), (vii)

social psychological (i)

socioeconomic (i)

research (i)

underlying (i)

Psychoanalysis (i)

Psychology

clinical (i)

counselling (i), (ii)

critical (i)

discursive (i)

health (i), (ii)

of memory (i)

narrative (i)

qualitative (i)

Psychosocial approach (i), (ii), (iii)

Q

‘Q’

little and big ‘Q’ (i)

big ‘Q’ (i), (ii), (iii)

Qualitative data collection techniques

characteristics of (i)

and data analysis (i)

and the internet (i)

and semi-structured interviewing (i)

Quality

experiential (i)

in qualitative research (i)

Questions

contrast (i)

descriptive (i)

evaluative (i)

structural (i)

R

Rapport (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Realism (i)

critical (i), (ii)

naïve (i)

Reflexivity (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi), (vii), (viii), (ix)

definition of (i)

epistemological (i), (ii)

and epistemology (i)

and evaluation (i), (ii), (iii)

and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (i)

personal (i), (ii)

and the research proposal (i)

Relativism

extreme (i)

Reliability (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Repertory grids (i)

Representativeness (i), (ii), (iii)

Researcher

as architect (i), (ii)

as author (i), (ii)

as builder (i)

as detective (i), (ii), (iii)

as expert (i)

as midwife (i)

as person-centred counsellor (i), (ii)

as reporter (i)

as story analyst (i), (ii)

as witness (i), (ii), (iii)

see also Role of researcher

Research proposal

functions (i)

key ingredients (i)

Research question (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi)

in case study research (i), (ii)

in discourse analysis (i)

and discursive psychology (i)

and epistemology (i)

and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (i)

and grounded theory (i), (ii), (iii)

and interview agenda (i)

and literature review (i)

and thematic analysis (i), (ii), (iii)

and transcription (i)

Resistance (i), (ii)

to discourses (i)

Resources

discursive (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

See also Discourse

Respondent validation (i)

Responsibility (i), (ii)

Ricoeur, Paul (i), (ii)

Right to withdraw (i)

Rigour (i), (ii)

Role

of researcher (i), (ii), (iii)

see also Researcher

S

Sample size (i), (ii)

Sampling

purposive (i), (ii), (iii)

theoretical (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi), (vii)

Sartre, Jean-Paul (i)

Saturation (i), (ii)

theoretical (i), (ii), (iii)

Scientist-practitioner (i)

Self-harm (i)

Selfhood (i)

Sensitivity (i)

to context (i)

theoretical (i)

Skype (i)

Smith, Jonathan (i)

Social constructionism (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

radical (i), (ii)

moderate (i), (ii), (iii)

see also Constructionism

Social phenomenology (i), (ii)

Social representations theory (i)

Speech

as social action (i)

See also Language; Action orientation

Stake (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v)

inoculation (i)

Standpoint (i)

Status

of the text (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

of visual data (i)

Study propositions (i)

Strategies

discursive (i)

interactional (i)

Strauss, Anselm (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

Structures

cognitive (i)

cultural (i)

economic (i), (ii)

of experience and behaviour (i)

institutional (i)

material (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v)

psychological (i)

social (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi), (vii), (viii)

underlying (i), (ii), (iii)

Subjectivity (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi), (vii)

Subject positions

definition of (i)

See also Position

Subsumption (i)

Summary table (i), (ii)

Survey-based research (i)

Suspicion (i)

Symbolic interactionist perspective (i), (ii), (iii)

T

Template

a priori (i), (ii)

Textual analysis (i)

Texture (i)

Theme

definition of (i), (ii)

emergent (i)

master (i)

‘shopping list’ of (i)

theoretical status of (i)

Theoretical flexibility (i)

Theoretical freedom (i)

Theoretical integration (i)

Theory

building (i), (ii)

development (i), (ii), (iii), (iv)

emergence of (i), (ii)

generation (i), (ii), (iii)

initial (i)

and interpretation (i)

psychoanalytic (i)

role of (i), (ii), (iii)

testing (i)

Therapy culture (i)

Transcription (i)

and conversation analysis (i)

and discursive analysis (i), (ii)

and grounded theory analysis (i)

notation (i)

Transferability (i), (ii)

Transparency (i), (ii)

Triangulation (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v), (vi)

Trigger

in memory work (i), (ii)

Twenty statements test (i)

Twin focus (i)

Typology

of plots (i)

U

Unitary rational subject (i)

V

Validation process (i)

Validity (i), (ii), (iii)

definition of (i)

ecological (i), (ii)

error (i)

representational (i)

Variables

preconceived (i)

psychological (i)

Verification (i)

problem of (i)

W

Wetherell, Margaret (i), (ii), (iii)