

Critical Synthesis Paper

Grace-Ann Gibby

Liberty University

Qualitative Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Achievement and Potential

This chapter highlights the nuances that qualitative research can measure, thus adding to the depth of counselling literature. It has largely been overlooked as a primary avenue due to the lack of understanding what qualitative research is. The sole purpose of research is to know more information. The methods of acquiring the information can best be described as verification or discovery. We are either trying to prove that something is true or make discoveries to add to the existing body of literature (McLeod, 2011.p.13). The text describes that because Paradigmatic methods dominated the medical and sciences field, quantitative research became the popular methods of choice (McLeod, 2011.p.2).

However, to gain knowledge about organizations, systems, and theories about how individuals apply meanings to these variables, narrative inquiry can discover such information. Consider the healthcare system that is struggling to humanize the processes for patients, qualitative research can efficiently help in identifying how to navigate such systemic change. Several examples of what qualitative research has already provided keen information about includes topics such as: Entering the lived experience of clients with different problems, characteristics of good therapists, and the significance of metaphors in therapy (McLeod, 2011.p.8-9).

Qualitative research adds an integral component as a measure of social constructs, it informs counselling and psychotherapy effective ways to respond to cultural and societal shifts.

The Philosophical basis of qualitative researcher

This chapter discusses the four integral components of qualitative research and the ways that the academic discipline of philosophy informs the foundation for these aspects: Describing (phenomenology), Interpreting (hermeneutics), Persuading (rhetoric), and Committing (social Justice). Husserl's philosophical agenda involved seeking how to arrive at ultimate truth (McLeod, 2011, p.23), setting aside what is known and attempting to see situations and information in a new light. This type of research depends on a withdrawal from the current world in hopes of describing with great detail "...the phenomena of everyday experience" (McLeod, 2011, p.25).

Hermeneutics refers to interpreting the meaning of a text; this task becomes increasingly difficult as texts are created within a cultural-historical background. If the original author of the text shared a context that was similar to the interpreter it is likely that similar understandings could be deduced (McLeod, 2011, p.29). However, with differences in time, location and the interpreters' cultural constructs; making an interpretation is extremely subjective. Hermeneutics demands that the text be experienced from the tradition it was created in (McLeod, 2011.29-30).

Rhetoric – language that is used persuasively in arguments. It is considered an ancient art and a symbol of advanced education (p.37). Although pre-modern in origin, it is still used in contemporary advertisements, law and debates. In qualitative research however, rhetoric can be problematic when concluding how to write up the data.

While this chapter is lengthy in describing the key components and further describes relativism and realism, making sense of the concept of reflexivity; and the debate around social constructionism and the role of language. Understanding how we know what we know and describing this is the essence of qualitative research.

Doing Qualitative Research

As previously mentioned, qualitative research strives to collect data about situations, individuals or ideas that are not always clearly defined and fit into nice, tidy charts or boxes. When considering the steps in this method, it is safe to assume that there is a myriad of ways to proceed. Specifically in the mental health field, the goal is to understand how to become a better therapist, a better supervisor and help clients maximize the benefits from therapy (McLeod, 2011, p.59). There are three main stages in conducting qualitative research: Getting started, actually doing the study, and writing-up the results (McLeod, 2011, p.62). It is helpful to note that the results of qualitative research are usually a combination of cognitive and emotion learning (McLeod, 2011, p.59) which contributes to the lasting power of the study. Therefore, topics chosen using this research method tend to be personally meaningful to the researcher (McLeod, 2011, p.63).

Specific methods used in this research type include: interviews, questionnaires, observation, and natural occurring transcripts (public documents, and personal documents) (McLeod, 2011, p.72). Personal documents are of special interest as usually their creation is not related to the research study and therefore has no influence from the researcher.

Additionally, once the text has been collected through described methods above, the process of analyzing the text begins. How does the researcher make sense of all of this information? Analyzing the text so that ideas can begin to emerge is the next step. Writing memos, jotting down ideas, constructing preliminary summaries of the material, organizing the text into units, and coding. All of these techniques eventually help the researcher to ultimately glean themes and pictures of the meaning of the texts.

Chapter 4: Phenomenological research

Within the phenomenological approach there are four main traditions: Duquesne school of empirical phenomenology, the conceptual encounter – created by Lewin, existential phenomenological investigations, and the dialogal phenomenology (Mcleod, 2011, p. 87). These traditions all share the same efforts of examining the whole experience of a phenomenon.

Edward Husserl, the founder of this approach to qualitative research also understood its limitations in utility for counselling and psychotherapy. However, Husserl did value what this approach could provide for human categories such as intentionality, time, color and number (

All aspects of phenomenological research urge the researcher to maintain an open posture, as whatever is being studied requires a flexibility to truly capture the essence. While the empirical approach provides a number of steps to follow to learn of the personal experience, the conceptual encounter seeks to create a map of personal experience. The goal is to constantly create and evaluate, measuring one piece of information against the other. An active effort of comparison and contrasting between different experiences (Mcleod, 2011, p. 95).

Although not widely used currently in counseling or psychotherapy, these traditions can provide rich information and inform the therapeutic relationship. Existential – phenomenological further adds to this description by aiming to understand the experience of being-in-the world (Mcleod, 2011, p. 96).

Chapter 5: Ethnographic

Ethnography refers to the method of collecting data about groups of people or ways of life. This type of approach is typically achieved through field work, and taught through apprenticeship (Mcleod, 2011, p. 5). Researchers oftentimes will immerse themselves in the way of life or the group of people to fully understand all aspects. Challenges experienced with this method is the gaining trust when approaching the group as a ‘researcher’; will the group of people truly lower their guards and allow this outsider to learn their ways of life (Mcleod, 2011, p. 106).

Ethnographic research can collect so much data that usually the material is presented in a book rather than an article. This explains why ethnography is limited in use in counseling and psychotherapy. In a study conducted in Denmark to study the efficacy of CBT-oriented programme, ethnography was the approach utilized (Mcleod, 2011, p.114). Details included how the program operates, and supported the idea that the therapeutic alliance is still the driving force. Another study based on male perpetrators of domestic violence discovered that men who had a strong commitment to change, completed the treatment and were motivated by their family ties. This type of knowledge helps to inform therapists when working with potential clients who struggle with the same issues.

An additional area that ethnography can contribute to counselling and psychotherapy is exploring the relationship between what happens in therapy and what happens in the outside world of the client. There are limited studies done with this approach due to the difficulty of maintaining confidentiality. Ethnographic studies help to capture dimensions about groups of people in ways that other approaches are limited.

Chapter 6: Grounded Theory

Considered one of the most popular approaches to qualitative research, grounded theory originally derived from ethnography, is a method for analyzing data rather than for data collection (Mcleod, 2011, p.119). Researchers using this method must remain sensitive to multiple meanings of the data, and not get stuck in one perspective. A distinct difference of this approach is that the analysis should be done singularly by a highly motivated individual. The individual aims to become saturated in the data so as to really learn every aspect in detail.

Grounded theory is often described as an active approach, common words when writing reports involve active verbs such as: becoming, and storytelling. A highly attractive trait of grounded theory is a specified outline of steps that when followed will produce good results (Mcleod, 2011, p.140), and research software such as NUDIST and ATLAS -TI provide organized categories for the data (Mcleod, 2011, p.124).

A specific example of grounded theory in action is when David Rennie, a prominent researcher, utilized interpersonal process recall when studying the client's experience of therapy. Clients would listen back to their tapes of therapeutic sessions and periodically the tape would stop and they would be asked to recount their experience at that particular time. Such transcripts would have grounded theory analysis applied to them.

Despite its popularity, grounded theory has some challenges in its approach. There is a tendency for it to feel atheoretical (Mcleod, 2011, p.143). This can be a challenge for therapists who are strongly aligned with a theoretical orientation. The data will be largely view through such lenses

Chapter 7: Variants of Grounded Theory

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 6, Grounded Theory is an extremely useful approach because it is very systematic and produces desired results. Over the years, several researchers have created alternate version and variations. These include: Thematic Analysis, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Consensual Qualitative Analysis (CQR), and ideal type analysis (Mcleod, 2011, p. 145).

While these versions all have grounded theory as their foundation, the variations are distinct. Thematic Analysis seeks to discover emerging themes from the data, and unlike grounded theory does not have a specific step by step process to accomplish this. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach that is usually centered around semi-structured interviews. However, the analyst interprets the meaning of the interview from already existing psychological constructs. This serves as one of many differences between grounded theory and IPA (Mcleod, 2011, p.147).

Consensual Qualitative Analysis is comprised of a team between 4-12 researchers with an external auditor that reads the data. Grounded theory has a fundamental tenet of seeking to create something new and different from existing literature. CQR reads existing literature and pre-select domain categories. As with qualitative research and the abundance of data, having categories helps to manage the overwhelming data. The last variant on grounded theory is Ideal Analysis. Different from the name implies, Ideal is not defined as “best” in this case but rather the development of an idea. One of the disadvantages of Ideal Analysis is the need for a large sample group (40), this also creates a distinction from other variations that typically use 15 individuals. Grounded Theory and the variants provide flexibility for researchers wanting to pursue a solid approach with nuances to achieve their professional goals (Mcleod, 2011, p. 151).

Analysis of Conversation and Discourse

This chapter discusses a master tool in counselling and psychotherapy: language. Although simplistic in nature – changes occur in therapy due to language; this is the tool that makes things happen (McLeod, 2011, p.167) and this chapter seeks to explore how language makes things happen. There are three broad areas: conversation analysis, discourse analysis and narrative analysis.

Conversation Analysis refers to the language constructs of an institution and an analysis of the daily language interactions (McLeod, 2011, p.169). In the mental health field, transcripts from therapy sessions are primarily used. The goal is that the analysis is grounded in the data. When considering conversation analysis there are four constructs utilized: 1. The organization of turn-taking, 2. What types of conversation sequence can be observed, lexical choice and interactional asymmetries. Although conversation analysis largely evaluates the language spoken, when participants contribute their reflection, the result is a greater understanding of the impact of language.

Discourse Analysis is not particularly a method, but rather an approach (McLeod, 2011, p.180). This approach does not seek to provide a step-by-step as the art of discourse represents a skill that is honed, similar to a craft. Intuition plays an integral role, as a researcher seeks to perform discourse analysis, they must be well-versed.

Counselling and psychotherapy revolve around language as its primary tool, however there are limitations to only using language and not taking into account, emotions, and our physical bodies (McLeod, 2011, p.186). Language is a social construct, and therefore we must be careful that our clients choices and positions are not limited (McLeod, 2011, p.186).

Narrative Analysis

As the name implies, narrative analysis refers to the use of stories as the primary source of data. Qualitative research fits well with this approach, because storytelling can have several layers to capture the full essence (Mcleod, 2011, p.188). Two qualitative approaches include: analysis of life-stories, and the second approach is focused on the task of understanding the processes of storytelling (Mcleod, 2011, p.188).

With life-stories, also known as life-history research, the actual structure of the story along with different elements of contrast convey a rich holistic meaning. Interview-based qualitative narrative analysis argues that stories as a whole have great meaning. (Mcleod, 2011, p.189). The analysis of the story as a whole incorporates several techniques, some include: examination of overall structure, analysis of various ‘voices’ in the story, the effect of competing voices and themes, and the analysis of the effects of pauses (Mcleod, 2011, p.194).

Additionally, to Interview-based Narrative Analysis, there is also an approach called Transcript-based Qualitative narrative analysis. Within this framework there are two-sub-categories: narrative analysis of therapy transcripts, and the JAKOB method. In Narrative Analysis one of more well-known strategies is stanza analysis. This technique created by Gee, argues that there is a poetic component to stories and by paying attention to the rhythm like quality, the emotional meaning of the story emerges (Mcleod, 2011, p.196).

The JAKOB method based on German research team of Brigitte Boothe emphasizes that narratives can be views from a psychoanalytic framework. This perspective explores the idea that stories told by clients can have unconscious object relations and also serve as a way to communicate with others.

Personal experience methods: Heuristic research and Autoethnography

Heuristic inquiry focuses on the researcher's self-involvement with topics that are connected to existentialism (Mcleod, 2011, p. 206). The founder, Clark Moustakas strongly believed in the capacity within each individual for growth and creativity. This belief also serves as a major difference between heuristic inquiry and phenomenology. Though, Moustakas agreed with phenomenology as a helpful approach, there is a separation that exists between researcher and the phenomenon which doesn't exist in heuristic inquiry. The goal in heuristic research encourages a deep connection with the topic.

Stages involved include: Initial engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, Creative Synthesis and validation (Mcleod, 2011, p. 207). A good example of heuristic research in the field of counselling and psychotherapy, is a study conducted by Theria Shantall that explored the question: Can life still be experienced in the face of tragedy and have meaning? (Mcleod, 2011, p. 208). This type of topic would likely have personal meaning for Shantall and thus the deep connection would be experienced and likely felt in the write-up report.

A new addition available to the qualitative research methods is Autoethnography. This method combines ethnography with the autobiographical information of the researcher. The goal is for the audience to connect emotionally with the material. For this connection to occur, the researchers must use their own personal experience with the topic to bring it to life (Mcleod, 2011, p. 210). Autoethnography seeks to challenge existing structures of knowledge that are used to maintain societal power and control (Mcleod, 2011, p.210).

Using participation in inquiry to enhance practical knowing: action research

Action research has its origins in social change with the understanding that research finding should make a difference in the field that the research is about (Mcleod, 2011, p. 218). For this reason, action research aligns with the goals of counselling and psychotherapy. Therapeutic outcomes and progress are constantly being evaluated to assess whether strategies are working.

One of the more popular studies conducted was on the conceptualization of Schizophrenia (Mcleod, 2011, p. 223). This study took place at an inner-city psychiatric hospital with the goal of understanding why there was such a high relapse rate. Using strategies based on action research, namely involving patients in the rehabilitation services provided, and the researchers trying to have the lived experience of the patients. Both of these efforts proved successful and the relapse rate lowered. This method used a combination of action research and participation (Mcleod, 2011, p.223).

These types of findings are particularly useful in counseling and can help to facilitate changes, and further aid in the development of new theories. While this research method can be useful in analyzing data and directly influence positive changes, it has not gained widespread use. There are only few studies that have used this method that are even published. The data gained from action research is not easily formatted for academic journals and publication (Mcleod, 2011, p. 225).

Qualitative Case Studies

Case studies provides practical knowledge about a single entity. This entity can vary between an individual, an organization, or a culture. Many of our everyday questions in counseling and psychotherapy about how our clients are experiencing therapy, how a person describes things in their life, and to what degree are there similarities or differences between ourselves as researchers and the topic of study in the case. Much practical knowledge is gleaned from reading case studies (Mcleod, 2011).

When a researcher decides if a case study method provides the best fit; there are five types of research questions that can guide the process: 1. Outcome questions, 2. Theory-building questions, 3. Pragmatic questions, 4. Experiential or Narrative Questions, and 5. Organizational questions. Once the case study has been established as the preferred method, a further decision is required to support the mixed methods approach. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative studies, the understanding for the situation in question is now backed by strong methods for acquiring data (Mcleod, 2011).

While case studies have their rightful place among qualitative methods, it also presents some challenges. The details in a case are usually extremely so significant that we have to operate cautiously, as not to break confidentiality and avoid doing any harm. However, any case

studies that are deterred too far will now struggle with unbelievable aspects and perhaps become unhelpful (Mcleod, 2011)

Amidst the challenges, case studies still provide knowledge that can be utilized in practical ways almost instantly. In the days of Freud, case studies were the only methodology utilized, and since that time new improvements have been made to encourage persons.

The Role of Qualitative methods in outcome research

Qualitative research methods naturally lend itself to certain areas in counseling and psychotherapy such as the therapeutic process and relationship (Mcleod, 2011, p.240). However, in outcome research, qualitative methods have received minimal funding and quantitative measures have capitalized (Mcleod, 2011, p.240). As the text clearly demonstrates, qualitative has much to offer the field of counseling and psychotherapy.

One limitation discussed is the manner in which qualitative results are presented. Their conversation-like rhetorical strategies lack structure which weakens the image of the results (Mcleod, 2011, p.242). Randomized Clinical Trials (RCT) are considered the gold standard in research and precisely shows the strengths of quantitative research. In a comparison between two study reports, the scientific style of writing is void of emotion, and focuses on presenting the results. RCT reports are linear in nature and silences the voices of the researchers, readers are unaware what the researchers' reflections are with regards to the results. This further supports why qualitative research would struggle to demonstrate viability in outcomes research.

Several qualitative outcome studies presented in this chapter provide critical additional information such as how therapy was conducted and a more detailed understanding of why

therapy did or did not work. These types of results paint a clearer picture that is useful in outcome research as all parts of entity have a voice and can be heard (McLeod, 2011, p.250).

One study conducted on a Women's Therapy Centre utilized summary narratives from the women and interviews were analyzed. The detailed results were extremely useful and some women who found the experience emotionally challenging by revisiting the same information helped the researchers to take into account that additional safety strategies can prevent harm to clients.

The concept of validity in qualitative research

The precision that numbers can provide in quantitative research allows for constructs such as validity, reliability, and sampling to be measured much easier as compared to qualitative studies. The very nature of qualitative research requires the emotional involvement of the researcher; an immersion with the phenomenon. The results are influenced by the investigator which serves as a reminder that from one researcher to another researcher results of the exact same study could vary.

To provide some parameters and boundaries, several guidelines have been formulated, although these guides are helpful, they are evolving. There are 13 guidelines, and while all of them play a pivotal role; some of them are particularly significant. For example: one of the guides states that the results should be clear in what they are trying to say. Qualitative research aligns with a metacriteria of gaining multiple perspectives from the data, thus it is critical that in reports, readers can actually understand the clear message and not get inundated with details. An additional guideline is involving other people in data collection and analysis. Oftentimes with such a high demand for personal immersion and researcher reflexivity the chief investigator can

experience frustration, having other people who are willing to lend fresh insight can be extremely helpful.

It is important for qualitative study to be considered a valid, and meaningful approach to Research. As we have seen, it has been difficult to demonstrate ways of measuring all of the constructs, in the final analysis it all comes down to trust.

There are many subjective aspects to qualitative research, but it is certainly worth the effort.

Next steps: Taking the Research forward

One of the emphasized goals for this text was to present qualitative research as a viable method for obtaining critical data that would otherwise go undiscovered. Counselling and psychotherapy are largely in need of studies that will add the thickness and richness in data collection, which ultimately informs a clinician's practice and improves efficacy. The limitations of quantitative research had also been demonstrated and so this chapter highlights next steps for qualitative research.

Considering that most of the research in counselling and psychotherapy is being conducted by doctoral students at universities, the big issues remain unnoticed (McLeod, 2011, p.284). A practical approach to increasing the use of qualitative research is through encouraging students to tackle the big issues, understand that there is always a risk involved and perhaps through a fresh set of visuals, new meanings can be constructed about the data. Secondly, qualitative research can contribute to the world that we live in, if we research topics that are social hot spots. Therapists can continue to research their unique topics of interest, but unless

such findings can connect to global initiatives of significance, qualitative research will not receive the credit it truly deserves.

This text has thoughtfully presented the definition of qualitative research, and provided a comprehensive account of each factor. The depth that qualitative research can add to the existing body of knowledge is undebatable. Future counsellors and psychotherapists should make every effort to dive in to qualitative research, and make use of these wonderful methods that glean insightful data. There is room for both research methods to do well and generate new meanings.

References

McLeod, J. (2011). *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy* (Second ed.). SAGE.

MCLEOD CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS PAPER GRADING RUBRIC

Criteria	Levels of Achievement			
Content	Advanced	Proficient	Developing	Not Present
Quality	129 to 140 pts. Shows high levels of evidence of comprehending course content and applicability to practice as a counselor educator.	118 to 128 pts. Shows satisfactory evidence of comprehension of course content and applicability to practice as a counselor educator.	1 to 117 pts. Shows some evidence of comprehension of course content and applicability to practice as a counselor educator.	128 points
Quantity and Timeliness	64 to 70 pts Submitted on time, all chapters completed and substantial (full page each-not more than one page).	59 to 63 pts Submitted on time and all chapters included and substantial (full page each-not more than one page).	1 to 58 pts Submitted on time but one or more chapters may be missing, not substantial enough (less than a page) or too substantial (more than one page).	64 points

	Grading Rubric-Self-Evaluation included.	Grading Rubric-Self-Evaluation included.	Grading Rubric-Self-evaluation may be missing.	
Structure	Advanced	Proficient	Developing	Not Present
Style Formatting/ Structure	83 to 90 pts. The Paper properly uses current APA style and reflects doctoral writing quality. In-text citations and references list are formatted correctly. The Paper reflects a graduate level voice and vocabulary. There are very few spelling and/or grammar errors.	76 to 82 pts. The Paper mostly uses current APA style and reflects doctoral writing quality. In-text citations and references list are mostly formatted correctly. The Paper reflects generally a graduate level voice and vocabulary. There are few spelling and/or grammar errors.	1 to 75 pts. The Paper uses some current APA style and reflects doctoral writing quality. In-text citations and references list are sometimes formatted correctly. The Paper review sometimes reflects a graduate level voice and vocabulary. There are some spelling and/or grammar errors.	82 points

Total: 274 points