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Introduction

Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton-Rogers

Until recently, qualitative research methods occupied a contested space on the margins of mainstream psychology. We are now witnessing a process of incorporation and expansion. In the UK at least, qualitative approaches to psychological research are increasingly being integrated into the mainstream. The British Psychological Society now rules that for a degree programme to be accredited, qualitative methods must be taught. UK funding bodies (such as the Economic and Social Research Council) are now starting to favour research proposals which use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. UK Government sponsored bodies (such as NICE – the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) that make recommendations on 'evidence based practice' are beginning to open up their reviews to qualitative as well as quantitative studies in areas such as health psychology.

Equally qualitative research in psychology is growing. Both undergraduate and higher degree students are increasingly opting for qualitative methods for their dissertations. As the chapters in Section 3 of this handbook indicate, more qualitative research is being published and, for example, journals like the *British Journal of Social Psychology* and the *Journal of Health Psychology* are beginning to get more than token numbers of qualitative psychologists on their editorial boards. At the same time, a number of psychology journals have recently devoted whole editions to qualitative work, guest edited by qualitative researchers and usually devoted to a particular field or approach (e.g. *European Journal of Work and Organisational Psychology* in 2000, *Canadian Psychology* in 2002, and the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* in 2005). A number of new journals have recently been established specifically to promote the status and use of qualitative methods. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, launched in 2004, is the best example, its mission explicitly to explore and expand 'the territory of qualitative psychological research' as well as 'strengthening its identity within the international research community and defining its place within the undergraduate and graduate curriculum'. In 2006, within less than one year of being formed, the British Psychological Society's Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section with its 1500 members became the biggest section within the society. As we go to press, a new Division for

Qualitative Inquiry is in the process of being established within the American Psychological Association.

Nobody is claiming that the dominance of quantitative research is threatened by immanent overthrow. But there is something stirring, and the turning point in the fortunes of qualitative research in psychology is an ideal time for this handbook. It has provided us, as its editors, with a fascinating and rewarding opportunity to trace its trajectory from the past into the future. It also offers an ideal opportunity to identify key debates, their historical origins and their implications for future developments, and to map how qualitative perspectives have been accommodated and operationalized across the sub-disciplines of psychology.

ABOUT THE HANDBOOK

As we have found as editors of this edition, there is not a lot of agreement about what kind of 'beast' a handbook actually is! A good place to start may well be what it is not. Certainly a handbook is not like a manual for a car or a washing machine – lots of 'how to use it' information together with advice for trouble-shooting when the various bits go wrong. It is more conceptual and contextual than that. But neither is it an amazingly erudite – but highly specialized – collection of technical, speculative or rhetorical articles intended for elite in-groups preoccupied with teasing out the more arcane or procedural minutiae of the method (or its application) in question. It is much more down to earth than that.

Somewhere between the two a handbook is supposed to be useful, especially to those with an interest – either in qualitative research in psychology generally, or in a specific method more precisely – but limited prior knowledge. It is more of a 'get-to-know-you' device, an up-to-date map of qualitative research methods in psychology at the beginning of the 21st century. It is all about what these methods are; how they do (and do not) fit together; how and where they are being used (and for what); and in what ways some key, overarching positions and standpoints (such as ethics, feminism and postcolonialism) frame, and are framed by, the qualitative research agenda in psychology.

Our aim has been for the map to be rich in its coverage, reviewing – reasonably comprehensively – the wide diversity of approaches to qualitative research in psychology that have been developed over the years. The chapters also explore how and why the various approaches have been brought into play at a particular time and in particular ways. As editors of the book, we invited our contributors to review the use of qualitative methods within their area of expertise, to evaluate the contribution these methods have made and to critically examine the ways in which qualitative research has informed both theory and practice. Finally, we asked contributors to anticipate possible future developments and trends in the application of such methods. As we read through the chapters, we were struck by the sheer diversity and range in positions and approaches. For example, it became clear that practitioners (i.e. those whose work primarily involves the application of psychological knowledge to 'real world' problems) and academics (i.e. those whose work primarily consists of producing and evaluating knowledge) work to different concerns and priorities and thus experience (and construct) different cultures within which qualitative perspectives are used and evaluated. We shall return to the theme of diversity in our concluding chapter.

WHO IS IT FOR?

One of the main audiences for the handbook will be students (mainly postgraduate but also some undergraduates) starting out on a piece of their own psychological research (possibly their first and probably for a dissertation). Our intention is to take them beyond what they gained from their basic research methods training and to offer them a 'first port of call' to gaining a more

in-depth knowledge and understanding both about a specific qualitative method and/or qualitative approaches more generally. The handbook is also designed for more established researchers and teachers. We particularly hope it will attract those interested in moving into – or at least learning about – the expanding range of different qualitative methods, techniques and applications currently being developed by psychologists.

The 13 chapters in Section 1 ('Methods') each offer an up-to-date review of a specific method, written by authors with considerable experience in using them. We chose people who know the methods well, can enthuse about their merits, point out their pitfalls, illustrate what they can do and speculate where they are going. We specifically invited our 'experts' to co-author with one or more less experienced – or maybe just less well known – colleagues or graduate students and many of them did so. Our plan was to get on board co-authoring partnerships and teams who could, between them, combine the sagacity and shrewdness of experience with the passion and freshness of the newcomer.

These chapters are not detailed 'how-to-do-it' manuals – although advice will be given where to find this kind of information. Rather the aim is to provide a sufficiently detailed review and overview to help the reader decide whether the method is worth considering, and, if so, where to go next to get themselves up-to-speed.

Second, Section 2 ('Perspectives and Techniques') engages with overarching concerns and positions which inform the ways in which qualitative research is conducted and disseminated. Here, questions around ethics, feminism and the uses of technology are raised. Section 2 also looks at new developments in visual modalities and arguments around mixing methods.

Finally, Section 3 ('Applications') gives readers an alternative take on choosing a method. This section contains reviews of qualitative methods as used in 12 of psychology's sub-disciplines, demonstrating the ways in which context interacts with methodological concerns.

As such, the sections of the book constitute different kinds of maps which the reader can use to navigate the terrain of qualitative methodology. Depending on the researcher's objectives (that is, their destination) they may require lexical direction from Section 1, topological guidance from Section 2 and/or a view from the various perspectives identified in Section 3. Overall, the purpose of this handbook is to help readers gain a sense of the territory and to enable them to make well-informed methodological choices.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our triumphal start to this introductory chapter superficially buys into a common perception that 'qualitative psychology' is a new phenomenon which has emerged over the last 20–30 years and which has finally succeeded in establishing itself as a distinct branch of psychology. This position is well exemplified by Kelley:

> Qualitative methodology has emerged as part of a broad movement that Rabinow and Sullivan (1979) call an 'interpretative turn' in social science epistemology … There can be little doubt that this 'turn' has had a pervasive influence, and qualitative research has become much more widely accepted as a valid approach within the social sciences.
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> Kelley (1999: 398)

However, we would like to challenge this interpretation of history. Qualitative approaches have been part and parcel of psychology from its very beginnings. While marginalized and muted for about the first 80 years of the 20th century, they never completely went away. The insights gained through their application constitute much of what is now considered to be psychological knowledge.

Going back a good way – to Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1752) – the idea that, for instance, knowledge is contingent is a very old one indeed. It is encapsulated in his verum ipsum factum principle that we can only logically guarantee the truth of that we ourselves make (see Shotter, 1981: 267).

From the start both Wilhelm Wundt and William James, who are often associated with the founding of psychology as a discipline, acknowledged the importance of both subjectivist (introspection) and objectivist (measurements of behaviours) approaches to psychological research (see Farr, 1996; Jones and Elcock, 2001). Both of them were also concerned with meaning, culture and identity (see Richards, 1996; Stainton Rogers, 2003) because, for both of them, mind was still the object of study in psychology (Farr, 1996).

Moreover, as Kvale (2003), for example, has pointed out, key figures like Freud, Piaget and Adorno used the qualitative interview as the basis of substantial areas of psychological knowledge (about child development, personality, sexuality, prejudice, motivation and so on).

Certainly quantitative research came to dominate psychology at the turn of the previous century (1890–1912) when mentalism gave way to behaviourism (Leahey, 2000) and introspection as method and consciousness as the subject of study were abandoned by the mainstream. At this point psychology, as a discipline, became reformulated as the science of behaviour (see, for example, Farr, 1996: 22 on 'Wissenschaft').

Danziger (1990) provides a detailed account of how research in psychology began as a subjective, if not qualitative endeavour, and how quantitative methods gained dominance, 'relegating any other method … to the realm of the unscientific' (Danziger, 1990: 107). This shift from introspection to experimental and survey research also involves a 'demotion' of the subject of the research from expert observer of the self to naïve response unit. Danziger (1990) describes how in the early days, experimental subjects were highly trained, their names or initials identified in research reports, and their responses almost always reported at the individual level. Theoretical discussions centred around the nature of the individual response patterns, even where average responses were included. It was only when scientific enquiry began to be concerned with aggregates and generalization that the object of psychological study was reconfigured into the experimenter's quantitative measurement of the 'mindless' response of the experimental subject.

It has been argued (e.g. Jones and Elcock, 2001; Richards, 1996) that this shift was at least partly driven by a socio-economic demand for psychology to become more utilitarian – for it to generate knowledge which could be useful for managing society and its problems (in areas like crime, mental hygiene, selecting children for schools and people for jobs). One of its consequences was the marginalization and consequent devaluing of subjectivist methods of psychological enquiry. Another was a tendency to make judgements about individuals on the basis of aggregate data.

Questionnaires allowed social scientists to create and then statistically interrogate data gathered from large samples (such as crime rates) and then, using indices (such as age, gender and 'race'), to discover associations – for example, that criminal behaviour is more common among the 'lower social orders'. From there, it was not hard to make the conceptual leap to, for example, viewing 'the poor' as collectively more prone to criminality. And then all too easy to go one step further and transform these associations found within aggregate data into evidence for individual 'predispositions' (for instance, towards crime, to suicide, to insanity). Through this tortuous logic, simply by being a member of a particular group defined by demographics (e.g. living in a certain neighbourhood) individuals became imbued with what Quetelet (1842) called 'propensities'.

A preoccupation with quantification was also reinforced by a more general movement in the social sciences at the end of the 19th century towards the view that there was a single 'philosophy of science' – a single set of principles that underpin research. This was certainly the aspiration, expressed succinctly by Karl Marx when he proposed that 'Natural science will in time subsume the science of man [sic] just as the science of man will subsume natural science: there will be one science' (Marx, 1975: 355; emphasis in the original).

As a young man Sigmund Freud, too, declared his goal was to 'furnish a psychology that shall be a natural science' (Freud, 1950: 295) and for most of his career at least saw this as an ideal to be pursued. However, in later life he became convinced that 'mental events seem to be immeasurable and probably always will be so' (cf. Jones, 1955: 470).

The construction of 'scientific psychology' as natural science (hence 'proper psychology') and the consequent rendering of soft/unscientific psychology as human science (hence the delinquent Other) had serious consequences for the development of the qualitative research tradition. The dispute about whether psychology was a natural science, or whether it was part of both the natural and human sciences was resolved in favour of the former and in favour of the new generation of experimental psychologists who defended this position (see Danziger, 1979, 1990, in Farr, 1996: 20). Farr (1996: 21) notes that, as a result, the history of psychology has typically been portrayed as the history of psychology as a branch of natural science, neglecting/obscuring its social/human science heritage. Social psychology alone maintained its dual social/human scientific orientation until the second half of the 20th century (Farr, 1996: 22).

Several authors offer reflections on the history of qualitative research methodology within their contributions to this handbook. In particular Brown and Locke (Chapter 21) develop some of the themes raised in this introduction.

POSITIVISM

In this handbook we have taken the position that there should be no more need to justify the use of qualitative methods than there is to justify quantitative methods. We envisage no long explanations appearing in our companion *Handbook of Quantitative Research* that argue such a case. Neither handbook should get bogged down in a debate about which is the better, more valid or more useful route to knowledge.

However, given its historical positioning as 'failing' the gold standard, a number of authors have chosen to clarify their perspectives by way of contrast with what is often glossed as 'positivist' approaches to psychological research. Since 'positivism' is invoked repeatedly within this volume, we would like to take the opportunity to offer some thoughts on this concept.

First of all, it is obvious that in the context of qualitative methods the term carries negative connotations. Someone new to the world of qualitative research may not find it easy to come to grips with the complexities of social constructionism, hermeneutics and post-structuralism. But they would soon become all too aware that being a 'positivist' is something to be avoided at all cost! However, it may not be so clear to them what is actually involved in 'being a positivist'. This is because sometimes the label 'positivist' is deployed for polemical purposes, in place of an argument. This can create confusion and misunderstandings, especially since people may have different definitions of what the term designates.

So, to clarify, in contemporary discourse, 'positivism' refers to a set of beliefs about how legitimate knowledge about the world may be acquired. Key positivist ideas are that:

> philosophy should be scientific, that metaphysical speculations are meaningless, that there is a universal and a priori scientific method, that a main function of philosophy is to analyse that method, that this basic scientific method is the same both in the natural and social sciences, that the various sciences should be reducible to physics, and that the theoretical parts of good science must be translatable into statements about observations.
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> *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2000: 696)

This has meant that in psychology, positivism has been associated with a preference for quantitative data and controlled experimental or quasi-experimental research designs. Positivist principles have also been invoked in order to undermine knowledge claims and

critiques generated on the basis of qualitative and/or critical perspectives.

As a result, it is often forgotten that positivism has a radical history. It was conceived as a challenge to religion and metaphysics, regimes of truth which had functioned to perpetuate society's 'common sense' and the socio-economic structures which it supported. In 19th century France and Latin America, Comtean positivism drove anti-clerical and anti-conservative politics and activism. 'Progressive' political ideas were associated with scientific progress and the victory of reason over prejudice and superstition. It was only later, during the 20th century, that positivism lost its connection with radicalism and that its commitment to scientific objectivity began to take on a conservative hue.

A similar argument could be made in relation to 'science', although this concept is much more ambiguously positioned within qualitative methodology discourse. Some of our authors very explicitly claim the term (e.g. Giorgi and Giorgi in Chapter 10), using the word 'science' in its broadest sense – as a systematic, rigorous, empirical endeavour that needs to be carried out properly if it is to produce knowledge which is trustworthy and reliable. They are taking a stance – as advocated by Brickman, for example – that:

> [c]ontrary to what is sometimes asserted, science is a question of aim, not method. Science is an effort to make accurate observations and valid causal inferences, and to assemble these observations and inferences in a compact and coherent way.
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> Brickman (1980: 10)

From this perspective science does not have to be defined solely in terms of the hypothetico-deductive method. Other – qualitative – methods can be equally rigorous and valid.

The identification of 'science' with hypothetico-deductivism is a relatively recent development (Popper, 1963). Before that time, 'science' was treated as a much more malleable concept. Until the end of the 18th century, for example, it was natural philosophy that concerned itself with experimentation and the identification of factual knowledge about the natural world, whilst 'science' was concerned with something more akin to logic and with knowledge of what is necessarily the case.

If we accept that 'science' is an historical concept, and that arguments around the extent to which qualitative methods can be 'scientific' contribute to its definition and evolution then we should not be overly concerned with whether or not to invoke the concept. Rather we should focus on the various ways in which qualitative researchers have tried to inspire confidence in the value of their findings. We shall return to the question of quality (and its appraisal) in qualitative research in our concluding chapter.

EMPIRICISM

Another key concept, 'empiricism', also captures a variety of meanings. In one sense, all qualitative research in psychology is 'empirical' because it gathers data, analyses or interprets it and draws conclusions. Claims made and conclusions reached are based upon an engagement with material that is, in one way or another, part of the social world that is being studied. Whether we work with interview transcripts, video-recordings of a social event, written memories, paintings or photographs, we are researching 'the world'. On the other hand, we know that there is no simple and direct relationship between 'the world' and our experience of it which means that our analyses of the data will always be mediated by us, the researchers.

Reflexivity is, therefore, a necessary dimension of all research, including qualitative research. Perhaps 'empiricism' is best thought of as a reference point in our reflections about our relationship with 'the world' rather than as a label which we either identify with or reject. Finally, the concept of 'reductionism' is perhaps the hardest to salvage. In frequent use since the mid-20th century, it describes an approach to knowledge which aims to reduce complex phenomena to more fundamental, underlying (usually material)

causal factors. These tend to be seen as pre-existing, self-contained and as such not subject to processes of transformation and feed-back loops. As such, reductionist versions of scientific thought contrast sharply with systems approaches and dialectical perspectives. It is probably safe to say that reductionist thinking is incompatible with most qualitative approaches to research in psychology.

THE 'TURN TO LANGUAGE'

A major challenge to psychology's claim to natural-scientific status did not emerge until the 1970s when the ideas and experiences of the emancipatory movements of the 1960s filtered through into the discourse of academic psychology. For example, feminist psychologists questioned research methods which had produced 'findings' confirming women's inferior intellectual abilities and moral character (e.g. Gilligan, 1982). The nature of psychological knowledge itself was interrogated and its reflexive, historical character was exposed (e.g. Gergen, 1973). Far from simply describing human behaviour and its causes, psychology as a discipline and a practice was actively shaping people's experiences.

The 'turn to language' describes an intellectual orientation which pays attention to how our ways of talking about and representing 'reality' contribute to its very appearance and effects. Such a perspective provides the tools for a fundamental critique of the type of psychological research which uncritically deploys commonsense concepts (such as prejudice, anger, aggression, self-esteem, intelligence) and seeks to measure them. The 'turn to language' allowed researchers to deconstruct the very concepts that appeared to underpin psychological knowledge (e.g. Parker, 1992). Since it is concerned with the construction of meaning (and its consequences), the 'turn to language' gave rise to a burgeoning of qualitative research in psychology. Over the years, a range of approaches to discursive analysis have emerged, the most influential of which are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 of this volume. Some researchers (e.g. Chapter 6) are particularly concerned with the ways in which talking about, and therefore representing, 'reality' feed into wider power relations, that is, with how discourse maintains the institutions and commonsense of a society. Others (e.g. Chapters 4 and 5) are more interested in the ways in which individuals deploy discursive resources in particular social situations and with what effects. Yet others (e.g. Wetherell, 1998) prefer not to choose between these two foci and aim to integrate them in their discursive analyses.

Although the 'turn to language' and the research inspired by it seem to have taken centre stage in contemporary qualitative psychology, other qualitative traditions have continued to develop and thrive alongside discursive work. For example, at Duquesne University in the USA, phenomenological research procedures were refined and disseminated throughout the 1960s and 1970s (see Chapter 11), whilst in the UK Harré and colleagues (e.g. Marsh, Rosser and Harré, 1978) formulated the ethogenic approach to the study of (dis)ordered behaviour. Both descriptive and interpretative (hermeneutic) forms of qualitative research continue to coexist with discursive perspectives although the latter have perhaps been better at attracting attention amongst psychological researchers. This, however, appears to be changing now that 'interpretation' is becoming a major concern among qualitative psychologists.

THE 'TURN TO INTERPRETATION'

Recent years have seen a growing concern with the role of interpretation in qualitative research. Although there has, of course, always been a hermeneutic tradition within qualitative research, many qualitative psychologists had avoided overt interpretation and, instead, preferred to use qualitative methods as a way of capturing and systematically re-presenting participant-generated meanings in the form of descriptive themes.

It has been argued (e.g. Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2002) that until now much qualitative research has implicitly adhered to a positivist epistemology. The format in which such qualitative research is presented tends to mirror the structure of the quantitative research report (introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion). Data are taken at face value and the work of analysis consists of a process of careful and systematic categorization of participants' statements into themes which are then presented as 'findings'. Interpretation does not enter the picture until the very end, when the 'findings' are reflected upon in the discussion section of the report.

This approach to qualitative research has been strongly encouraged by the format and style conventions adopted by the vast majority of psychological journals. It probably also helped qualitative researchers to gain acceptance among their quantitatively oriented peers, as it lends an air of objectivity to the research. Chamberlain (2000) has identified this tendency to avoid theory and to fall victim to methodolatry in qualitative health psychology.

Increasingly, however, qualitative psychologists are engaging with the question of interpretation. They are asking questions about the social and/or psychological structures and processes which may generate the themes which are identified in participants' accounts, and they interrogate existing psychological theories in the light of qualitative data. Qualitative research is becoming more interpretative, less content to see careful description as the endpoint of the research. Frosh and Young (Chapter 7) advocate 'binocularity' as a way of combining 'ground up' (i.e. descriptive, focus on 'what is there') with 'top down' (i.e. theory-driven, interpretative) approaches. They propose that thick, detailed description followed by an attempt to draw on psychological theory in order to explain phenomena can enrich our understanding. In their chapter, they demonstrate how qualitative researchers can produce analysis which is both grounded in data *and* theoretically driven.

Eatough and Smith (Chapter 11) address this question in relation to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and they acknowledge that for both IPA and for qualitative psychology as a whole 'what is actually involved in interpretation … is … a pretty neglected or undeveloped area' (p. 190). Interestingly, it seems that the preferred theoretical orientation within this movement towards interpretation has, so far, been psychodynamic although more explicitly political perspectives such as Marxism and feminism have also been adopted.

There is also a difference between qualitative methods of analysis which presuppose a clearly defined theoretical orientation and those which do not. For example, discourse analytic research presupposes that discourse constructs rather than reflects versions of reality, and that language use is performative. This means that what research participants say is not taken at 'face value' and that the application of the methodological procedure itself constitutes an act of interpretation, generating a theoretically informed reading.

By contrast, methods such as IPA offer methodological guidelines for the identification of themes, but they do not specify how, or even whether, these ought to be linked theoretically. Here, interpretation comes after representation, although it is clearly acknowledged that the researcher's identity and standpoint will inevitably colour the way in which s/he represents participants' material thematically. Eatough and Smith (Chapter 11) identify differing 'levels of interpretation' ranging from the empathic-descriptive where the researcher tries to 'stand in the shoes of the participant' and produces a rich experiential description, to the critical-hermeneutic level where the researcher builds an alternative narrative which differs from the participant's own account of what is going on and which offers a deeper understanding of the participant's experience (see also Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006).

The latter may be informed by existing psychological theories. What distinguishes qualitative research concerned with description from qualitative research concerned with

interpretation is that the latter aspires to generate an understanding of how people come to experience the world and themselves in a particular way. In other words, there is an attempt to understand, as well as to describe, phenomena. This also means that overtly interpretative work is based on the premise that people may not be aware of all the processes that are involved in their behaviour and experience, and that the task of psychological research is to bring these to light.

Interpretation, then, means gaining a better understanding of phenomena than those who manifest or enact them would normally have themselves. This means that engaging with the question of interpretation raises issues of ownership and power. It entails addressing questions such as who has the last word (e.g. does the research report constitute the last word and where does that leave the research participants?) and what happens when the research participants do not agree with the researcher's interpretation (e.g. does such disagreement get further interpreted as resistance to the emotional significance of the interpretation and where does that leave the participant?).

One of the reasons for adopting qualitative methods in feminist research was to give voice to participants and to allow their own perspective and understanding of their experiences to be foregrounded. This was partly a response, and challenge, to traditional ('male-stream') research which had discounted women's voices and interpreted the meaning of women's behaviour and experiences through the lens of theories which had been developed on the basis of male research participants' responses (e.g. Gilligan, 1982).

We believe that it is important that a 'turn to interpretation' in contemporary qualitative research does not mean a return to the unreflected imposition of meanings upon participants' material. There has already been some debate regarding the ethical implications of reading research participants' accounts through a set of pre-defined theoretical constructs (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2005a,b; Spears, 2005; Wetherell, 2005). Whilst established theories provide powerful tools for analysis, they can also create blindspots and projections which can cover up meanings as much as reveal them. It is important to bear in mind that interpretation ought to be concerned with understanding rather than with explanation (cf. Dilthey, 1976), and, as such, it should not aspire to the production of certainties, of definitive knowledge and facts, of last words.

Cohn (2005: 221) reminds us that interpretation is inexhaustible – what Curt (1994) termed the *interrogation interminable*. Moreover, all understanding is partial: 'something always remains un-understood'. Pujol and Stainton Rogers (1996: 17) describe this as 'the irritating little bits and bats that cannot be neatly accommodated within pre-existing theoretical frameworks'. The phenomenon of interest should not become something different through being interpreted; it does not get translated into, and thus replaced by, its underlying meaning because it is not 'a disguise for what is "real"' (Cohn, 2005: 222). Instead, interpretation means amplification of meaning, an exploration and clarification of the many strands of meaning which constitute the phenomenon of interest. This includes paying attention to absences and their significance. Cohn (2005: 224) writes, 'We need … to remember that the process of revealing the unknown part of a phenomenon does not replace a deceptive manifest utterance or symptom with the reality of a true meaning which invalidates what we have seen so far. On the contrary, the perceived phenomenon gains clarity, richness and meaningfulness whenever a new aspect of its totality is discovered'.

The challenge to qualitative researchers is, therefore, to go beyond what presents itself, to reveal dimensions of a phenomenon which are concealed or hidden, whilst at the same time taking care not to impose meaning upon the phenomenon, not to squeeze it into pre-conceived categories or theoretical formulations, not to reduce it to an underlying cause. In practice, it may not always be easy to distinguish between the two which means that sustained attention needs to be paid to the ethical dimensions of qualitative research.

METHODOLATRY

Curt (1994: 106) defines methodolatry as the worship of method (notably scientific method), according it a separate, revered status as the only self-respecting means by which 'true knowledge' can be discovered. Method is idolized because it portrays research as exacting and highly skilled, the province of 'experts'.

> Methodolatry thus serves the purpose of enabling psychologists to cast themselves as the sole architects of legitimate knowledge about 'the science of behaviour' … The ability to select and use appropriate methods of enquiry (and their associated statistical techniques) is held to be the key to extracting the 'gold of pure truth' from the dross of opinion, prejudice, folk-tale and superstition. Methods are the alembics of these modern day alchemists. In marking its territory with the Academy, mainstream psychology, almost throughout its history, has presented scientific methods of empirical enquiry as the antidote to the ills of 'armchair psychology'.
>
> Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson and Stainton Rogers (1995: 226)

Although the target of these critical comments is 'mainstream psychology' using 'scientific methods', qualitative psychology is not immune to methodolatry. There are times when methodological preoccupations and conflicts dominate the debate at the expense of ethical and political concerns. There is also a range of views, within the qualitative research community, about the relationship between methodological and ideological considerations. At one end of the continuum, there are those who argue that qualitative (and indeed all) research serves a political purpose in that it either challenges or supports the (political, economic, social, cultural) status quo, and that, therefore, ethical and political issues need to be at the top of the research agenda (e.g. Parker, 1992). From this point of view, the methods we use in our research are essentially a means to an end such as the empowerment of socially disadvantaged groups of people. Researchers in community psychology (see Chapter 29) are likely to take this position. At the other end of the continuum, there are those who are rather more agnostic about values and who prefer to focus on the specific ways in which a particular method can shed light on specific processes or phenomena. From this point of view, our research has no purpose other than to increase understanding and this is made possible by the application of the method (which is not to say that such understanding cannot also be used in order to bring about positive change). Such a position is likely to be taken by phenomenological researchers (e.g. Chapters 10 and 11) or by those whose work is influenced by conversation analytic principles (e.g. Chapters 4 and 5). An example of an engagement between these two positions can be found in the exchange between Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig (2007) and Speer (2007). Most researchers will choose a position somewhere in between the two ends of the continuum and it is likely that one's position evolves over time. The chapters in this handbook offer a wide range of positions on this, and related, questions.

Throughout this introduction, we have emphasized that qualitative psychology is characterized by a range of positions and approaches regarding epistemology, ethics and politics. There is also a difference in priorities and concerns between academic researchers and practitioner researchers. We have drawn attention to qualitative methodology's complex relationship with knowledge, and we have stressed that this handbook is about mapping and navigation rather than about recipes and rules. Whilst these are all worthy sentiments (as well as, in our view, inevitable features of a qualitative perspective), we have to admit that our task as editors would have been a lot easier, had we been able to use a positivist framework from within which to read our contributors' chapters! As it was, we were presented with the challenge of having to ensure that a hugely diverse range of treatments of the topic of 'qualitative research in psychology' was presented within the confines of the aims and objectives of a research methods handbook. This was no easy task. As there is no single authority on what is 'right' or 'wrong' in qualitative research, we decided to use our

contract with the reader as our guide to the editorial process. This has meant that, as editors, we tried to ensure that each chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the 'state of the art' within a particular area of work. We invited authors to write clearly and accessibly so that readers new to the field would be able to understand and appreciate the ideas presented in the handbook. Although we encouraged authors to position themselves in relation to other approaches and perspectives, we did not feel that partisan treatments of the subject matter would be helpful. We hope that we have achieved the right balance between description and interpretation (!) within these pages, and that readers will be able to use this handbook as a clear, comprehensive and reliable guide on their journey through qualitative psychology.

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