

Theoretically informed qualitative psychotherapy research: A primer

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Abstract

This paper presents an introduction to theoretically informed qualitative psychotherapy research (QPR). Although QPR researchers have traditionally remained silent on theory, we suggest this has resulted in an implicit and unacknowledged use of theory. We argue instead for a clear articulation of qualitative researchers' theory and outline how theory can be incorporated to inform the entire qualitative research process. This approach assumes the research problem is embedded in a clearly defined and articulated theoretical framework, which also informs data collection and data analysis. We outline how researchers can use explicit theoretical frameworks to inform research question formulation, data collection and data analysis and illustrate this with specific applications of the method in practice. We believe that starting from a declared theoretical framework sets up a dialogue between the research problem, the type of data required and their meaningful analysis and interpretation. This aims not only to achieve greater depth in the final product of research, but also to enhance its utility in terms of practice; it contributes to building, altering and differentiating theory; and it allows for greater transparency by openly articulating the theoretical framework that scaffolds the entirety of the research process.

KEYWORDS

emotion-focused therapy, methodology, qualitative methods, qualitative psychotherapy research, qualitative research, theoretically informed

1 | INTRODUCTION

Qualitative psychotherapy research (QPR) has evolved considerably over the past 40 years, since emerging formally in the 1980s. Spearheaded by the work of multiple authors such as David Rennie, Robert Elliott, Bill Stiles, Clara Hill and John McLeod, it has thrived in various areas of psychotherapy and counselling research. Much of the early formulation of QPR followed the general trend present in qualitative research across various disciplines such as nursing, education and sociology (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It suggested that, due to its inductive nature, researchers ought to approach the subject of interest without any prior knowledge (Timulak & Elliott,

2019). The zeitgeist was thus that qualitative research should be discovery-oriented and not driven by theoretical conceptualisations, as opposed to hypothesis-driven quantitative research. Furthermore, given that early QPR studies focused on clients' experiences of therapy (e.g. Rennie, 1990), it appeared only natural and expected that researchers who aimed to 'hear' from the clients should not transmute their pre-understandings on the clients' perspective.

With this in mind, the field proposed the notion of 'bracketing' (see Fischer, 2009; see Tufford & Newman, 2010), the method by which researchers 'shelve', 'suspend' or 'bracket' their interests, assumptions, beliefs and values from their engagement with the data. This is with a view of 'viewing data freshly' (Fischer, 2009), allowing findings to emerge organically from the data, rather than being influenced by the researcher's theory, background or experience. The

aim was to have access to data uncontaminated by one's particular theory. The practice of bracketing in this way became almost the defining feature of QPR (see also Elliott & Timulak, forthcoming).

In parallel to the methodological work on bracketing (e.g. Fischer, 2009), work was similarly ongoing on interpretative work in the research process involving double hermeneutics (Rennie, 2012). Double hermeneutics proposes the researcher to understand participants' revealed meaning within participants' own intentions, to then interpret it from the researcher's perspective, in a way that not only captures the participants' revealed meaning, but also experientially resonates with the researcher (i.e. an experientially embedded interpretation). It recognises that both participants and researchers engage in a process of making and identifying meaning. The researcher's interpretation is the finding communicated to the audience in a way that maintains resonance for the reader (Rennie & Fergus, 2006). This line of work conceptually articulated interpretation/categorisation in data analysis, as well as acknowledged that the interpretative framework arose from the researcher; it did not, however, place this interpretative framework at the centre of the knowledge generation process. It was recognised that generating findings was a coconstructive process between the researcher and participants (e.g. Ponterotto, 2005). The researcher was thus asked to provide a background on him/herself (e.g. Hill, 2012; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), and this 'situatedness' was seen as sufficient information for the audience to consider when reading the findings. There was not, however, emphasis on articulating how researchers are influenced to see particular aspects of the data (through theory, experience and background) and to understand them in a particular way. Distinct research teams, from the same starting point, could end up with different findings even when analysing the same data set. Indeed, we now have some empirical tests of the limits of 'bracketing', or of putting biases aside; in the context of consensual qualitative research (Ladany, Thompson, & Hill, 2012), when different teams set out to examine the same data set, the result can be different conceptualisations of findings.

In the field of QPR, several authors (e.g. Stiles, 1993; Timulak & Elliott, 2019) have instead argued for a clear articulation of the qualitative researchers' preconceptions and how these present throughout the research question formulation, data collection and data analysis. These arguments fundamentally contradict the practice of bracketing, as well as placing greater emphasis on the explicit articulation of researcher background and its interplay with all aspects of the research process. Stiles (2003) writes that, in qualitative research, 'employing bracketing can be self-deceptive and self-defeating' (2003, p. 487): self-deceptive—in that unarticulated, less accessible/explicit beliefs remain and continue to influence the researcher; and self-defeating—in that all understanding is based on experience and overlooking theory in QPR 'denies the possibility of improving it' (p. 487). Stiles' (2001) chain of studies on the Assimilation of Problematic Experiences in psychotherapy theory is a prototypical example of theory-driven programmatic research, which also incorporates qualitative case studies or case studies using qualitative elements. Similar examples are found in

the 'mixed-methods' task analysis (Greenberg, 2007; Pascual-Leone, Greenberg, & Pascual-Leone, 2009; Rice & Greenberg, 1984). We also note articulations of theory-laden qualitative research outside of QPR (e.g. Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018).

Furthermore, as Elliott and Timulak (forthcoming) argue, there is 'always an encounter between what is known and what is becoming known'; prior knowledge shapes what researchers search for and how they understand it. We can thus consider bracketing here to be about an attitude of openness (cf. Fischer, 2009), rather than that of not knowing. As researchers, we keep an inquisitive mind, to set out to learn and remain open to be changed by what we hear or observe; our preconceptions need to be permeable (see Stiles, 2003). Elliott and Timulak (forthcoming) offer two options, both where researchers examine, reflect and report on what shaped their research problem formulation, data collection strategy and data analysis process. In the first, the reflection and articulation involves situating the researchers/analysts theoretically, professionally and personally (who they are and how this has shaped their research question, data collection and data analysis process). In the second, these authors argue for a more explicit, articulated theoretical framework that informs how the research problem is generated, as well as the process of data collection and data analysis. Here, they argue for an explicitly theoretically laden qualitative approach, resonating with Stiles (2003), who has advocated for theoretically informed qualitative research.

The latter is the approach we take in this paper, where we will introduce our articulation of theoretically informed QPR approach, illustrating it with specific examples of the method in practice from the research group at our university (although we illustrate with one specific theory/model, theoretically informed QPR can be feasibly applied to any theory relevant for psychotherapy research). This approach first assumes the research problem is embedded in a clearly defined and articulated theoretical framework, which also informs data collection and data analysis. We believe that starting from a declared theoretical framework sets up a dialogue between the research problem, the type of data required and their meaningful analysis and interpretation. This aims not only to achieve greater depth in the final product of research, but also to enhance its utility in terms of practice. It realises the principle of bracketing, in so far as data are not unintentionally influenced by undeclared interests. It also allows for transparency by openly articulating the theoretical framework that scaffolds the entirety of the research process.

2 | FORMULATING A RESEARCH PROBLEM IN THEORETICALLY INFORMED QPR

Qualitative psychotherapy research is typically employed in research areas requiring open-ended, exploratory questions (cf. Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2015). As with any other research, the study's rationale, or the reason for a particular research problem, needs to be addressed. The research problem is typically something that intrigues and puzzles researchers and that they consider important to

investigate; the researchers then attempt to persuade their audience about the importance, relevance and value of the problem. For theoretically informed QPR, the process of formulating a research problem unfolds in the context of a particular theoretical thinking. It is not simply that theories known to the researcher play a part; instead, the entire articulation of the need for the study and its relevance takes place in the context of this particular theoretical thinking. This allows for the emergence of theoretically relevant problems that require study in order to expand, refine and/or examine the theory where the researchers thus transparently articulate their starting point and an interpretative framework.

Our research group has led numerous theoretically informed qualitative studies (e.g. Dillon, Timulak, & Greenberg, 2018; Hissa, Connolly, Hession, & Timulak, 2020; McNally, Timulak, & Greenberg, 2014; O'Brien et al., 2019), investigating elements of the emotional transformation model as conceptualised within emotion-focused therapy (EFT). These studies followed from the work of Pascual-Leone and Greenberg (2007), Pascual-Leone (2005) and Pascual-Leone (2009), who, utilising task analysis, investigated the process of emotional transformation in 'good'/therapeutically productive sessions (vs. unproductive therapy sessions) giving rise to a model of emotional transformation with moment-by-moment description of productive emotional processing. This model follows a specific sequence, from expression of undifferentiated global distress/secondary emotions through to distinct, clearly articulated, chronic painful (primary) emotions such as shame and fear, the embedded unmet needs in these (e.g. for recognition, safety) and the emotional responses to the needs in the form of self-compassion, assertive anger and/or adaptive grieving.

The model of emotional transformation was generated through examining clients' in-session progression in productive sessions of therapy for depression, and later tested, showing that it successfully predicted good in-session outcomes and related to overall treatment outcome (Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007). It was used subsequently as a basis to develop an EFT case conceptualisation model (see Timulak & Pascual-Leone, 2015), applied in empirically based mixed-methods case studies (e.g. Dillon et al., 2018; McNally et al., 2014), where it was examined in the context of entire therapy cases (i.e. all therapy sessions, not only productive therapy sessions). This allowed particular cases to be conceptualised and for the process of emotional transformation to be tracked within them, from undifferentiated pain (global distress), through underlying core (primary) chronic emotions (such as loneliness, shame and fear) and unmet needs in these (for connection, recognition, safety) to the transformation of these chronic painful emotions through generation of adaptive self-compassion and protective anger. The case studies found the model of emotional transformation fitting to account for the main processes within the cases, as well as helping to introduce novel concepts of emotional avoidance of chronic painful feelings and further articulate how these core chronic painful feelings manifest (e.g. lonely, ashamed, unsafe). In this way, applying the original model of emotional transformation to other therapy cases allowed for further refinement of the model and theory.

Further qualitative studies followed, an example being O'Brien et al.'s (2019) use of the case conceptualisation model above as a way of illustrating the in-session emotional experience of clients with generalised anxiety disorder. The case conceptualisation model (see Timulak & Pascual-Leone, 2015) resulted in a unique, theoretically informed phenomenology of in-session presentations of clients with generalised anxiety. For example, it demonstrated that clients were avoidant of idiosyncratic triggers and painful feelings embedded in their personal history narrative, rather than generalised as traditionally understood by the label of generalised anxiety. This successful application led to the extension of the case conceptualisation model to a psycho-oncology setting (Hissa et al., 2020), where we utilised the case conceptualisation model as the theoretical framework for interpreting the in-session presentations of breast cancer patients with comorbid anxiety and depression. The model formed the explicit basis for examining, unfolding and outlining the emotional experiences of clients with a diagnosis of breast cancer and the interplays with their emotional vulnerabilities. These examples from our programmatic research illustrate how research problems can unfold systematically from an initial effort to illuminate different aspects and variations of an evolving theoretical model.

3 | DATA COLLECTION IN THEORETICALLY INFORMED QPR

Data collection strategy is always informed by the research problem and research questions. These inform not only the characteristics of the sample, but particularly the method of data collection. Variations on methods of self-report data collection, such as exploratory interviews, focus groups, think-aloud protocols, assisted recalls and written questionnaires, and/or on observation-based methods, such as analysis of session recordings and analysis of non-verbal behaviour in the context of self-report, can be employed in QPR. These data collection methods are usually flexible, open-ended and possibly evolving, albeit embedded in an initial structure outlined on the basis of the articulated research problem. This initial structure (e.g. an interview schedule), which also informs our domains of investigation (cf. Timulak & Elliott, 2019), is grounded on the scholarly work leading to the formulation of the research problem and is thus also embedded in the context of existing knowledge/literature.

In the context of theoretically informed QPR, the initial data collection strategy is formulated in the context of an explicit theoretical framework. For example, it is possible to have an interview schedule informed by the EFT model of emotional transformation, which then informs questions asked of participants. Questions can thus enquire about emotions experienced on a symptomatic level (corresponding to global distress in EFT), or about underlying emotions (primary emotions or core pain), and the unmet needs embedded in these (see Timulak and Pascual-Leone, 2015, for the case conceptualisation framework referenced throughout). In one of the studies from our research group, that qualitatively examined

the experience of cancer from an EFT perspective, the interview schedule was structured to elicit responses corresponding to domains of EFT case conceptualisation (Lynch, 2017). For example, to elicit for triggers of emotional pain, the researcher enquired on participants' largest crisis prior to their diagnosis of cancer; to prompt for self-treatment processes, participants were asked how they treat themselves in difficult situations; and to elicit for core emotional pain/primary emotions, participants were asked about their most difficult and painful feelings, and how they feel inside. This interview schedule allowed for collecting theoretically relevant data, while maintaining curiosity/openness to hear participants' perspectives.

In a similar way, when we utilise theoretically informed observation as a data collection strategy, we may focus on the theoretically relevant aspects of behaviour, verbal and non-verbal, which can become our domains of investigation (cf. Timulak & Elliott, 2019). Theoretically informed data collection does not suggest rigidity in strategy. In O'Brien et al. (2019), although the domains of investigations (e.g. symptomatic emotions, underlying core chronic emotions, unmet needs) were derived from the EFT case conceptualisation framework, researchers maintained flexibility in their approach to the data (i.e. therapy sessions). As the researchers allocated observations of clients in therapy to theoretically informed domains of investigation, and before analysed further, they noticed that some of the dynamics/observations did not readily fit with the model (namely that some clients appeared to be emotionally over-regulated, while some, under-regulated). The decision was then made to include an additional domain suitable to capture these dynamics, that of Emotional Processing; this new domain of investigation is equally anchored in the context of existing EFT theoretical framework.

In sum, theoretically informed data collection strategy allows for another layer of transparency for the reader, who is able to follow an explicit data collection process in the context of existing and articulated theory. The rationale for the specifics of the data collection method can be traced back to the relevant theoretical issues. This allows for the researcher to situate the data collection process transparently, as well as for the reader to trace back the link between theoretically important questions and the data collection strategy.

4 | DATA ANALYSIS IN THEORETICALLY INFORMED QPR

There are two main characteristic features involved in the data analysis stage of theoretically informed QPR: One is how we structure the data, and the other is how we interpret it. It is important to remember that, due to the flexible nature of qualitative research, the process of data analysis can overlap with data collection. Emerging analysis can inform the data we search for. This can also occur in theoretically informed QPR, with this process being explicitly anchored in the theoretical thinking, as outlined above

with O'Brien et al.'s (2019) study where a theoretically relevant domain is added.

Data analysis often begins with the *structuring* of the data set. This is often informed by the researchers' data collection strategy and initial scholarly work (cf. Timulak & Elliott, 2019), generally a declared or undeclared theory-informed structure (Elliott & Timulak, 2005). The structure brought by researchers may, for example, be essentially pragmatic, and even atheoretical studies apply some sort of structure. Some atheoretical studies (e.g. Rhodes, Hill, Thompson, & Elliott, 1994) on therapeutic alliance ruptures, for instance, utilise a temporal sequence of beginning, middle and end of event. It is then within those domains (beginning, middle and end) that the data are analysed. Similarly, atheoretical studies on clients' experience of therapy (e.g. McElvaney & Timulak, 2013) utilise a structure that informs both their interview schedule and how data are structured in early stages of analysis (when domains of investigations are outlined). It is then within this structure that the data are clustered, thematised, categorised, etc.

Theoretically informed QPR is, in a similar way, structured, except that the domains of investigation are explicitly informed by theory. In our study (Hissa et al., 2020), the declared EFT theoretical framework informed data analysis, principally how we organised the data/delineated domains (i.e. triggers of emotional pain, global distress, problematic self-treatment, behavioural and emotional avoidance, core pain, unmet needs); in this way, our domains of enquiry corresponded to the EFT case conceptualisation headings. Our observations within those domains were then subject to distinct categorisations. For example, we observed that the Core Pain domain for breast cancer clients with depression and anxiety involved unique features, such as fears of illness recurrence and grief from the losses associated with the illness (see below).

When categorising data within domains, researchers develop categories (themes, etc.) that intend to capture the essence of a clustered portion of the data. This process involves an interaction between the researcher's meaning-making when categorising the data and the meanings or intentions communicated by the research participants (equally in self-report as in observation-based studies). In theoretically informed QPR, the researcher's/analyst's reading or *interpretation* of the data is not only embedded in the researcher's professional and personal background (Elliott & Timulak, forthcoming), but also embedded in an explicit theoretical framework. The process of thematisation/categorisation of the data not only captures the essence of the data in embodied themes in a way that resonates with the researcher and reader (cf. Rennie, 2012), but also does so by using theoretically informed language and interpretative lenses.

In Hissa et al. (2020), the EFT model of emotional transformation informed both how we clustered and how we interpreted findings; that is, the model informed data structure, but within that data structure, it also informed the evolving categories. For example, Core Pain (primary painful emotions), proposed by Timulak and Pascual-Leone (2015) to cluster around loneliness, shame and fear/ terror, was, in our study, unique to the oncology context;

we saw that fear captured the existential terror associated with cancer and the cancer-related trauma, resulting in fear of illness, of recurrence and of death. Our interpretation of core pain was also extended to include sadness at loss to capture the multiple losses involved in cancer diagnosis and treatment (see also Connolly-Zubot, Timulak, Hession, & Coleman, 2019). The emerging data were analysed using the language of the theory, which intended to achieve greater depth of analysis and theoretical coherence, situating the results in the particular theory and EFT practice. Utilising a theoretically informed model thus contributed to further enrich our EFT case conceptualisation of depression and anxiety, as well as to differentiate the model for a subpopulation of clients in EFT (cancer patients).

The analysis continues to be carried out in the spirit of openness and permeability (Stiles, 2003), where the existing theory is merely an interpretative vehicle and the source of language used in categorisation, rather than a definite account that is confirmed. Indeed, as researchers, we wish to build on theory, alter, expand and differentiate it further; theoretically informed QPR allows for this. An argument we have encountered challenging theoretically informed QPR is that this approach may lead to confirming/disconfirming theory, rather than enriching and nuancing theory (as is our motivation). The concern may be that findings and interpretation are limited by the declared theoretical framework. We would argue instead that it allows for a consistent, systematic approach to data and for the reader to track evolution of theory. Furthermore, as any thinking is invariably led by implicit or explicit frameworks, bracketing one's beliefs and values does not result in the absence of theory. As Stiles (2003) proposes, the issue of bias, which the practice of bracketing purports to address, can be tackled with 'practices likely to enhance and reveal permeability' (p. 487), so that researchers are open to adjusting their understandings as they interact with the data. In theoretically informed QPR, the purpose is not to necessarily test the theory, but to elaborate on how the theory is present in particular situations (Timulak & Elliott, 2019). Researchers should also remain committed to the usual credibility checks and trustworthiness practices of interpretation, as well as consider and highlight alternative interpretations to the reader.

Theoretically informed QPR offers a theoretically embedded and explicitly articulated framework for data analysis. This helps to situate the professional and personal background of the researcher/analyst, allows for a transparent examination of the research by the reader and explicitly enriches tradition generated by a particular theory. We believe this increases applicability and relevance for readers who may be practitioners, as well as for researchers, by refining theory and expanding the field with theory-specific knowledge. The Hissa et al. (2020) study, used throughout as a case in point, helped to contribute in enriching the model of emotional transformation by successfully applying it to a new context; it contributed to EFT theory by suggesting new understandings to EFT case conceptualisation in an oncology setting; and it helped contribute to EFT by highlighting emotional processes present in depression and anxiety, and its practice in psycho-oncology.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have attempted to provide a rationale for theoretically informed QPR by highlighting how theory interplays with research problem formulation, data collection strategy and data analysis. We believe that theoretically informed QPR brings several advantages to the research process. It allows for the research process and researcher him/herself to be more explicitly and transparently situated to the reader; it further contributes to building, altering and differentiating theory; it contributes to practice, by being explicit in psychotherapy theory; and finally, by utilising theory, it can inform not only models of understanding, but also models of practice that, in a coherent way, can be assessed against other alternative theories.

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