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Qualitative Psychotherapy Research: The Journey So Far and Future Directions

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This article documents the evolution of qualitative psychotherapy research over the past 3 decades. Clients' and therapists' accounts of their experiences in psychotherapy provide a window into the psychotherapy relationship and its mechanisms of change. A sizable body of literature has been generated that uses qualitative methods to collect and analyze these accounts and to shed light on the psychotherapy process. It notes changes in the field such as growing numbers of dissertations and publications using qualitative methods as well as a strengthening emphasis on qualitative research within graduate education and research funding bodies. Future recommendations include developing principles for practice from qualitative methods and conducting qualitative meta-analyses. Other recommendations include forming journal review policies that support the publication of qualitative research and that focus on coherence in adapting methods to meet research goals, in light of a study's characteristics and epistemological framework, rather than focusing on sets of procedures.

Keywords: qualitative research, psychotherapy research, grounded theory, phenomenology, consensual qualitative research

Qualitative research is a relatively new approach to studying psychotherapy. As journeys go, we are still very much at the beginning. We have left the gates though and have gained enough momentum that it can be useful to pause and look back. This article will describe the development of qualitative research in relation to the study of psychotherapy and will provide suggestions on directions that we might yet travel. First, I will overview some of the dominant ways in which qualitative methods have been used in psychotherapy research.

Most commonly qualitative methods have been recruited to analyze one of three different sources of data (data from clients, data from therapists, and recorded session data) and have been used toward corresponding ends. Researchers have analyzed interviews and the written responses of clients and therapists using approaches such as phenomenological methods (Churchill & Wertz, 2001), grounded theory methods (Rennie, 1994), and consensual qualitative methods (Hill, 2012). Analyses of clients' experiences often are intended to shed light on clients' internal processes to sensitize therapists to their experiences. In Rennie's (1994) groundbreaking research on clients' experience of a therapy hour, for example, he uncovered the ways clients tended to defer to their therapists to maintain the psychotherapy alliance, avoid threatening or challenging the therapist, and meet the therapists' expectations. They used covert processes and subtle indicators of discomfort, such as pauses, to manage the therapist and indicate their difficulty with a therapists' communication rather than risk a rupture in their connection with the therapist.

Analyses of therapists' experiences often function to alert therapists to internal processes that underlie case conceptualization, intervention, and approaches to treatment. This work can shed light on the stressors, intentions, and developmental experiences of psychotherapists. It can be useful for facilitating therapists' self-reflection, training program development, and informing the process of clinical decision making (Williams & Levitt, 2007).

Also, qualitative methods have been used to study recorded psychotherapy sessions to identify patterns in the client–therapist discourse or successful psychotherapy processes that lead to change, such as within task analytic methods. Pascuale-Leone and Greenberg's (2007) study of emotional processing in emotion-focused psychotherapy provides an example of how this method can identify the steps in a change process by tracking how change unfolds from the experience of global distress. They identify two productive routes—the first entails the identification of an internal experience of fear and shame whereas the second route entails the identification of rejecting anger with both routes converging in a sense of acceptance and agency at the end of the process. This type of research can be used to sensitize clinicians to the stages of change within specific problems and tasks as well as to direct future research. Although these are the most common sources of data and goals for studying psychotherapy, diaries (Mackrill, 2008) and focus groups have been productive methods that also have shed light on the therapy experience (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011).

Major Developments: How Far We Have Come

Getting in the Car

Unlike other topics within this 50-year retrospective issue on psychotherapy, the main change that has happened for qualitative research within this time span is incontrovertible. It exists. Although the first methods to study psychotherapy were qualitative

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in nature (Freud, 1905/1953), and early approaches to psychological research included models based on human science approaches, this form of research fell out of favor as psychology adopted a more positivist approach to research (Danziger, 1990). This approach emphasized quantification, the study of behavior, and an objectivist epistemological perspective on the process of conducting research. It met needs in the fledgling field of 1930s psychology that was establishing itself within the realm of intelligence testing (Rogers, 1991).

In Anglo and North American contexts, qualitative psychotherapy research appears to have experienced a revival in the 1980s (Rennie, 2004; see Frommer, Langenbach, & Streek, 2004 for a description of the reemergence of qualitative methods in German-speaking countries). Although qualitative methods now are used by researchers across theoretical orientation (Castonguay et al., 2010), the reemergence was driven by the research of humanistic psychologists (Elliott et al., 2013; Levitt, in press a). Hill and Corbett (1993) described how different psychotherapy orientations have distinct research cultures that have led to the development of a diversity of research strategies. To explain the correspondence of humanistic research cultures and qualitative approaches, Rennie (2007) argued that converging values and inferential processes exist in the development of both traditions—namely, a process of methodical hermeneutics (see Rennie, 2012), which emphasizes using both conscious and inchoate experiences in meaning making.

Humanistic phenomenological theorists have long written about the theoretical implications of their approach for conceptualizing psychotherapy and evaluation (Combs, 1949). Decades later, this approach was popularized as a method of analysis by Amedeo Giorgi (1970) at Duquesne University (Churchill & Wertz, 2001). It has been adopted as a method to study psychotherapy even more recently (Bachelor, 1995; Farber, 1983) but has produced a growing body of work on the experience of being in therapy (Churchill & Bayne, 2001).

Around this same time period, David Rennie adapted grounded theory (Rennie, Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to the purpose of studying psychotherapy. He described (2004) the process by which his introduction of grounded theory contributed to some of the most commonly used qualitative methods in North American psychotherapy research. Grounded theory was adapted by Robert Elliott (Elliott et al., 1994) contributing to the method of comprehensive process analysis and adding a criteria of research group consensus—leading to a more objectivist method than Rennie's original approach that emphasized a hermeneutic constructivist process (see Rennie, 2000). In turn, Clara Hill (2012) further developed this process of consensus in creating her qualitative method, consensual qualitative research.

Within the United Kingdom, discourse analytic and narrative methods have been more common than within a North American setting. Notably, Anna Madill (1996) began using discourse analysis to analyze psychotherapy text. John McLeod used narrative methods with his research team to study sessions as well (McLeod & Balamoutsou, 1996). These research traditions have not been divided by the Atlantic, however, and much collaboration has occurred across regions (Angus & McLeod, 2004). These remain the most common qualitative methods in psychotherapy research (Levitt & Lu, 2014; Levitt, Pomerville, & Surace, 2014).

Picking up Speed

Although still very much a minority approach within the field of psychology, the use of qualitative methods has been steadily increasing (Ponterotto, 2013; Rennie, 2004). A review of major journals in counseling psychology found that qualitative studies increased from 13% during 1995–2000 to 18% in 2001–2006 (Ponterotto, Barnett, Ticinelli, Kuriakos, & Granovskaya, 2008). Also, courses in qualitative methods and education on these topics is increasing as well—especially in counseling psychology programs in North America of which 10% required these courses and 10% of students conducted qualitative dissertations (Ponterotto, 2005). It appears that these methods are on the uptake within clinical psychology as well—although this appears to be occurring faster within the United Kingdom than in the United States. A survey of British clinical psychology training programs reported that in 1992, 81% of programs taught qualitative methods for an average of 4.85 hr. A repeat of this survey in 2005–2006 revealed that 100% of programs taught these methods on average for 12.6 hr and 42.8% of dissertations within the previous four years used only qualitative methods (Harper, 2012).

It will be interesting to see how education on qualitative research shifts in the US context as qualitative methods are more widely used. When looking at the psychotherapy research that was based on data from the perspective of adult therapy clients in an ongoing meta-analysis of the qualitative psychotherapy literature, Levitt, Pomerville, and Surace (2014) identified only 11 studies before 2000 and 52 others that were published from 2000 to 2013. In a similar ongoing study looking at research based on data collected from therapists, Levitt and Lu (2014) found six studies until 1999 and then 72 from 2000 to 2013. Although the numbers of quantitative psychotherapy research articles are many times higher, the qualitative research field is growing.

One reason for the increased popularity of qualitative methods might be because of development of interest in funding multimethod projects by the US National Institute of Health (see <http://sigs.nih.gov/cultural/Pages/default.aspx>, November 7, 2013). The Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research at the National Institute of Health commissioned a report (Creswell, Carroll Klassen, Plano Clark, & Clegg Smith, 2011) on best practices for mixed-methods research to provide guidance for developing competitive applications, evaluating these proposals, and for the office when selecting reviewers, setting priorities and establishing new initiatives. This report described different types of mixed-method designs, strategies to develop infrastructure and teamwork for these designs, and ways to plan and review applications. In any case, American psychology seems to be embracing these approaches. In a recent development, the American Psychological Association's Division 5 (Evaluation, Measurement and Statistics) now has a qualitative section, The Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology, which boasts its own journal, *Qualitative Psychology*.

Within psychotherapy research, the growing affinity with qualitative methods might exist for a number of reasons. First, psychotherapy itself is an intersubjective dialogue—which introduces complexity into analyses because, instead of one truth of what is occurring in any one moment, clients and therapists can have distinct and multiple understandings. Also, they are self-aware and are capable of misrepresenting their experiences to one another.

This capacity means that the study of psychotherapy as behavior can misconstrue important aspects of the interactive experience. For instance, clients who seem to want to describe their dreams may only be doing so because they want to keep the therapist from asking about the homework that they forgot to complete (Rennie, 1994). Clients and therapists both monitor and adjust their self-presentation in attempts to influence one another and the therapy process.

Second, qualitative research tends to be contextually focused, permitting therapists to apply findings in an attuned and responsive manner to the shifting and unfolding interactions in their sessions. For instance, clinicians can experience how clients respond to metaphors in psychotherapy (Angus & Rennie, 1989), share the thought processes of a therapist when offered a gift by a client (Knox, Hess, Williams, & Hill, 2003), and contemplate different paths they might take in resolving distress (Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007). Findings are presented in a way that highlights the dynamics that are unfolding within the sessions, allowing the therapist to adapt their application to individual clients.

In addition, qualitative methods have been particularly advantageous in bringing to light minority voices in psychology—experiences of people from minority populations or perspectives whose experiences might be erased in quantitative research that is focused on average experiences. These studies can identify the psychotherapeutic needs of clients from different cultural backgrounds (Mulvaney-Day et al., 2011) or the dynamics that can unfold when therapist and clients are from different cultural groups (Dos Santos & Dallos, 2012). These studies can explore the complex web of assumptions and expectations to sensitize therapists and researchers alike to the ways the same treatments might be experienced quite differently by clients.

Moving Forward: The Road Yet to Travel

This section focuses on three routes that might lead us in profitable directions. First, the identification of principles for practice, as outcomes from qualitative research can enhance the transferability of findings to clinical settings. They can do this to shed light on both qualitative and quantitative research findings. For instance, studies using advanced statistical modeling may identify that therapist effects exist but not identify their causes or form. In contrast, principles derived from qualitative findings can be generated to describe what “therapist effects” or “common factors” look like within a session. Second, meta-analyses of qualitative research appear to be a useful direction for the future. Finally, as the field shifts to become more knowledgeable about qualitative methods, the journal review process itself has become stressed and editors and reviewers might wish to consider how to deal with this transition.

Principles for Practice: Developing Directions

Although qualitative findings often are presented in the form of narratives that are accessible to clinicians and their context-rich data presentation increases their utility, there are a number of ways in which the findings of qualitative research can be made even more transferable to clinical practice. Akin to initiatives in the field to develop principles of psychotherapeutic change based on qualitative research findings (Castonguay & Beutler, 2006), qualitative

research can produce principles for practice. These principles can be articulated by labeling main findings in a way so as to make the clinical implications clear or by presenting principles that derive from findings.

Qualitative research methods can be ideal for the development of principles to guide psychotherapy because they are able to capture both the subjective experience of the client as well as the intentionality of therapists (see Levitt, Neimeyer, & Williams, 2005 for an extended discussion of principles for practice). This description of subjective experience within an interpersonal context lends itself to identifying the *pivotal moments* in sessions. These can be the moments in which clients convey how their experience transforms—for example, moving the client away from disengagement into a trusting connection with the therapist (Frankel & Levitt, 2008). These studies also can identify the premises that underlie the clinical decision making of therapists—for example, deciding when to challenge a client and when to explore more (Williams & Levitt, 2007). These principles might be especially useful when they stem from research on master therapists’ intentions (Goldfried, Raue, & Castonguay, 1998; Levitt & Williams, 2010; Jennings, Sovereign, Bottorff, Mussell, & Vye, 2005) and could generate useful guidelines for trainees as well as experienced clinicians. Stiles (in press) described this effort as *enriching research*, which often is conducted for the purpose of deepening the understanding and appreciation of a phenomenon or *theory-building research*, which develops aspects of theory.

For instance, Levitt, Butler, and Hill (2006) conducted a grounded theory analysis of clients’ experiences treated in different psychotherapy orientations and generated a set of principles to guide practice. Fourteen clients described the process of setting goals. Most of these clients described preferring to set their own agenda for the therapy, disliking therapists who imposed goals, and desiring a collaborative process. A minority of clients, however, described needing a clearer agenda. One client wished she had thought, “I am going to come in and we are going to work on this [threatening topic] . . . cause you really do have to push yourself not to avoid things. It is really so easy to avoid” (p. 319). Identified discrepancies like this one can be captured in a principle to guide therapists, such as “Allowing the client to set goals is experienced as empowering, but, when mired in unimportant topics, clients want therapists to provide direction after checking for clients’ consent” (p. 319). Developing principles to guide practice can help therapists use the insights of qualitative analyses more easily in their sessions.

Another method to increase the clinical utility of qualitative research might be to share relevant findings of qualitative studies with clients. Research findings could facilitate clients’ understanding of their experiences, normalize experiences, and generate therapy dialogue. For instance, a therapist and client reading together about other clients’ explorations and insights about sadness (Henretty, Levitt, & Mathews, 2008) or disengagement (Frankel & Levitt, 2008) could make available new metaphors and understandings. The effects of reading qualitative research could be productive to explore in both process and outcome research.

Initial Meta-Reviews: Generating a Map

The field has come to a point in which a number of meta-analytic reviews have been conducted to condense the main find-

ings across the qualitative research on psychotherapy. Timulak's (2007) metasynthesis of seven qualitative studies focused on helpful events in therapy to identify central elements in this literature. He identified the following helpful processes as central across these studies: (a) the development of new awareness, insight, or self-understanding; (b) new strategies to approach behavioral change or problem solutions; (c) a sense of greater personal strength or interpersonal empowerment; (d) a relief due to a sense of acceptance by the therapist; (e) the exploration of feelings and emotional experiencing; (f) the sense of feeling understood by a therapist; (g) the clients' involvement and influence in the therapy process; (h) the implicit and explicit reassurance and support from the therapist; and (i) the personal contact with the therapist as another human being. These findings exploring clients' experiences across psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, and humanistic approaches emphasized the importance of the therapeutic relationship.

A few years later Timulak (2010) conducted a second metasynthesis of 41 studies that comprised the significant moments literature—a body of innovative research, spearheaded by Robert Elliott (1986), asking clients to reflect upon and describe what they experienced as significant in a therapy session. When looking at studies of individual psychotherapies, events related to insight and awareness were found again to dominate across the studies, second to interpersonal impacts of the therapist, such as feeling understood. Descriptions of unhelpful events were dominated in turn by misunderstandings between therapist and client and disappointment with therapists' interventions. When examining the literature on whether clients and therapists matched in their perceptions of significant events, it appeared that they often held different interpretations of events and interpretations—matched in roughly 30% to 40% of event (with similar results in recent research; Levitt & Piazza-Bonin, 2011). While therapists were more focused on therapeutic work related to the development of awareness, clients focused more on relational factors within the sessions. They recommended that future research on hindering events become a focus in the literature. Also, many of the helpful events identified included the processing of painful and distressing experiences—making clear that what was helpful for clients could extend beyond the bounds of what is comfortable. In this way, helpful and hindering events might be intertwined and so discrete categories might misrepresent the data.

A qualitative review of adult clients' experiences of individual psychotherapy, which was not restricted by either method or foci on significant moments, examined 63 studies that included 1031 participants (Levitt, Pomerville, & Surace, 2014). This review identified the central topics studied. These included—(a) significant moments or the change process in general ($N = 15$); (b) common factors in psychotherapy ($N = 15$), such as disengagement, agency, and metaphor use; (c) diversity or cultural characteristics ($N = 15$), including racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and religious or spiritual backgrounds; (d) boundaries and values ($N = 3$) with a focus on self-disclosure; (e) orientation-specific processes ($N = 9$) describing how change unfolds within one orientation; and (f) topics related to the relationship or alliance ($N = 6$), such as transference.

A companion study using the same method, but focused on studies interviewing therapists about their experience in sessions, reviewed 78 studies (Levitt & Lu, 2014) that included 1070 ther-

apists. Topics researched included—(a) diversity or cultural characteristics (such as racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and religious or spiritual backgrounds; $N = 19$); (b) issues related to specific client populations ($N = 12$); (c) therapists' training and development ($N = 10$); (d) boundaries or values, such as the influence of therapists' values or managing professional boundaries ($N = 10$); (e) common factors in psychotherapy, such as disengagement, agency, and metaphor ($N = 8$); (f) significant moments or the change process in general ($N = 8$); (g) their reflections upon their interventions or orientations ($N = 5$); (h) therapists' fears or doubts ($N = 4$); and (i) topics related to the relationship or alliance, such as transference ($N = 2$). The topics being researched speak to the perceived importance of cultural factors, therapist factors, and common factors in the field and the interest in understanding their functions within therapy.

Importantly, this growing body of meta-analytic research has countered the critique that qualitative research does not build upon itself. These studies have found convergence in findings—emphasizing the importance of developing insight, feeling understood, cultural influences, the person of the therapist, and the agentic nature of being a client in therapy. Also, they are especially well poised to influence the practice of therapy because they meet the needs of clinicians by providing practice recommendations rooted in rich descriptions of the client-therapist exchange (Booth, Cushner, & Newnes, 1997).

Review Process: Developing Roads

As qualitative methods have become more widely used, journals are developing review processes. The review of qualitative research manuscripts is challenging for a number of reasons. These methods are still new to many editors and reviewers, and psychologists with competence reviewing quantitative studies may not yet have expertise in qualitative methods. Having conducted a few qualitative studies might not equip a reviewer to review a study using a different form of that same method, a different method, or a different epistemological framework. Because invitations to review often do not identify the method or epistemological framework used, it can be challenging to judge one's own appropriateness to review a study until after a request to review has been accepted. It is complicated. Understanding epistemological roots of methods and their relationship to procedure permits reviewers to take into account the different questions, purposes of research, and study characteristics (Ponterotto, 2005; McLeod, 2011). Yet, most researchers have not been trained to understand the variety of philosophies that underpin these methods (Ponterotto, 2013) and might not know when they need to learn more.

Increasingly, journals have been generating procedural-driven guidelines to help reviewers. These can be easier to apply and more familiar as a basis for review. They can seem friendly and accessible and, at first blush, it may seem reasonable that good rules developed for quantitative methods or one qualitative method should generalize to all qualitative methods. Their danger, however, is not only that they create a context in which reviews are based on procedural packages or rules but they discourage the submission and acceptance of high-quality qualitative research that uses constructivist epistemologies, critical epistemologies, and/or multicultural-feminist research approaches (see Frieze, 2008 for one example of such a policy).

In contrast, qualitative researchers have begun to describe exemplary approaches to design as being characterized by the tailoring of methods to best fit a specific question at hand and a study's characteristics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Levitt, in press b; McLeod, 2011). Having a wide knowledge of different qualitative methods and epistemological approaches can allow researchers to integrate procedures as is appropriate and efficient to solve a given problem. Instead of simply following a manual, this approach requires flexibility and creativity to pragmatically adapt methods to each project—potentially from across multiple interpretive paradigms. Also, this understanding is based within the belief that research procedures *should* be adapted to strengthen the process of generating meaningful findings given the personal histories and cultures of the researcher and the participants at hand.

A few examples from my experience as a qualitative researcher and as an editorial board member for many academic journals can make this problem clearer. They illustrate how imposing ideals for design across epistemological framework and methods cause problems:

(1) Misunderstood processes and outcomes. In quantitative research, hypotheses tend to be articulated clearly at the forefront, as the studies are designed to evaluate whether they should be rejected or not. In contrast, qualitative research often is used toward the purpose of generating new explanations or descriptions of understudied events or experiences. Insisting that an investigator should communicate to interviewees a clear definition of the phenomenon under study at the outset of interviews is nonsensical when that understanding may be the desired *outcome* of the study. In fact, many qualitative approaches have discouraged researchers from becoming attached to a hypothesis about their phenomenon in fear that it might constrict their openness to new findings in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Churchill & Wertz, 2001). Other qualitative research approaches are used to facilitate social critique or prompt change (Fine, 2013), and their evaluation should relate to how successfully they accomplish goals intrinsic to those methods within their epistemological frameworks (Ponterotto, 2005).

(2) Lack of consensus and epistemological confusion. Because qualitative methods are new and have emerged from different philosophies, disciplines and needs, we have not reached consensus in standards for authors to follow. For instance, within a post-positivist rhetoric, researchers avoiding the disclosure of biases tend to enhance the appearance of objectivity, but for many qualitative researchers disclosure enhances the trustworthiness within their (e.g., constructivist or critical) rhetoric (Rennie, 1995). They may wish to be forthcoming about how they either limited the effects of this perspective (e.g., asking nonleading questions) or used their perspective within the analysis (e.g., in a feminist discourse analysis). Presently, there is great variation in reviewers' responses to this reflexive disclosure (even within journals), with some wanting pages of analysis and others being disturbed that the researchers' perspectives are described at all—and many in between. As a result, editors and reviewers may wish to learn how different methods and epistemologies conceptualize rigor and trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005) but also permit authors with the *chance to respond* to reviewers' requests given the diversity in the field and the impossibility for authors to predict expectations at this time.

(3) My method isn't your method. A challenge with qualitative methods is that there are many different valid forms of

methods that go under the same name. For instance, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original grounded theory method is different from Glaser's (1990) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) later versions, which differ from Rennie's (2000) and Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory. And methods evolve over time and should be adapted to fit any study at hand. Although they share some core features (e.g., the development of a data hierarchy), methods can be embedded within different epistemological frameworks and use different terminology and procedures. Instead of evaluating an article based on whether the *procedures replicate* a familiar version of grounded theory, reviewers should recognize multiple versions of a method. It can be better to consider whether the procedures in a study are *adapted well* to develop a strong description or interpretation of a phenomenon to benefit the study's purpose—in keeping with the bricoleur approach to research design. Inviting researchers to provide descriptions of why and how methods have been adapted can be helpful, if unfamiliar.

Editorial practices that can support qualitative research include indicating that page limits can be extended for qualitative manuscripts to permit researchers to provide the detailed methods and rich descriptions of results that are required for evaluation. Establishing action editors who have focused expertise in qualitative methods and epistemologies, and are able to assess the coherence of qualitative methods and epistemologies and critically evaluate reviews, as well as reviewers who have expertise in different qualitative approaches are desirable. Above all, it can be important to invite authors to respond to mixed reviews given the lack of consensus in the field and different valid methods. In response to the concern about establishing coherent qualitative review practices, a variety of helpful guidelines have been developed that describe the assessment of trustworthiness for specific qualitative methods (Levitt, in press b; Fassinger, 2005; Wertz, 2005), and the adaptation of procedures across qualitative epistemologies (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005; Parker, 2004).

Over the past few decades, qualitative psychotherapy research has come a long way. From virtual nonexistence, it has come to gain respect of the field. It holds a central place in evidence-based practice, not only because of its ability to shed light on the intricate processes hidden within common and specific factors, and its relevance and accessibility for contextualized and responsive practice, but because of the robust findings from across research studies. As we shift into the next decades, and greater attention shifts to the adaptation of procedures to studies' goals and epistemological frameworks, I predict smoother driving and a long road ahead.

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