



## Innovating qualitative research methods: Proposals and possibilities

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### ABSTRACT

We reflect on the current state and growth of qualitative research in psychology alongside the development of publications, publication venues, and research societies for qualitative research that have facilitated that growth and enhanced interest in qualitative research within the discipline. We also argue that much contemporary qualitative research is formulaic in nature, frequently as a result of relying on checklists and guidelines in a misguided attempt to ensure methodological rigour. We argue the need for more innovation in qualitative research and showcase the range of articles accepted for this special issue on qualitative research innovation. We discuss these articles under four headings: Addressing challenges in a new era of qualitative research; Considering ethical practice; Dynamic practices of data collection; and Rethinking analytic practices. Our hope is that these articles excite readers' psychological imagination, leading them to engage with and take up the ideas and practices promoted by the articles, to diverge from prescribed methods and to journey into the unfamiliar and embrace innovation in their research.

Psychology has been noted as one of the last social science disciplines to take up qualitative research methods — until relatively recently, qualitative research has been side-lined or seen as a precursor or adjunct to quantitative approaches within the discipline (Chamberlain et al., 2020; Lamiell, 2019; Camic, 2021a; Gough and Lyons, 2016). Little material on qualitative methods existed in key databases such as PsycINFO until the final decade of the 20th Century, with qualitative research terms constituting only 0.45% of all *PsycINFO* records in the 1990s (Rennie et al., 2002). More recently, Kazak (2018) reported a 15-fold increase in published research from a PsycNET search with the word “qualitative” in the title or as a keyword, with publications going from fewer than 200 articles per year in the mid-1990s to almost 3000 per year in 2016. However, Marks et al. (2021) conducted further analyses of this increase and concluded that, although it was possible to replicate a 15-fold, or perhaps even higher, increase in raw numbers, the increase in qualitative articles in a *relative* sense was only six-fold, with much of the increase appearing in specific subdisciplines, particularly in health-care-related journals.

This increase in qualitative research publication has seen the establishment of new journals focusing exclusively on publishing qualitative research, most notably *Qualitative Research in Psychology* and *Qualitative Psychology*. At the same time, many psychology journals moved to accepting articles using qualitative research and consequently qualitative research has become increasingly prominent in psychology in recent

times (see, Kazak, 2018; Rubin et al., 2018; Schiff, 2019a). However, it should also be noted that various qualitative approaches to research, often not acknowledged explicitly, have persisted across the history of psychology (Wertz, 2014). These developments in publications and outlets were mirrored in the establishment of qualitative research divisions within professional societies, such as the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section (QMiP) of the British Psychological Society (established in 2005; Riley et al., 2019) and the reorganisation of Division 5 of the American Psychological Association to become Quantitative and Qualitative Methods (in 2014). The latter followed the establishment of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP) (in 2011), and the process involved reflected the strong opposition to qualitative research even at that late date (Josselson, n.d.). Other qualitative research societies, such as the Association of European Qualitative Researchers in Psychology (del Rio Carral and Tseliou, 2019), have also appeared in the last few decades. Alongside these moves, several influential articles promoting the value of qualitative research in psychological research have appeared (e.g., Brinkmann, 2015; Camic, 2021a; Demuth and Terkildsen, 2015; Eisner, 2003; Gergen et al., 2015; Gough and Lyons, 2016; Madill and Gough, 2008; Schiff, 2019b), making the kind of argument illustrated by the following comment from Gergen et al. (2015, p. 8):

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"It is essential, then, that the field comes to appreciate and to honor the multiple ways in which psychological inquiry can contribute to both the field and society at large. Giving voice to the marginalized, undermining the taken for granted, critically analyzing societal conditions, helping a community to rebuild, or generating new ways of seeing the world—for example—should take their place alongside hypothesis testing in the contribution of psychology to society. The qualitative movement brings with it fresh ways of thinking about such contributions, along with practices that are fashioned for just such purposes."

As the promise and value of qualitative research becomes more strongly recognised (e.g., Freeman, 2019; Levitt et al., 2017; Willig, 2019), interest in teaching qualitative methods has likewise increased (e.g., Gibson and Sullivan, 2018; Hansen and Rapley, 2008; Harper, 2012; Rubin et al., 2018). Qualitative research courses are becoming compulsory or strongly recommended in university curricula in many places, although as Gibson and Sullivan (2018) note, this is often given perfunctory coverage in many programmes. Alongside these changes, and possibly driving them to some extent, is the increased interest from students of psychology in learning about qualitative research (Povee and Roberts, 2014; Terkildsen and Petersen, 2015). Students, instructors, and researchers alike have noted the value of qualitative research in psychology for deepening understandings of a range of experiences and for situating phenomena within sociocultural contexts (e.g., Camic, 2021a; Levitt et al., 2017; Povee and Roberts, 2014; Willig, 2019). Alongside this growth of interest in teaching and learning, there has been a considerable increase in books, textbooks, and handbooks published on qualitative research (see, Demuth, 2015; Gough and Lyons, 2016), and such publications continue to appear (see e.g., Camic, 2021b; Willig and Stainton Rogers, 2017).

However, this growth of qualitative research publication and teaching in psychology has also brought with it some concerns about how we work (e.g., Brinkmann, 2015, 2017; Chamberlain, 2000; Riley and Chamberlain, forthcoming). One of the principal critiques is that much published qualitative research is becoming more formulaic and homogeneous. This is driven to a degree by checklists such as the COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies; Tong et al., 2007), which is often used by journals to shape the reviewing of qualitative studies, despite concerns about the ways in which checklists of this nature promote technical fixes and ignore the wide variation in qualitative research practice (Barbour, 2001; Sandelowski, 2015) and reproduce particular logics (Buus and Perron, 2020). As Sandelowski (2015) points out, attempting to assess the quality of qualitative research is akin to making judgements of taste, and formulaic approaches can fall considerably short of the goal. More recently, a SQIP task force has published recommendations for the design and review of qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2017) and an APA task force followed that with a statement of reporting standards for qualitative research in psychology (Levitt et al., 2018). Although these recommendations and standards were intended as non-prescriptive guidelines, they have also been the subject of critique (Clarke, 2021). In reviewing Levitt (2020), Clarke considers that "the tumult of overlapping, intersecting and divergent methods and traditions that constitute qualitative research in psychology" constitutes a "messy swamp" (Clarke, 2021, p. 1). She asks whether such generic reporting standards are helpful, given the diversity of qualitative research values, approaches, and contexts, and suggests that they are potentially more likely "to lead researchers more to methodological incoherence than to methodological integrity" (p. 4). Although Clarke is focussed on journal reporting standards (and American Psychological Association reporting standards at that), she also suggests, and we would strongly agree, that reporting standards can constrain ways in which qualitative research might be construed, planned, and conducted, and can stifle innovation in research practices.

Other pressures also confine and restrict the nature of qualitative research undertaken in psychology. The homogenization of research

design and a formulaic focus in qualitative publishing and teaching risk undermining the diversity of qualitative research. As Terkildsen and Petersen (2015) state, "an overhomogenized understanding of qualitative research, as an umbrella term, underpins and reinforces a default understanding of qualitative research as an anti-doctrine to quantitative research" (p. 203). This homogenization has its roots in the positivist legacy in the discipline (Brinkmann, 2015; Rubin et al., 2018), and is also likely related to a lack of mentors and supervisors for qualitative research who are confident and experienced in supervising research projects across a range of qualitative methodologies (Povee and Roberts, 2014; Wiggins et al., 2016). Brinkmann (2015) notes how qualitative research is coloured by neo-positivist understandings, which promote more restricted and 'safe' approaches to research funding applications and outcomes, to the shape of research publications, to what is regarded as quality in research practice, and to what counts as 'evidence' in an evidence-based research culture. Journal publication requirements also function to inhibit the scope and depth of qualitative research articles, in particular restrictions on word limits and demands for formulaic article structures, such as structured abstracts and the separation of Results and Discussion sections. Further, much research has come to equate 'qualitative' with 'interviews', leading Clarke and Braun (2019), amongst others, to raise concerns about the dominance of interviews in qualitative psychological research, and to argue that this limits the field and restricts knowledge production. Further, much published qualitative analyses increasingly lean toward descriptive, rather than theorised and interpretive accounts. The outcome of these various pressures often lead to researchers conforming to limited, established ways of undertaking and publishing research (Riley and Chamberlain, forthcoming). As Brinkmann (2015) has argued, a diversity of approaches and methods in qualitative research in psychology is important because "the subject matters studied by qualitative psychologists, which are polyvocal, multimodal and often multi-sited, cannot be fully captured if one only approaches them with, say, interviewing or observations" (p. 169).

These limitations are further compounded by the increasing neoliberalisation and corporatisation of the academy (see Fasenfest, 2021), promoting quantity over quality in determining publication productivity and inhibiting creativity and innovation. As universities have shifted toward managerialism, or as Anderson (2008, p. 251) puts it, "a more muscular management style", academics across disciplines are called toward particular forms of performance that do not invite or condone creativity. Pockets of resistance exist, of course, and particularly when resistance carried out in a collective, it can generate politically and personally lines of flight away from singular modes of doing and being academic (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Deschner et al., 2020; Murray, 2018).

Alongside (and entangled with) broader resistances to neoliberal or managerial academia and critiques of standardized ways of doing qualitative work (e.g., Brinkmann, 2017; Chamberlain et al., 2018; Clarke, 2021; Clarke and Braun, 2019; Riley and Chamberlain, forthcoming), there is movement toward innovation. Innovative practices in qualitative research can involve pluralisms of various kinds, creative ways of collecting and analysing data, disseminating findings, and engagement with some of the ethical and practical challenges involved in qualitative research. In this special issue, we bring together a collection of articles that offer a variety of insights into, and perspectives on, innovative practices in qualitative research. This is not the first special issue to invite innovation in qualitative research, and nor do we intend it to be the last. Our hope is that this set of articles will spark conversations, discussions, debates, or even disagreements about what constitutes excellent and innovative qualitative research, and how we might further drive innovation over regimentation in undertaking qualitative research.

The authors in this special issue take up a diverse array of topics and different methods to demonstrate the potential of qualitative research in psychology that goes beyond formulaic approaches. The set of articles is wide-ranging—from addressing integrity in gathering data online to engaging with materiality in qualitative analytic praxis to thoughtful

and ethically-focused engagement with photographic and video content, with authors offer perspectives from their own research experiences as the forefront of innovation. Together, they encourage researchers to think deeply about the people they are working with, the ethics and integrity of the data they gather, and the theoretical and methodological approaches they engage with, from visioning to carrying out qualitative research in psychology and beyond. In the following sections we outline these contributions.

### 1. Addressing challenges in a new era of qualitative research

Conducting qualitative research in psychology since the late 2010s, and perhaps particularly during a moment of significant social, environmental, and political change, requires innovation. One major shift that has materialized in the psychology research landscape over the past 20 years has been the advent of online research methods, which bring with them both exciting possibilities and additional challenges. In this issue, Jones et al. (2021) engage with critical questions about how to maintain integrity in asynchronous online methods. Among several practical suggestions for gathering high-quality data when collecting data online via asynchronous means, the authors invite transparency and “a proactive rather than reactive approach” (p. 1) to contending with challenges.

In addition to the promises – and pitfalls – of online data collection, the centrality of the Internet and the explosion of publications in recent years invites new challenges in working with large data sets. While a hallmark of qualitative research has tended to be the use of smaller datasets, some researchers have begun to shift toward methods that enable engagement with large amounts of data. The challenge here becomes how to retain the nuance and specificity that qualitative analysis invites while reaching across vast amount of information. Duden (2021) contends with this challenge in relation to evidence synthesis approaches. She offers an example of qualitative evidence synthesis from mental healthcare research, demonstrating how collaboration and transparency hold promise for strengthening evidence synthesis. Carter et al. (2021) offer insights into combining computational and manual approaches to data analysis; like Duden, Carter et al. work through an example to illustrate the potential of their approach. Demonstrating computational and manual analyses of forum posts by sex workers and men who pay for sex, Carter et al.’s work illustrates how computational approaches can offer broad insights across the data, but also how these are nuanced further through manual qualitative analyses.

Another challenge in conducting psychology research in the 21st century is finding new ways of thinking and engaging with ideas that have become taken-for-granted or hidden. Reliance on standardized approaches to qualitative psychology research presents challenges to illuminating everyday inequities, which, as Calder-Dawe et al. (2021) argue, may “disappear from view” (p. 1) when we rely on our typical ways of engaging with them. Calder-Dawe et al. illustrate the value of flexible and creative approaches to engage with participants, to bring out rich experiential data, and to disseminate their findings in highly creative ways.

### 2. Considering ethical practice

Across the contributions to this special issue, researchers have engaged with ethical issues that arise in *contending with* the challenges that carrying out qualitative research presents. Ethical concerns were a common issue addressed across the set of articles, and several articles specifically present ways forward that envision new ethical praxis in qualitative research. Wharne (2021), for instance, invites qualitative researchers in psychology to engage with the work of philosopher Edith Stein. Looking to the past to move forward, Wharne argues that Stein’s philosophical account of empathy has considerable value for psychology researchers who want to engage more fully with participants’ lived realities, providing them with both ethical and practical guidance in

seeking to understand the meanings of participants’ “experience[s] in the flow of intersubjectivity and situated living” (p. 1).

Using creative methods also invites the need to think creatively when addressing ethical practice. Williamson et al. (2021), discussing their participatory photography research, propose thoughtful ways of navigating tensions that arise in balancing institutional and relational artistic ethics. Reflecting on “unanticipated voices” in this work, the authors encourage readers to conduct their work in transparent, reflexive, and critical ways that invite, rather than shy away from, “multivoicedness” in research. Dare et al. (2021) engage in a discussion of visual research conducted online, exploring what it means to conduct safe, sensitive qualitative research in this space. Like Williamson et al., Dare et al. consider the importance of reflexive praxis for designing and carrying out research that meaningfully interrogates the practices of researchers themselves. Lenton et al. (2021) likewise call for reflexivity in designing ethical research with young people, offering specific considerations for students, supervisors, and ethics committees. Drawing on their experiences of conducting research with young people in the UK, Lenton et al. provide a set of techniques that researchers might consider in designing and carrying out research.

### 3. Dynamic practices of data collection

Many of the articles in this issue offer insights into the aspects of research we hear and read little about; a particular benefit of a methods-based journal is that it provides the opportunity to expand on the challenges and dynamics involved in conducting research. Several novel and dynamic approaches to qualitative researching in psychology are explored within the special issue, including creative non-fiction (Sass et al., 2021), psychodrama (Lennie et al., 2021), multi-interviewer design (Monforte and Úbeda-Colomer, 2021), and various approaches to visual research (Dare et al., 2021; del Río Carral et al., 2021; Kilby and Lennon, 2021; MacIsaac, 2021; Williamson et al., 2021).

On the use of visual methods, MacIsaac (2021) offers a systematic review of approaches to conducting research that centre the visual. The visual methods-oriented articles included in this special issue also demonstrate, as MacIsaac (2021) affirms, how visual methods can “materialize bodies, social practices, and interactions between individuals and structures” (p. 1). Williamson et al. (2021) comment on unexpected outcomes that they have encountered when employing participant-authored photography in their research and discuss the challenges they encountered. They argue that this form of research “offers considerable opportunities for more democratized and synergistic modes of research based on an ethics of care where all parties’ capital is equally valued” (p. 7). MacIsaac (2021) placed her focus on gender relations, a perspective that is shared across several other articles in the issue, including the discussion by Sass et al. (2021) on using creative non-fiction in working with men with dementia reminiscing around sport. As this research indicates, along with others in the issue (e.g., Calder-Dawe et al., 2021), approaches that invite new ways of conducting qualitative research can open up new ways of looking at well-studied phenomena and relationships.

Lennie et al. (2021) conducted research at the interface of therapeutic and research-based intervention, using psychodrama to tap into emotional labour amongst police officers. Lennie et al. suggest that researchers can work closely with their participants to develop thoughtful and inviting modes of research, resonating with other articles in this issue that contend with affect and emotion (e.g., Wharne, 2021 on empathy), and others teasing out the complexities of engaging with sensitive topics (e.g., Dare et al., 2021 on using online visual methods). Monforte and Úbeda-Colomer (2021) take our focus back to interviewing and onto a topic that is rarely discussed: the use of two simultaneously, actively involved interviewers. They discuss the pros and cons of this approach, using the notion of ‘tinkering’ – a reflexive, “constant questioning of what to do, what is best, and what is appropriate within each moment of the research” (p. 1) – arguing that approaching research



in this way forces researchers to move beyond methodological prescription.

#### 4. Rethinking analytic practices

Alongside rethinking qualitative data gathering techniques, several of the special issue articles invite new ways of analysing data once it is collected. Among these approaches to revisiting analysis, [Ross and Vallée-Tourangeau \(2021\)](#) offer “kinenoetic analysis” as a way of engaging with materiality, movement, and interactivity. Particularly relevant in light of a material turn in psychology, this article provides guidance for how researchers might practically engage with materiality, turning the focus “from the effects of objects on thoughts, to tracing object-thought mutualities as they are enacted and made visible” (p. 1).

Engaging with different modes of expression and data that layers the textual and the visual is relevant to the increasing interest in psychological research in utilising multi-modality. [del Río Carral et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Kilby and Lennon \(2021\)](#) offer two different perspectives on engaging with multi-modality. [del Río Carral et al.](#) analyse professional Youtubers’ health videos, focusing on narrative and visual aspects of these videos. Drawing on critical health psychology, they illustrate an analysis that brings together these facets of the Youtubers’ stories, extending beyond a purely “voiced” perspective. Much like [Williamson et al.’s \(2021\)](#) insights about the value of attending to multivoicedness, in [del Río Carral et al.’s](#) work we can see the value of engaging with the told and the seen to deepening understandings by attending to the layers through which people communicate.

[Kilby and Lennon \(2021\)](#) combine textual and visual data using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. Like [del Río Carral et al.](#) and others in this issue, they suggest that combining approaches offer more than additive insights. In bringing together different modes, insights arise at the interface that might otherwise stay shrouded. In bringing things together, in other words, we retain the strengths of insights gleaned by each, as well as the potential for generating something completely new as analytical insights come together in new ways.

[Halpin and Richard \(2021\)](#) are likewise concerned with bringing things together; in their case, using analytic abduction to approach qualitative data both “from the ground up” and “from the top down”. Much like [Carter et al. \(2021\)](#), [Halpin and Richard’s](#) research present the potential of bridging qualitative and quantitative divides, offering the opportunity to capitalize on the strengths of each. The authors work through examples to illustrate the ways in which abduction enables researchers to both engage with theory and with the liveliness of data.

#### 5. In conclusion

The contributions to this special issue are exciting and encouraging for qualitative research in psychology. These articles invite us to think about the planning, doing, and writing up of qualitative research and present practical, ethical, and artful ways forward. These nuanced contributions do not offer a singular voice about “the” way to do qualitative research, and in their multiplicity respond to critiques of standardization in qualitative methods ([Brinkmann, 2017](#); [Chamberlain et al., 2018](#); [Clarke, 2021](#); [Clarke and Braun, 2019](#); [Riley and Chamberlain, forthcoming](#)). The work of researchers featured here is frequently “polyvocal, multimodal and often multi-sided” ([Brinkmann, 2015](#), p. 169) and it pushes up against calls for prescribed, rote practice. We invite readers to engage with this work and carry forward the calls these authors issue to undertake qualitative research in situated, ethical, creative, and innovative ways. In short, we hope these articles excite the psychological imagination and expand possibilities for qualitative researchers to consider and reflect on, and consequently drive them to move away from prescribed methods of research and take up more interesting, more thoughtfully engaged ways of researching their topics.

Notably, this special issue has been developed during a global pandemic. This created problems in assembling the issue, with setbacks

and delays for the editors, authors, and reviewers alike. We are grateful to the authors whose work is presented here, and to the reviewers who took the time to thoughtfully engage with these works. Although it has, at times, felt odd to be working on a methodological special issue during this period of global unrest, it is also, arguably, an excellent time to be engaging with new ways of thinking and doing qualitative research. As [Gergen et al. \(2015\)](#) note, qualitative researchers can engage in the critical analysis of social conditions, determine ways to help communities rebuild, and generate new possibilities for living. We feel that the contributions in this special issue spark the potential to engage in such critique, enabling psychological research that can dig deeply into critical issues for our times.

In a special issue with “innovations” in the title we might also mention that we are not espousing innovation simply for innovation’s sake. Each research project should take its own path, with decisions made that suit the positionalities of both researchers and participants, the topic and aims of inquiry, and the research context, among other matters. What we *do* argue, however, is that collecting and analyzing qualitative data and disseminating research outcomes need not follow safe, tried, and trodden pathways. And, as the authors in this issue have done, we encourage readers to travel into the unfamiliar while relying on fundamental ethical, relational, and analytical principles to guide the way. That, we feel, delivers the innovative.

#### Author statement

Both authors contributed equally to this editorial.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this article.

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