Introduction: this book

Qualitative research methodology in psychology is now well established. The authors of the Handbook of Qualitative Methods in Psychology (2008), Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton Rogers, suggest that this approach has moved from the ‘margins to the mainstream in psychology in the UK’ (2008: 8), and many other researchers and writers attest to its widespread use elsewhere (e.g. Bryman, 2006; Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey, 2006; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007).

In this book we will be describing ways to use qualitative methodology in psychology research. We will outline the single use of four commonly used methods – grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), discourse analysis and narrative analysis – and then consider how these can be used in combination. In each chapter we will be providing a history of the method and careful consideration of when and how it might be used. We will look at why we might want to use more than one qualitative method, and what this might tell us about the topic of inquiry and about the research process. By the end of the book you will have insight to the detailed use and application of qualitative research methodology, and an understanding of why and how to select a single method or pluralistic approach to your qualitative research.

Each chapter in the book provides a history of each method, it aims to put into context the way in which the beginnings of a desire by psychology researchers to look beyond objective measurement and rating of causal behaviour led to new ways to elicit ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 1973) of human experience. The chapters will discuss how each qualitative method can be employed singly to examine data to illuminate meanings and insights not available without considering aspects of the research process such as the role played by the researcher, the context of the data elicitation and the uniqueness of the participant perspective. The book will consider how research questions are developed and how these influence the choice of method. It will focus on the philosophies and assumptions underlying each approach so that as researchers you can make an informed choice about the methodological framework within which you approach your research.
We focus in this book on four of the most commonly used methods, and they demonstrate the many aspects of qualitative data inquiry. They range from ways of examining language use (e.g. discursive psychology, discourse analysis) to looking through data for themes and codes (e.g. IPA, grounded theory) to seeking out stories and their meanings in accounts provided by participants (narrative analysis). What is striking about these methods is that there is always a choice of how to apply them, which models to employ and the reasons for using them in pursuit of meaningful research outcomes. It is this plurality within single methods that led to the development of Part 2 of this book. This looks at plurality across methods in pursuit of a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry.

Table 1.1 Methods focused on in this book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
<td>Asks questions about a range of psychological processes. It asks about what is happening as well as how and why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse Analysis</td>
<td>Asks questions about how language is used. It investigates what is said as well as why it might be said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)</td>
<td>Asks questions about how individuals make sense of their world. It seeks insight to the meanings that events and experiences hold for people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Analysis</td>
<td>Asks questions about how individuals make meaning using stories. It seeks understanding of the unique perspective brought by individuals to make sense of their external and internal worlds.</td>
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Combining Methods

The combining of different methods of inquiry in psychology is not new. Mixed-method approaches to research have used qualitative and quantitative methods in combination for some time. Mixed-method approaches might be used to enrich or populate data, to find a way to triangulate findings or to conduct a pilot study in order to inform a large-scale quantitatively orientated project (Todd et al., 2004). Mixed-method approaches are commonly found in health psychology and medically related research, and in market research, where funders are often keen to see numbers, objectivity and generalisability, but where researchers want to support the process with rich description of experience from the perspective of the individual patient, client, practitioner or consumer. Several developments in approaches to research have arisen from the application of mixed-method approaches. These include pragmatism (e.g. Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005), bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001; 2005) and multiperspectival analysis (Kellner, 1995). All seek to access as much meaning as possible from data but are applied in slightly different ways depending on the research questions and rationale for the research.
Pragmatism

Pragmatism is commonly regarded simply as a means with which research questions can be addressed and an approach that does not take too much account of the underlying epistemologies of the approaches used to do this. Pragmatic researchers may use science, art and social interaction in any combination in order to obtain a richer account of experience (Yardley & Bishop, 2008). They are less concerned with the epistemological debates underlying method, and instead set out to use whichever techniques will answer or address the research question. For example, they may use a mixed-method approach in the pursuit of practical outcomes, as seen in clinical practice, or for other pragmatic reasons such as to satisfy funders. The research question becomes central to the research process, and the issue of deciding which methods to use to answer it becomes more important than the philosophies or paradigms underlying the methods. The ‘pragmatic’ approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005), in common with the bricolage approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001; 2005), advocates the combining of methodological ontologies in the pursuit of a more extensive understanding of the needs of human beings (Howard, 1983).

Problem-based question

You are a student researcher interested in pursuing a career in counselling psychology. While on placement you have been invited to join a research team made up of psychotherapists, psychiatrists and mental health service users. The aim of the research is to investigate the outcomes of six weeks of cognitive behavioural therapy sessions. It is decided to use both quantitative and qualitatively orientated approaches to investigate this. Why might you use each approach to research this topic?

Bricolage

Bricolage, first outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), is a research approach that promotes interdisciplinarity as a way of drawing on many methods of inquiry. It regards the research process as consisting of many elements and is concerned with the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of these as well as with the object, topic or phenomenon or other artefact under study. It is an approach that seeks to avoid the limitations imposed by employing a single method, such as limitations of its epistemology, and the ‘traditional practices of’ (Kincheloe, 2001: 681) or ‘the historicity of certified modes of knowledge production’ (Kincheloe, 2001: 681), by seeking out a rigour that leads to new ontological insights. This means that context is paramount in the bricolage approach, and objects of inquiry are regarded as firmly embedded within their social and cultural construction, historical situatedness and the language used to describe them. By examining the object within this context,
using whatever methods necessary the bricoleur views the research from many perspectives in order to gain multiperspectival insight to its complexity.

**Question**

What do you think are the main differences between bricolage and pragmatism?

**Multiperspectival analysis**

The notion of multiperspectival analysis has been promoted by Kellner (1995). It too draws on multimethodological research strategies and does so to introduce a variety of ways of ‘seeing and interpreting in the pursuit of knowledge’ (Kincheloe, 2001: 682). This approach reduces the impact of assumptions and limitations brought to the research process by allowing the researcher to see the phenomenon in more dimensions than if they employed a single-method approach. The multiperspectival approach can be taken by employing flexible use of one particular method (see Mason, 2006) or by drawing on many methods or disciplines to enhance dimensional insight and illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon under study.

The three approaches highlighted above are described in order to enable some of the issues that may arise in considering a pluralistic qualitative approach to be illuminated. Issues of the role of epistemology, ontology, purpose and approach to the research are all of great importance when considering how you will find out more about your topic of inquiry.
Employing a flexible narrative analysis approach (Frost, 2009b)

In a flexible use of narrative analysis I employed different models of narrative analysis to work with data gathered to explore the transition from first- to second-time motherhood among middle-class British white women (see Frost, 2006; 2009b). I sought to extract as much meaning as I could about each woman’s hopes, fears, fantasies, expectations and realities during this time from the transcripts of semi-structured interviews I conducted with them. I used different approaches to analyse narratives I located within the data. These included systematically reducing the text using approaches such as Labov’s structural model (1972), Gee’s linguistic model (1993), Riesmann’s performative model (1993), and Emerson and Frosh’s critical model (2004). This allowed me to examine the meaning brought to the text by particular linguistic features, and to critically consider my role in the research process by investigating the stories and the way they were told in the interviews. The flexible narrative analysis approach draws on the strengths offered by each model it employs to privilege the narrator’s words. It takes guidance from the interview text in each phase of analysis, and layers of understanding of the account are built up. The initial understanding of the story is gradually enriched by systematic exploration of the text until a new story emerges. Each finding contributes to the resultant multidimensional understanding of the meaning of the narrative. The approach resembles triangulation methods in its ambition to view data from different perspectives, seeking not to verify meanings but to add texture to the interpretation of them.

For full details of this study, see Frost, N. (2009b) ‘Do you know what I mean?’: the use of a pluralistic narrative analysis approach in the interpretation of an interview. Qualitative Research, 9(1), 9–29. It is also discussed further in Chapters 5 and 7.

Triangulation

The notion of using more than one method to ‘find out more’ about a phenomenon has traditionally been used to verify or support findings. Researchers use more than one method (often a qualitative one with a quantitative one) in order to ‘triangulate’ the outcomes of measurements and observations (Todd et al., 2004). Qualitative researchers, however, are not seeking to validate any claim about the experiences or their possible meanings, but to explore how understanding of them can be enhanced. Qualitative researchers using phenomenological or constructivist paradigms are not in pursuit of a definitive truth about experience. They do not regard reality as fixed, but instead understand individuals to bring a unique perspective to the way they see and comprehend the world around them. The researcher into these experiences may use different methods to bring different ways
of understanding the data, and to highlight complementary, contradictory or absent findings within it.

Recent work (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006) has identified different forms of triangulation that can be derived from the combining of methods in pursuit of ‘knowing more’ (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 45) about a phenomenon. These researchers distinguish between ‘integration’ of methods, which can be understood as ‘a particular, practical relationship between methods, sets of data, analytic findings and perspectives’ (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 46), and ‘triangulation’, which ‘incorporates an epistemological claim about the research’ (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 46). They emphasise that the meaning of triangulation has been extended beyond seeking increased confidence (or validity) in results, as might traditionally have been its reason for use in mixed qualitative-quantitative research. This is an evolution of the traditional approach to triangulation, which uses different methods in order to counter biases and assumptions brought by one method alone, and regards differences in findings as examples of flaws or biases in measurement. When using methods of different epistemologies (whether positivist and interpretivist, as may be found in some quantitative-qualitative combinations, or social constructionist and critical realist, as may be found in some qualitative-qualitative mixing) triangulation can offer a more in-depth, multidimensional insight to the complexity of the social world. It can generate ‘complementarity’ (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 48) instead of highlighting flaws in measurements. It can ‘reflect different aspects of a phenomenon’ (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006: 48), and inform researchers about both the phenomenon under study and the research process. This broadening of the meaning of triangulation within social science supports the pragmatic researchers who are more concerned with the technical framework of pluralistic research than the epistemological or theoretical one.

In our pluralistic work with interviews elicited from women making the transition to second-time motherhood (Frost, 2006; Frost et al., 2010) none of our findings appeared to contradict each other and so we understood this approach to have provided us with a way of ‘generating complementarity’ (e.g. Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). It provided us with different understandings of the phenomenon under study to be reflections of its different aspects (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). Our approach was a pragmatic one that was interested in both the insight gained to the phenomenon of transitioning to second-time motherhood, and the process by which we came to derive our understanding of individual experience. In adopting this approach we focused on the role of the researchers as well as on the techniques of analysis that they employed. Epistemological claims were social constructionist so that we took the view that each researcher entered into their own relationship with the data, and that this played a unique role in transforming the data to a presentation of the findings (see Frost et al., 2011).
Paradigms in competition

While both qualitative and quantitatively orientated approaches to research serve valuable purposes in furthering research aims, mixed-method approaches have been criticised for combining qualitative and quantitative paradigms. It is argued by some that the differing philosophies underlying each of these designs mean that they cannot be combined. The results of such criticisms have been to see the paradigms placed in competition with each other. Many eminent researchers have taken issue with this. Ann Oakley labelled the criticisms ‘a paradigm war’ (Oakley, 1999); she argues against this, saying that there is a place for both approaches and that without both it is not easy to see whether, for example, personal experiences are individual or collective oppression (1999: 251). She highlights that she has perceived animosity directed at her work on the basis that it leans too much towards one paradigm or another. She expresses her ‘puzzlement’ (1999: 248) at having her work labelled as ‘old Oakley’ and ‘new Oakley’, based on the methodologies that she employed over the years, at being asked to account for the difference in her writing and at being accused of ‘letting the qualitative and feminist sides down’ (1999: 248). Importantly, Oakley emphasises that ‘all methods must be open, consistently applied and replicable by others’ (1999: 252). She stresses that, instead of undergoing some sort of conversion away from qualitative research, it is more important to ask why different research methods are seen as opposing in the first place.

This question, first asked in 1999, is now increasingly regarded as moot. Subsequent debates about mixing methods (e.g. Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; 2003) have led to a ‘paradigm peace’ (Bryman, 2006), and other questions, such as those about quality criteria and evaluation of mixed-method research, are being asked (Bryman, 2006). Researchers have taken positions in which they either choose to overlook or marginalise issues of coherence/incipherence in epistemology and ontology in favour of applying methods best suited to the research question. The research question is paramount and it is assumed that ‘Mixed methods research can answer research questions that the other methodologies cannot.’ (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003: 14, cited in Bryman, 2006: 118).

CASE STUDY

As a final-year undergraduate student you have the choice of choosing any topic you like to carry out research. You decide to focus on something of which you have personal experience: the death of a close family member. You decide to research how other students have experienced bereavement. To begin the study, you want to find out how many students in your cohort have had this experience. How will you do this, bearing in mind that this is a sensitive topic that may upset people?
Once you know who has been bereaved you want to explore what it was like for them. How would you gather such data?

Once this decision is made you start analysing the data you have collected. You have some numbers and some words. What might you do with them?

In doing the analysis you sometimes find yourself feeling upset and reliving your own experience of being bereaved. What will you do about this?

You may not be able to answer all these questions yet, particularly if you are new to research. They are designed to start you thinking about how much you already know about conducting research and what aspects you may want to focus on when using this book. For example, were you clear about which methods to choose? What about defining your research question? How were you going to address the ethical considerations of this study, and how were you going to bring reflexive practice into your research?

**Pluralism in qualitative research**

In our research we have adopted many of the same reasons for combining qualitative methods with each other as mixed-method researchers do: we take a largely pragmatic view that it is important to find the best methods to address the research question; we are concerned to conduct research that is useful and worthwhile. We concur fully with Oakley that the research methods must be open, and would also agree with Bryman and others that quality criteria that are applicable to one method are not always the best to be applied to another (e.g. Bryman, 2006; 2007). The pluralistic approach that we adopt may be seen to be more towards the agnostic end of a range that places methods as a means of profiling political and ethical issues at one end (e.g. Parker, 1992) and a focus on understanding how methods can illuminate specific phenomena or processes at the other (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). As Bryman says in relation to mixed-method research, we are concerned to ‘access as much as possible within the data’ (Bryman, 2006) in our adoption of a qualitative pluralistic approach.

Areas of research in which pluralism has been used include studies into anomalous experience (Coyle, 2010), the movement of youth identity through space and time (Katsiaficas et al., 2011), and the management and repair of shame (Leeming & Boyle, 2004). It has been discussed in a Special Issue of *Qualitative Research* (2006) in relation to triangulation (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006) and multi-modal ethnography (Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey, 2006). The PQR team have published papers on the impact of researchers on pluralistic work (Frost et al., 2010), and on issues of interpretation in pluralistic work (Frost et al., 2011). A forthcoming Special Issue of the *Qualitative Research in Psychology* journal will focus on a variety of questions raised by employment of a pluralistic qualitative approach through invited papers (Frost & Nolas, Eds 2011). Some research methods incorporate pluralistic working as
an essential part of their approach. One example is memory work, in which researchers form a collective within which each member contributes a memory and the group analyses it (see Frost et al. (forthcoming) for more details of some of the issues that arose for one group in carrying out this approach). With the re-emergence of pluralism in psychological research (early calls were made in 1983 (Howard) and have surfaced periodically since then (e.g. Burck, 2005; Mason, 2006)) the arguments about whether, and how, methods with differing assumptions can be combined with each other considered what constitutes knowledge and reality.

We examine some of these arguments throughout this book by considering the perspectives and insight brought by each method. Perspectives may be informed by epistemological or ontological positions and also by the personal assumptions, cultural knowledge and other contextual information that each researcher brings to their employment of the chosen method(s). The chapters about the different ways in which each method might be employed (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5) consider in detail the epistemological and reflexive practice arguments and their influence on application. The remaining chapters (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) consider practical and theoretical concerns in carrying out research with a pluralistic approach.

**Why might you want to carry out qualitative research pluralistically?**

As we have seen, there can be many reasons for carrying out research pluralistically. It may be to achieve the richest experience possible, as in the pragmatic approach, to draw on the most appropriate tools to address the research question, as in the bricolage approach, or to gain different perspectives on a phenomenon, as in the multi-perspectival approach. Different methods may be employed in combination in order to achieve different forms of triangulation of the data. In this book we focus on using only qualitative methods in combination. We discuss how this may help in gaining greater insight to a number of research topics. As researchers you may want to gain as much insight as you can to individual experience, you may want to gain insight to previously under-researched areas, to include participants in the research process, to find new ways of looking at a previously researched phenomenon, to highlight lack of research in some areas of psychology or to use your own experiences to gain insight to others’ experiences of culture or language difference. In all cases you will be considering, at the very least, the context in which the research is being conducted, the uniqueness of the participants’ perspective in their recounting of their experiences, your role in the process and the methods you have brought to the transformation of the data. By bringing reflexivity, context and interpretation to the research process the qualitative approach is distinguished from the objective, positivistic assumptions brought to quantitatively orientated research. It allows researchers to access some insight to the meanings that individuals make of their experiences. Researchers can go further, using other methods to consider other aspects of the phenomenon. For example, using narrative analysis researchers can inquire into how this meaning-making informs individual sense of identity, or using
discourse analysis to see the context within which individuals create meaning through language in their social interactions. Methods such as IPA seek out chains of understanding so that from the accounts provided by individuals the illumination of themes can lead the researcher through the linguistic, to the affective, physical and cognitive lived experience of the individual. Each chapter in this book focuses in detail on the way in which each method, used singly or in combination with another, can facilitate these insights.

The background to the book

In our own research the authors of this book came to develop their individual interest in pluralistic qualitative research in different ways. Much of our initial curiosity was piqued during our doctoral research, in which many of us were supported and educated in qualitative ways by knowledgeable and informed supervisors. We were enabled to think around our topic and its method of inquiry and, in taking ownership of our work, to start questioning some of the aspects of our approach. We asked questions that we considered essential to conducting high-quality research, such as:

- How do we know as lone researchers that other researchers using the same method would have found (or not found) similar meanings in the data we have?
- How do we know that the same data examined using different methods would not have illuminated different insights?
- Where is a space for contradiction or qualitative triangulation in single-method research? Is it needed?

Overall we were wondering if there was more meaning that could be accessed in our data, and how we could find out about this while retaining our desires to prioritise the participant and the recounting of their experiences. Pluralism seemed to offer a way to do this and in exploring this we came across a number of further questions: questions about epistemology, ontology, reflexivity, data transformation and research presentation, for example. Along the way we presented our work to many other researchers, academics and practitioners in several fields of psychology from across Europe. These researchers now form the Network for Pluralism in Qualitative Research (N-PQR; see www.npqr.wordpress.com) and a quick glance at its site shows the varied topics of research in which this approach is being applied.

The pluralistic approach can now be considered in detail, and this book aims to present the discussions and debates that have been held about this approach so far.
This book is organised in two parts, but each chapter follows broadly the same structure. In Part 1, we take each method and discuss it in detail in a way that aims to show how and why you can employ it in your own research. We present some background to its development and use, and describe various ways in which it is applied. Typical research questions are described alongside several examples of its use. Challenges and particular considerations of each method, such as application, ethics, data elicitation and participant recruitment, are considered. Each chapter is liberally scattered with contemporary research examples as well as with some problem-based questions to get you thinking. Each method chapter is written by a researcher who has personally employed this method (Sevasti-Melissa Nolas – grounded theory, Pnina Shinebourne – IPA, Amanda Holt – discourse analysis, and Cigdem Esin – narrative analysis) and to illuminate their experience of it each chapter includes a ‘Reflection on Practice’. We hope that in addition to providing you with a way to get closer to the experience of applying this method to some of the questions that arose for the individual researchers when they did that, this feature will enable you to reflect on your own use or contemplation of using this method.

In Part 2 we extend the discussion to consider how and why the methods might be used in combination. In this part of the book we focus on the particular issues, challenges and benefits of pragmatics in pluralistic research, interpreting data pluralistically and writing up pluralistic research. The concluding chapter looks at how this approach has been applied and considers the next steps in its use within psychology. The chapters in Part 2 follow a similar structure to those in Part 1 and include the same useful features of research examples drawn from around the world, problem-based questions and reflections on practice.

Whether you choose to use this book as a reference book to dip in and out of, as an essential textbook to support your qualitative research methods learning during your undergraduate or master’s degree or as a supplement to your broader introduction to conducting research in psychology, it will provide you with a solid foundation for understanding and using qualitative methodology in your own work. We hope you enjoy it and are always pleased to hear about your work at our website: www.npqr.wordpress.com.
My early research work was very quantitatively orientated. As a science graduate first and then a psychology graduate, the focus of research had usually been on measuring, testing and verifying things. It was with my introduction to working with people in a hospital setting that I began to consider other ways of carrying out inquiry. As a student working alongside experienced medical and other researchers I became increasingly aware of how qualitatively orientated research could bring some understanding of what it might be like to be a patient in a hospital. With this foundation and subsequent psychodynamic counselling training, I became interested enough in pursuing this type of research to undertake a PhD in qualitative research. This was a narrative analysis study of the transition to second-time motherhood, in which I was surrounded, guided and supported by highly experienced and knowledgeable qualitative researchers. As I learned more and more about the narrative analysis approach my delight in it grew alongside an increasing concern that I was still at risk of imposing my story on the participants simply through the fact that I had been the one to select a method with which to analyse and interpret their stories. Out of these thoughts grew the seed of investigating a pluralistic use of qualitative methods.

With the help of funding from Birkbeck, University of London, I put together a small team of analysts so that we could together explore what else might have been found in the data that I had analysed for my PhD, using a flexible approach to narrative analysis. Some of our findings have been published in academic journals but, more than that, I have been immersed, engaged and excited by the questions we have asked, been asked and addressed along the way, as well as by the debates and arguments that have ensued. The PQR team organised two successful international symposia to present our work and to invite responses to and discussion of it. These led to a continuing engagement with researchers in academia, clinical practice, commercial psychology, NHS governance and medicine. I am often approached by PhD students wishing to employ a pluralistic approach in their study and several colleagues have discussed the strengths and limitations of it with me.

Now I almost cannot help but think of researching phenomena pluralistically. It seems to me that most questions about human experience, understanding and perception should be approached from as many viewpoints as possible. Only then can we seek to begin to understand the complexity within which we negotiate our everyday lives and sense of self. My research interests on mothers and identity, and experiences of mental illness would all seem to benefit from a pluralistic approach. As important as seeking to learn as much as we
can from data, I think, is the notion that the adoption of a pluralistic approach reduces the likelihood of imposing my truths, realities and assumptions on to those that are donated to me by participants. Through careful reflexive practice the pluralistic approach allows for some blurring of the researcher/researched boundaries that have been prevalent in psychology up until relatively recently. Given the time and other resources that a pluralistic approach can command I would like to say that I do not always employ it in my research. However, this is not quite true as I find it is always going on in my head even if resources in the external world do not permit!

Further reading

A detailed guide to conducting qualitative research with accompanying web resources.

This book provides detailed consideration of single-method analysis of one piece of data, and a useful chapter (Chapter 11) that draws comparative reflections on the similarities and differences across the four methods.

In addition to chapters dedicated to different methods, this book includes a useful chapter on phenomenology (Chapter 3), and one on validity and qualitative research (Chapter 11).

This book provides informative discussion of the history, employment and applications of mixed-method research.

This book includes chapters on less common methods such as memory work (Chapter 8) and the case study approach (Chapter 5).