

Analysing  
Qualitative  
Data  
*in* Psychology

**SAGE** was founded in 1965 by Sara Miller McCune to support the dissemination of usable knowledge by publishing innovative and high-quality research and teaching content. Today, we publish over 900 journals, including those of more than 400 learned societies, more than 800 new books per year, and a growing range of library products including archives, data, case studies, reports, and video. SAGE remains majority-owned by our founder, and after Sara's lifetime will become owned by a charitable trust that secures our continued independence.

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi | Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

*2nd Edition*

# Analysing Qualitative Data *in* Psychology

*Evanthia Lyons & Adrian Coyle*



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

---

Editor: Luke Block  
Production editor: Imogen Roome  
Copyeditor: Neil Dowden  
Proofreader: Audrey Scriven  
Indexer: Martin Hargreaves  
Marketing manager: Alison Borg  
Cover design: Wendy Scott  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Ashford  
Colour Press Ltd

Editorial arrangement © Evanthia  
Lyons and Adrian Coyle 2015  
Chapter 1 © Evanthia Lyons 2015  
Chapter 2 © Adrian Coyle 2015  
Chapter 3 © Edith Steffen 2015  
Preface to Section 2 © Evanthia  
Lyons and Adrian Coyle 2015  
Chapter 4 © Jonathan A. Smith  
and Virginia Eatough 2015  
Chapter 5 © Lesley Storey 2015  
Chapter 6 © Victoria Clarke and  
Virginia Braun 2015  
Chapter 7 © Gareth Terry 2015  
Chapter 8 © Sheila Payne 2015  
Chapter 9 © Sheila Hawker and  
Christine Kerr 2015  
Chapter 10 © Adrian Coyle 2015  
Chapter 11 © Chris Walton 2015  
Chapter 12 © Brett Smith 2015

Chapter 13 © Nick Caddick 2015  
Chapter 14 © Evanthia Lyons  
2015  
Appendix 1 © Arnie Reed 2015  
Appendix 2 Preface © Adrian  
Coyle and Evanthia Lyons 2015  
Appendix 2 Report 1 © Virginia  
Eatough and Jonathan A. Smith  
2015  
Appendix 2 Report 2 © Caroline  
Huxley, Victoria Clarke and  
Emma Halliwell 2015  
Appendix 2 Report 3 © Magi  
Sque and Sheila Payne 2015  
Appendix 2 Report 4 © Simon  
Goodman and Lottie Rowe 2015  
Appendix 2 Report 5 © Nick  
Caddick, Brett Smith and  
Cassandra Phoenix 2015

First edition published 2007.  
Reprinted 2007, 2012, 2014, 2015.  
This second edition published 2016.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2015951598**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4462-7374-6  
ISBN 978-1-4462-7375-3 (pbk)

At SAGE we take sustainability seriously. Most of our products are printed in the UK using FSC papers and boards. When we print overseas we ensure sustainable papers are used as measured by the PREPS grading system. We undertake an annual audit to monitor our sustainability.

# 2

## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Adrian Coyle

---

This chapter introduces the reader to some key issues in qualitative psychological research. It begins by reviewing the assumptions made by the standard 'scientific method' within psychology concerning *how* we can know and *what* we can know. These are contrasted with the assumptions that underpin different qualitative approaches. This discussion includes an historical account of the development and use of qualitative research in psychology. Attention then turns to some key issues in qualitative psychological research, including reflexivity, appropriate criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research and combining methods.

---

### Introduction

The methodological repertoire of psychological research has undergone a remarkable change over the last few decades. I recall that when I was an undergraduate student in the mid-1980s, we received a very clear message from our lecturers that acceptable psychological research involved, among other things, the careful measurement of variables, the control of other variables and the appropriate statistical analysis of quantitative data. The possibility of conducting psychological research using qualitative methods was never entertained. Indeed, I remember thinking that qualitative work was something done by some of my unfortunate peers in sociology, who, I thought, did not seem to realize that their research could never be properly 'scientific'. How times have changed!

Beginning in a concerted way in the 1990s, British psychology developed an openness to qualitative work and a growing recognition of the contribution that qualitative research

makes to a rich and broad disciplinary research profile. This can be seen, for example, in the frequency with which psychology conference papers and symposia feature qualitative work without methodology being a focal issue, the increasing number of qualitative articles in many peer-reviewed psychology journals, the plethora of books on the use of qualitative methods in psychology and the establishment of modules within psychology degree programmes and entire courses devoted to qualitative methods. In 2005 a Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section was established within the British Psychological Society which remains among the Society's largest sections. (The American Psychological Association now has a Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology within its Division 5: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods.) Qualitative work has become a standard feature of many branches of psychology, especially in social psychology, health psychology, feminist psychology, psychotherapeutic and counselling psychology, clinical psychology and educational psychology. As a result, it is fair to say that psychology students in British universities today have a different methodological socialization compared to the one I experienced as an undergraduate, although coverage of qualitative methods can be tokenistic and there are some outposts where qualitative approaches are still resisted.

This chapter examines the development of psychological interest in qualitative methods in historical context and point to the benefits that psychology gains from qualitative research. It also looks at some important issues and developments in qualitative psychology. First, though, we will consider a vitally important matter that cannot be overlooked in any consideration of qualitative research – epistemology. This takes us into philosophical territory that might be a bit off-putting but I will try to make it as painless as possible. Try to stick with me because, if you can understand some basic points about epistemology, this will give you a framework for understanding important differences between approaches to research and for applying different approaches in a coherent way. Also, the term will reappear across the chapters in this book, which is why it is important from the outset to grasp what it means and its implications.

## Epistemology and the 'scientific method'

At its most basic, qualitative psychological research may be regarded as involving the collection and analysis of non-numerical data through a psychological lens (however we define that) in order to provide rich descriptions and possibly explanations of people's meaning-making – how they make sense of the world and how they experience particular events. As Willig (2013: 8) notes, qualitative researchers 'aim to understand "what it is like" to experience particular conditions (e.g. what it means and how it feels to live with chronic illness or to be unemployed) and how people manage certain conditions (e.g. how people negotiate family life or relations with work colleagues)' – although this does not capture all qualitative research in psychology, as we shall see. The chapters outlining the principles and practicalities of the five focal methods in this volume specify the kinds of research questions that each method most readily addresses. However, qualitative psychological research involves more than this.

## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Qualitative research is bound up with particular sets of assumptions about the bases or possibilities for knowledge, in other words **epistemology**. The term ‘epistemology’ refers to a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the theory of knowledge and that tries to answer questions about *how* we can know and *what* we can know. All research approaches and methods are based on a set of epistemological assumptions that specify what kinds of things can be discovered by research which uses those approaches and methods. Epistemology is often discussed alongside **ontology**, which refers to the assumptions we make about the nature of being, existence or reality (and discussions often slip between the two).

I want to repeat a key point here: different research approaches and methods are associated with different epistemologies. It is important to bear this in mind because otherwise it is easy to assume that we are talking about a homogeneous domain when we refer to ‘qualitative research’. Instead, the term ‘qualitative research’ covers a variety of methods with a range of epistemologies, resulting in a domain that is characterized by (potentially creative) difference and tension. In this section and the next, we shall examine the main epistemologies associated with both quantitative and qualitative research.

The epistemology adopted by a particular study can be determined by a number of factors. A researcher may have a favoured epistemological outlook or position and may locate their research within this, choosing methods that accord with that position (or that can be made to accord with it). Alternatively, the researcher may be keen to use a particular qualitative method in their research and so they frame their study according to the epistemology that is usually associated with that method (although note that many qualitative methods have some degree of epistemological flexibility, most notably thematic analysis – see Chapter 6 in this volume). Whatever epistemological position is adopted in a study, it is usually desirable to ensure that you maintain this position (with its assumptions about the sort of knowledge that the research is producing) consistently throughout the write-up to help produce a coherent research report. Sometimes a more flexible position on this is needed – for example, when using methods with different epistemologies within the same study. We shall return to this later.

If you are still reading and have not given up in despair at all this philosophical talk, you might be thinking that this concern with epistemology needlessly complicates qualitative research. If you have been using experimental approaches or other research designs in which you have been gathering and analysing quantitative data, you may not have encountered any major discussions about epistemology. This does not mean that those types of research have no epistemological position. It just means that those research approaches adopt an epistemology that is often taken for granted both in research and in life more generally. That epistemology can be referred to as positivist-empiricist and hypothetico-deductive, although, strictly speaking, positivism and empiricism are slightly different.

**Positivism** holds that the relationship between the world (that is events, objects and other phenomena) and our sense perception of the world is straightforward: there is a direct correspondence between things in the world and our perception of them, provided that our perception is not skewed by factors that might damage that correspondence, such

as our vested interests in the things we are perceiving. Thus, it is thought possible to obtain accurate knowledge of things in the world, provided we can adopt an impartial, unbiased, objective viewpoint. The related domain of **empiricism** holds that our knowledge of the world must arise from the collection and categorization of our sense perceptions/observations of the world. This categorization allows us to develop more complex knowledge of the world and to develop theories to explain the world. Few scientists today adopt an unqualified positivist or empiricist outlook because it is generally recognized that our observations and perceptions do not provide pure and direct ‘facts’ about the world. Yet one fundamental claim from empiricism remains central in research, namely the idea that the development of knowledge requires the collection and analysis of data. This is something shared by qualitative researchers, although, compared with empiricists, we have very different ideas about what constitutes appropriate data and about how those data should be generated and analysed.

Researchers and students who have been exposed to a traditional methodological socialization within psychology (especially experimental psychology) will be very familiar with the theory of knowledge that developed in response to the shortcomings of positivism and empiricism – **hypothetico-deductivism**. The figure most closely associated with the development of hypothetico-deductivism, Karl Popper (1969), believed that no scientific theory could be definitively verified. Hence, the aim is not to obtain evidence that supports a theory but rather to identify theoretical claims (hypotheses) that are false and ultimately theories that are false. Research that adopts a hypothetico-deductive stance therefore operates by developing hypotheses from theories and testing these hypotheses. The assumption is that by identifying false claims, we can develop a clearer sense of the truth.

This approach involves **deductive** reasoning. In research, this means reasoning which begins with theories, which are refined into hypotheses, which are tested through observations of some sort, which leads to a confirmation or rejection of the hypotheses. This is sometimes referred to as a ‘top-down’ approach because it involves starting at a general theoretical level and taking claims from that level through more specific levels of reasoning – going down from general to specific.

As psychology developed as a discipline, it became identified with the assumptions of positivism, empiricism and hypothetico-deductivism – in short, the ‘**scientific method**’. This assumed that a reality exists independent of the observer (the ontological assumption of **realism**) and that we can access this reality through research. The research approach that would access reality accurately was held to be one that was characterized by objectivity and neutrality and precise measurement in hypothesis-testing. It was assumed that this would enable the researcher to obtain accurate, unclouded information about the psychological and social worlds. It was believed that objectivity and neutrality could be achieved by having researchers remain detached from their research so that they would not contaminate the research process with whatever personal investments they may have had in the research topic. So, for example, contact between researchers and participants was either minimized or



## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

standardized, so that each participant received the same instructions. In writing up research reports, the researcher was usually erased from the research process by the use of the passive voice rather than personal pronouns. Hence, rather than saying ‘I developed a questionnaire’, researchers would write ‘A questionnaire was developed’, erasing the agent in the process and creating the impression that the work was ‘untainted’ by human involvement on the researcher’s side. Precision in measurement was assumed to be possible for any psychological dimension that existed. It was assumed that, through the development of progressively refined tests and measures, any psychological dimension that actually existed could be measured with precision.

Where qualitative work was undertaken within the ‘scientific method’, this was very much as a preliminary step before the ‘real’ research. For example, when researching an area that had not been researched before or that had been minimally researched, qualitative work might be conducted to identify the key elements in that area which could then form the basis of measurement instruments such as questionnaires. However, a few qualitative research methods embraced the ‘scientific method’ and all its apparatus. One example is Krippendorff’s (2013) structured form of content analysis, which categorizes and quantifies qualitative data very systematically and is concerned with reliability in a way that is not shared by many other qualitative methods. This is an example of what has been called ‘**small q**’ qualitative research (Kidder and Fine, 1987). This is research that uses qualitative tools and techniques but within a hypothetico-deductive framework. In contrast, ‘**Big Q**’ qualitative research refers to the use of qualitative techniques within a qualitative paradigm which rejects notions of objective reality or universal truth and emphasizes contextualized understandings. All five research approaches that are examined in this book are examples of ‘Big Q’ qualitative research. We will now consider the historical development of that type of qualitative work.

We have started our consideration of qualitative research in psychology by noting how important it is to understand the assumptions that different research approaches and methods make about knowledge – what it is based upon and how it can be achieved. We looked at the assumptions that underpin the research designs that have long dominated psychology, such as experimental approaches and survey work. These have been referred to as the ‘scientific method’. We noted that some types of qualitative research share these assumptions. In this book, though, we are concerned with approaches to qualitative research that are based on quite different assumptions and are *distinctively* qualitative – what has been called ‘Big Q’ qualitative research.

BITE-SIZED  
SUMMARY

1

## Resistance to the ‘scientific method’: alternative epistemologies and research foci

The ‘scientific method’ approach to psychological research has been resisted in some branches of the discipline. For example, in versions of psychotherapeutic psychology, from its early days emphasis was placed on qualitative case studies as a route to knowledge development. Freud (1909/1955) used that approach as a way of testing his theories. However, the truly ‘scientific’ status of this work was seen as dubious by the arbiters of scientific practice and it remained the methodological exception rather than the rule. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s but becoming more evident in the latter part of the 1980s and the 1990s, there was a slow, incremental shift in British psychology as the discipline moved towards acceptance of at least some versions of qualitative research. This was the culmination of a long history of debate about what sort of knowledge psychologists can and should aim for in research (in other words, epistemological debate), even if this debate did not occur in the foreground of mainstream psychology.

### Understanding individuals in context on their terms

In their concise historical account of the development of qualitative psychology, Henwood and Pidgeon (1994) trace this debate back to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey in 1894 who argued that the human sciences should aim to establish understanding rather than causal explanation (see also Denzin and Lincoln’s, 2011a, review of the history of qualitative research across disciplines). This challenge proved persistent and it can be heard echoed in the nomothetic-idiographic debate of the 1950s and 1960s. This debate concerned the relative merits of **nomothetic research** approaches which seek generalizable findings that uncover laws to explain objective phenomena and **idiographic research** approaches which seek to examine individual cases in detail to understand an outcome. Researchers such as Allport (1962) argued that we cannot capture the uniqueness of an individual’s personality simply by abstracting dimensions from aggregate statistical scores.

These themes can also be discerned within some influential early texts that advocated a shift towards qualitative methods within psychology. For example, in their 1972 book *The Explanation of Social Behaviour*, Harré and Secord expressed concern about the focus on the manipulation of variables and the dominance of quantification in psychological research. They saw this as reflecting a limited, mechanistic understanding of human beings whose complex humanity could never be captured by such an approach to research. In their classic 1981 text *Human Inquiry*, Reason and Rowan drew upon these and other ideas to advocate what they called a ‘new paradigm’ for psychology. Similarly, in their 1985 book, Lincoln and Guba called for a ‘naturalistic’ paradigm based upon the search for detailed description, which aimed to represent reality through the eyes of research participants and attend to the complexities of behaviour and meaning in **context**.

These concerns were also characteristic of psychological research informed by second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the chief aims of feminist psychology is to reveal and

## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

challenge the ways in which male power has operated and continues to operate within psychology and the ways in which it has overlooked or misrepresented women's experiences. For example, psychology has long evaluated women's experiences in terms of male norms and, unsurprisingly, has found that women 'fall short'. It has looked for 'sex differences' in various domains and has turned up differences that represent women as inferior to men – except when those differences are in domains that allow women to excel in their 'natural' roles as wives and mothers (Wilkinson, 1996).

In a desire to explore women's experiences on their own terms and to allow women's voices to be presented without imposing pre-existent, ill-fitting frameworks of meaning, many feminist psychologists turned to qualitative methods that had a **phenomenological** emphasis. Such methods focus on obtaining detailed descriptions of experience as understood by those who *have* that experience in order to discern its essence. These methods are not concerned with producing an objective statement of an experience but rather with obtaining an individual's personal perception or account of the experience on their own terms. For example, one explicitly feminist qualitative method that was developed was the voice relational method, which has as one of its aims the hearing of voices that have often been suppressed and silenced such as those of adolescent girls (McLean Taylor et al., 1996). It does this through a careful, guided 'listening' to transcripts of interviews with those whose voices are not usually listened to and hence who have played no meaningful role within public debate. Some of the research methods covered in the present volume can be seen as practical responses to the concerns raised by these critics of the use of the 'scientific method' within psychology. For example, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has an explicitly phenomenological and idiographic commitment to discerning individual meaning-making within qualitative data (see Chapter 4).

These approaches involve **inductive** reasoning. In research, this means reasoning that begins with data, which are examined in light of a study's research questions. Patterns in the data are discerned and labelled. Some approaches link these patterns to existing theory or use them to create new theory. Inductive research is sometimes referred to as a 'bottom up' approach because it involves starting with the specific (that is, the data) and moving up from this level towards conceptual and theoretical levels.

Any type of qualitative research that seeks to uncover people's meanings and experiences in an inductive way has been described as embodying an 'experiential' approach (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Most of these forms of qualitative research have retained the realist commitment of the scientific method to some degree. They assume that a reality exists independent of the observer which can be accessed in some way through research and that participants' language provides us with a 'window' to that reality. This is not a straightforward, unqualified realism: many of these methods have adopted a **critical realist** outlook which assumes that, while a reality exists independent of the observer, we cannot know that reality with certainty. These are ontological and epistemological assumptions about reality and how we can know reality. However, feminist and other psychological researchers sought approaches that were critical in a different way and that allowed not just a phenomenological

understanding of experience but also a critical understanding of the social and economic factors that determined experience. Both the voice-relational method and IPA permit this but the major focus for those who wanted to undertake thoroughly critical work was research methods that had a radically different epistemology – **social constructionism**.

### Critical stance on the construction of reality

The milestone in the popularization of a social constructionist approach to psychological research was the publication of Potter and Wetherell's book *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* in 1987. This was to have a profound and unsettling influence on social psychology and sparked much debate and controversy within this and other branches of the discipline as it challenged the very foundations of what was regarded as legitimate psychological research. In broad terms, the social constructionist perspective adopts a critical stance towards the taken-for-granted ways in which we understand the world and ourselves, such as the assumption that the categories we use to interpret the world correspond to 'real', 'objective' entities (Burr, 2015). From a social constructionist perspective, the ways in which we understand the world and ourselves are built up through social processes, especially through linguistic interactions, and so there is nothing fixed or necessary about them: they are the products of particular cultural and historical contexts.

This is a **relativist** stance in which 'reality' is seen as dependent on the ways we come to know it. Research conducted within a social constructionist framework focuses on examining the ways of constructing social reality that are available within a particular cultural and historical context, the conditions within which these ways of constructing are used and the implications they hold for human experience and social practice (Willig, 2013). In contrast with an 'experiential' approach, relativist, social constructionist research has been described as embodying a 'critical' or 'discursive' approach to qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Reicher, 2000).

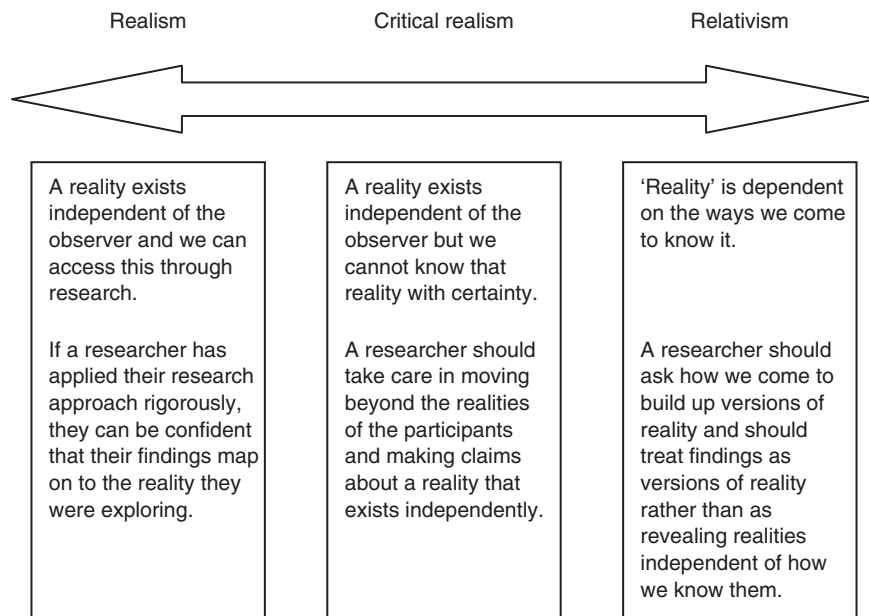
Relativism and social constructionism contrast with the ontology and epistemology of other approaches to qualitative research which tend to assume that there is some relationship between the outcome of the analysis of research data and the *actualities* of which the analysis speaks. So, for example, if I were to analyse qualitative data from men on their experiences of expressing emotion, many analytic approaches would assume that the analysis reflects some sort of underlying truth or reality about these experiences. Many approaches may see the correspondence between the analysis and those experiences as not being an exact one because the men may have forgotten some of the details of what they described or because they engaged in particular self-presentations or because the analysis represents an interaction between the data and the **interpretative framework** (that is my professional and personal investments in the research) that I brought to bear on the data. Nevertheless, some relationship is usually assumed between the analysis and truth or reality from these realist and critical realist perspectives.

Social constructionism views things rather differently. Some qualitative methods that adopt a social constructionist epistemology hold on to the idea of data representing things that have an existence outside the data. Others are largely disinterested in whether there is a

## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

reality existing ‘out there’ to which qualitative data correspond and instead locate their focus of interest elsewhere. So, to return to our example, from a social constructionist perspective, data on emotions are not seen as reflecting some reality about emotions. Instead they are seen as accounts that construct emotions in particular ways and that use ‘emotion talk’ to perform particular social functions. Social constructionism can be quite difficult to grasp as its understandings run counter to so much that we take for granted in our world and in much psychological research. To find out more about it, turn to Chapters 10 and 11 in this volume which examine the main social constructionist research approach – discourse analysis.

You have now moved right across a spectrum of ontology and epistemology, starting with the realism of the scientific method, through critical realism and finally the relativism of social constructionism. You have also encountered other ways of categorizing types of research (deductive and inductive) and qualitative research (experiential and critical). All these terms might be a little confusing because they overlap in what they refer to. However, if you continue reading about qualitative research, you will encounter them again and again so it is useful to have them defined and related together in one place. The core commitments of each ontological position are summarized in Figure 2.1. I have not mapped the five qualitative approaches that are covered in this book onto this figure, partly because some approaches can be located in more than one position and partly because Evanthia Lyons



**Figure 2.1** An ontological and epistemological continuum (based on material from Braun and Clarke, 2013)

examines this in Chapter 14. Also, the authors of the chapters that present the principles of each approach (Chapters 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12) discuss the ontology and epistemology of their approach in specific terms.

## BOX 2.1

### Mapping ontology and epistemology onto actual research

Below you will find modified versions of abstracts from three published qualitative studies. Information about the specific approach to analysis that was adopted in each study has been removed.

Consider each abstract and try to map the study onto the ontological and epistemological positions presented in Figure 2.1. Think about how the authors write about their findings and the relationship they assume between their findings and a definitive 'reality'.

You may find this tricky, partly because you only have a short summary of key points from each study and also because, as Evanthia Lyons observes in Chapter 14, researchers do not always adopt ontological and epistemological positions consistently in their research. If you need more information on the studies and how the researchers wrote about their findings, look up the whole articles and read them.

Consider the other ways in which we have categorized (qualitative) research – as deductive or inductive, as experiential or critical – and try to map the abstracts onto those categories too.

- This study explored what it is actually like to be depressed, that is, to capture the content and complexity of this experience from the view point of the sufferer. We present a case study of one man diagnosed with reactive depression. A semi-structured interview explored the experience of depression. The interview was transcribed and qualitatively analysed. We describe how his depression occurred in the context of work and financial difficulties and note how a sense of vulnerability emerged and contrast this with his reported experience of conventional masculinity. The process of becoming depressed involved the eruption of old negative memories and a catastrophic view of the present and future involving failure and death. We present a detailed analysis of two metaphorical constructions of depression. The features of depression form an interconnected whole. The experience of depression is so extreme that it is reported as if the person or self is dying. Onset appears to involve the destruction of highly

## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

valued life projects of the person. For some individuals, metaphors and images may be an actual part of the experience itself and contribute to it. (From Rhodes and Smith, 2010)

- Weight management services in the UK's National Health Service (NHS) are on the increase, partly due to rising rates of patients classified as obese. Those attending such services are held accountable, on some level, for their weight, although this issue is rarely addressed in clinical research in this area. By contrast, critical social research on obesity considers blame a prominent issue, though it has yet to examine this in interactions between patients and health professionals. This paper examines how blame is managed in the turn-by-turn interaction in group meetings within NHS weight management treatment. The data corpus consists of digital audio recordings of 27 discussion-based group meetings between patients and practitioners in a specialist weight-management service in central Scotland. The analysis focuses on those moments in which patients appear to resist the notion that they are responsible for their weight gain. Such moments are typically managed by patients in one of two ways: by denying having performed the blameworthy activity, or locating the blame as outside of individual control. Both strategies, however, rely on an individualistic concept of weight that reifies the medical model, while at the same time, troubling that model and its efficacy. The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications of these discursive practices and their relevance within the field. (From Wiggins, 2009)
- Two young adults' experiences of deliberate personal change in the realms of study habits and social interaction were examined using a qualitative, interview-based case study approach. Both talked about an aspect of their behaviour that they had changed and one that they would like to change. Qualitative analysis was used to interpret their stories and reach an integrative and contextualized understanding of their individual developmental trajectories. Our analysis explored the use of motivated reasoning to avoid or reinforce change, and the role of emotion in decision-making under uncertainty. These two themes are integrated in our discussion of the role of self-regulation in deliberate change, which sheds light on the experience of ambivalence about change and on the unpredictability of individual development trajectories. Building on theory and research on affective forecasting biases, we propose that a failure of 'experiential emotional anticipation' can explain ambivalence about personal change and why people sometimes do not act upon their rational beliefs. (From Lopes et al., 2014)



BITE-SIZED  
SUMMARY

## 2

We have traced the history of qualitative approaches to research in psychology. As the scientific method was found to be too limited in the insights that it could provide into human life, calls were made for approaches to research that would allow us to understand people in context, on their own terms and in all their human complexity. Such approaches were developed and some contemporary qualitative approaches to psychological research embody the same commitments. The psychology that arose from second-wave feminism sought research approaches that offered critical understandings of the social and economic factors that determine experience. Social constructionist approaches helped to answer that need. This historical account takes us from realist approaches to critical realist approaches to relativist, social constructionist approaches – right the way across the ontological and epistemological spectrum.

## Reflexivity in qualitative research

If you have made it this far and are still reading, you deserve to be congratulated on your persistence and determination. We have covered some demanding philosophical ground and, if you have understood it, this will equip you to engage with qualitative approaches to psychological research in an informed way. You can relax now because we move onto less demanding terrain as we attend to a key feature of qualitative research: **reflexivity**.

Reflexivity refers to the acknowledgement by the researcher of the role played by their interpretative framework or **speaking position** (including theoretical commitments, personal understandings and personal experiences) in creating their analytic account. The role of the researcher's interpretative framework in generating data and producing the analysis is often regarded as a contaminating factor in most quantitative research – particularly the personal aspects of that framework. In contrast, many qualitative methods are characterized by an expectation that the researcher will make explicit their speaking position. In some research, there is a tokenistic engagement with this, where researchers present a mini-biography and fail to identify which aspects of their speaking position were salient in their research and in what ways these commitments influenced the research process and the research outcome (to the extent that this is available to the researcher's conscious awareness). However, properly done, this can acknowledge the role of the researcher and it can increase the **transparency** of the research process and so help readers to understand and evaluate the work. For an example of a researcher reflecting on their speaking position, see Box 2.2.

Reflections such as these can be readily incorporated within qualitative studies undertaken by undergraduate and postgraduate students, especially in disciplines such as



**BOX  
2.2****A researcher reflects on her speaking position**

In her doctoral study of Pentecostal Christians' representations of and responses to people with mental health conditions, Victoria Uwannah (2015) offered some reflections on how her positions as a researcher and a Pentecostal Christian played out in her research. For example, she reflected on what she noticed about how she positioned herself during focus group interviews and the dilemma that this presented:

During the interviews I noticed that I sometimes slipped into addressing the groups as 'we' in reference to Pentecostal Christians and later, as I listened to the recordings, I wondered why I did this and what effect it had on the interview process. I think at times I may have felt like I wanted the participants to know that I was on their side, that I shared an identity and commitment with them, that I wasn't there to 'catch them out'. This may have positively affected how at ease the participants felt but it also could have prevented certain material from coming up if there was an assumption that I would know all about Pentecostalism and wouldn't have to have Pentecostal beliefs, views and behaviours explained to me.

I became particularly aware of my position and investment when interviewing people from my own church. At times when the group used words or expressed views that I knew would be classed as stigmatizing or negative, I inwardly cringed, thinking how best I could interpret or gloss over parts of the data that made it sound like 'we' were ignorant or insensitive to matters of difference. This feeling was present to some extent in all the focus group work. I felt I would be pulled in two directions when it came to the analysis – whether to be a researcher of integrity whose interpretations were determined by the data in productive interaction with my subjectivity or whether to defend 'my people'. As someone who was engaged in doctoral research and who is committed to psychological practice being based on good research evidence, I felt there shouldn't have been any question about priorities in my mind – but it *did* feel very much an 'either/or' situation at that point.

A shift came when I began to read more deeply about how our realities are shaped or constituted by our interactions with others and with dominant

(Continued)

discourses. To put it simply, I realised that we are what we know. If we don't know possible alternative ways of seeing, feeling and acting, how can change occur? Instead of viewing my research as a potential exposé of Pentecostal Christians, I started to see it as a potentially positive situation in that, if I fed my research findings back to Pentecostal communities, this could create an impetus for forging new realities around how those communities understand and respond to mental health issues and to people with mental health histories in Pentecostal congregations. That realization enabled me to engage with the data in an open way and with a sense of integrity and 'mission' as a researcher *and* as a Pentecostal Christian.

counselling psychology and clinical psychology where personal reflectiveness is usually expected. Students can work these reflections into their research narrative at appropriate points. For example, the reflections in Box 2.2 could be located within an account of the analytic procedure and process. The only difficulty with this is that, if the rest of the account is written in a more detached style, the use of 'I' in the personal reflections can be rather jarring. In this case, it is necessary to think carefully about how best to achieve a consistent tone throughout the research report – for example, by writing in a more personal way throughout. Alternatively, personal reflections can be kept separate from the main body of the text. This, however, runs the risk of suggesting that the personal dimension is not really very important or that it somehow contaminates the qualitative research process and so has to be kept separate from the 'real' business of the research (that is the analyses). Instead, the personal dimension is an integral aspect of many qualitative methods.

While personal reflections can and should be included in student research reports, it is usually a different matter when writing for publication. Relatively few academic journals carry articles that feature analyses that include consistent personal reflections. This may be because tight word limits for articles mean that researchers prefer to focus on presenting findings. It does mean, though, that those findings lack an important contextual aspect and readers may be deprived of something that would help them to understand and evaluate the research. For more on reflexivity, see Finlay and Gough (2003).

## Evaluative criteria for qualitative research

Having noted that a researcher's acknowledgement of their speaking position within a study can help the reader to evaluate the research, we now examine that issue further

## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

and consider how consumers of qualitative research (whether they be students, academics or service providers) can evaluate the worth of a qualitative study. Positivist-empiricist, hypothetico-deductive, quantitative psychological research tends to be assessed in terms of criteria such as reliability and internal and external validity. These rely on an assumption of objectivity – that the researcher and the research topic can be independent of each other. Hence the aim in this research paradigm is to limit researcher ‘bias’, with ‘bias’ being defined in terms of deviation from some definitive truth or fact. Given the contention in most qualitative research that the researcher is inevitably present in their research, any evaluative criteria that relate to strategies for eliminating ‘bias’ are inappropriate.

Using inappropriate traditional criteria to evaluate qualitative research means that inevitably the research will be found wanting. It is as if a music critic who is a specialist in heavy metal evaluates an opera in terms of its pounding, driving rhythm and loud elemental physical sound, expecting fast and furious screaming guitar lines. Inevitably an opera will fail to meet these criteria – but that means that the wrong criteria have been applied, not that the opera was of poor musical quality. For this reason, in their research reports qualitative researchers may wish to specify alternative criteria by which they wish their research to be evaluated. There is now a variety of such criteria available but I still find myself drawn back to criteria developed at the turn of the millennium by Elliott et al. (1999) and Yardley (2000). Together these sets of criteria have a scope and usefulness that have not been bettered.

Through a thorough process of consultation, Elliott et al. (1999) developed seven evaluative criteria that are considered common to qualitative and quantitative methods and seven criteria that are particularly pertinent to qualitative research. Some qualitative researchers have expressed reservations about these criteria (Reicher, 2000) and have favoured looser evaluative schemes such as that of Yardley (2000) whose criteria overlap with those of Elliott et al. (1999) in some respects. See Table 2.1 for both sets of criteria.

Yardley held that good qualitative research should embody elements of ‘sensitivity to context’, ‘commitment and rigour’, ‘transparency and coherence’ and ‘impact and importance’. By ‘**sensitivity to context**’, she means that, among other matters, the research should make clear the context of theory and the understandings created by previous researchers using similar methods and/or analysing similar topics; the socio-cultural setting of the study (for example, the ideological, historical and socio-economic influences on the beliefs, expectations and talk of all participants, including the researchers); and the social context of the relationship between the researchers and the participants (see Box 2.3). ‘**Commitment**’ is said to involve demonstrating prolonged engagement with the research topic and ‘**rigour**’ relates to the completeness of the data collection and analysis. ‘**Transparency**’ entails detailing every aspect of the processes of data collection and analysis and disclosing/discussing all aspects of the research process; ‘**coherence**’ refers to the quality of the research narrative, the ‘fit’ between the research question and the philosophical perspective adopted, and the method of investigation and analysis undertaken. ‘**Impact and importance**’ relate to the theoretical, practical and socio-cultural impact of the study.

**Table 2.1** Evaluative criteria for qualitative research presented by Elliott et al. (1999) and Yardley (2000)

Elliott et al.'s criteria	Yardley's criteria
Criteria applicable to qualitative and quantitative research:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensitivity to context</li> <li>• Commitment and rigour</li> <li>• Transparency and coherence</li> <li>• Impact and importance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit scientific context and purpose</li> <li>• Appropriate methods</li> <li>• Respect for participants</li> <li>• Specification of methods</li> <li>• Appropriate discussion</li> <li>• Clarity of presentation</li> <li>• Contribution to knowledge</li> </ul>	
Criteria especially pertinent to qualitative research:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Owning one's perspective</li> <li>• Situating the sample</li> <li>• Grounding in examples</li> <li>• Providing credibility checks</li> <li>• Coherence</li> <li>• Accomplishing general versus specific research tasks</li> <li>• Resonating with readers</li> </ul>	

**BOX  
2.3**

**'Sensitivity to context' in a study of perceptions of bystanders held by people who experienced workplace bullying**

To take an example of what one of Yardley's (2000) evaluative criteria might refer to in practice, let us consider a qualitative study that sought to develop an understanding of how people who had been bullied in the workplace perceived the role played by bystanders to this experience – that is, workmates who witnessed the bullying or were aware of it but did not intervene to prevent it. Let us say that the researcher obtained their data by conducting individual interviews with people who reported that they had been subjected to workplace bullying.

In order for this study to demonstrate 'sensitivity to context', the researcher would need to relate the study to other relevant research and theory on bullying in general, workplace bullying in particular and the bystander phenomenon. We would expect the

## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

researcher to note not only where the findings echo this previous work but also where they differ from it and to suggest new ways of conceptualizing the bystander effect in workplace bullying.

We would also expect that the participants and the researcher would be placed in context. This would involve describing the participants' demographic and other relevant 'background' details (such as sex, age, ethnicity, educational attainment and occupational history) and, in presenting the findings, orienting to how these factors may have shaped the reports that participants provided. So, for example, a female employee may not have expected male bystanders to intervene when she was subjected to bullying by a male supervisor for 'not being competitive enough' because she may have perceived the bully and the bystanders to share the same ideas about the necessity of a competitive ethic in the workplace and about women not being ideally suited to this. We would also expect the researcher to disclose whether they had experienced bullying in the workplace or in other settings and, if so, to suggest how these experiences might have shaped their expectations of the study and influenced the analysis.

We may also wish to see the researcher reflect upon the social context of their relationship with the participants, especially in terms of any power differentials. Although research participants have power during interviews as they possess something that the researcher wants, the researcher is usually on familiar terrain in the interview context and may use this familiarity to exert control. In this particular study, we would expect the researcher to be carefully attuned to issues of power because, if the researcher were overly controlling, the participant may experience this as replicating the bullying that they are talking about. Hence, we would hope to see the researcher discuss how issues of power were managed during the interviews and afterwards (for example, they may have sent draft analyses to participants to allow them to play an active role in interpreting the data).

As yet, there is no consensus about the best criteria for evaluating qualitative research, although there are recurrent themes among the criteria that have been developed relating to the provision of contextualized accounts of the participants, detailed accounts of the analytic process, an account of the researcher's speaking position and how this influenced the analysis and the consistent grounding of interpretations in research data. Indeed, it has been claimed that reaching consensus is impossible because of the heterogeneity of qualitative methods in psychology (Madill and Gough, 2008, have identified 32 methods of analysing qualitative data). Moreover, it has been contended that any attempt to specify

generic evaluative criteria risks having qualitative studies evaluated by criteria that do not suit the particular form of qualitative research they have employed (Madill and Gough, 2008). This assumes, however, that the researcher exerts no control over the criteria that are applied to their work. The evaluative schemes that have been suggested should be seen as giving the researcher a range of credible criteria that have been tested through usage. The researcher can select those criteria that are most appropriate to their study, justify their choice of criteria and allow readers to assess that rationale and, if they agree, evaluate the study using those criteria.

Another criterion that appears in the schemes of Elliott et al. (1999) and Yardley (2000) relates to the practical utility of qualitative research. This is an important consideration that overlaps with Elliott et al.'s criterion about resonating with readers and is part of Yardley's 'impact and importance' criterion. This is sometimes referred to as the 'So what?' question, which arises from the view that good psychological research should inform professional practice, the delivery of public services or social policy or make some other sort of demonstrable or potential positive difference. For example, a clinical psychologist specializing in working with people with chronic conditions may enjoy reading a detailed qualitative analysis of an account offered by one person of their experience of living with Parkinson's disease (see Bramley and Eatough, 2005). However, they may then wonder, 'So what? What does this tell me about the experiences of the many people with Parkinson's disease whom I encounter in my work? How can my practice be improved by this study?' Given that relatively few qualitative studies

## BOX 2.4

### Applying Yardley's (2000) evaluative criteria

Choose one of the three studies presented in Box 2.1 and download the full article. (At the time of writing, two of three articles can be found through a Google Scholar search if your library does not have access to the relevant journals.) Read the article carefully and evaluate it using Yardley's (2000) four criteria.

- How did the article fare when evaluated using these criteria? What can you now conclude about the quality of the research presented in the article?
- Based on your initial reading of the article, do you think the assessment produced by these criteria is justified?
- Did any of the criteria seem more appropriate to the article than others?

can confidently claim to have charted the full diversity of their research topic, these ‘So what?’ questions can be frequently encountered. Various responses are possible. The researcher could explain that a more general picture of a research topic is progressively built up through a series of complementary qualitative studies, with each adding something new to that developing picture. Hence, an individual study represents a step in the process of building up a more general picture that could be used to inform therapeutic intervention. In addition, there is always the possibility of glimpsing something of the universal through the particular.

## ‘Methodolatry’ and flexibility in qualitative research

In her reflections upon her evolving understanding of the research process, Willig (2013: 4) talked about how, as an undergraduate, she thought of research methods as ‘recipes’. These recipes specified the right ingredients (for example, a representative sample, a suitable measurement instrument and a relevant statistical test) and the order in which they had to be used to produce the right outcome. However, over the years, through her experience of research, she has come to view the research process as a much more creative enterprise centred not on the correct application of techniques but on the best ways of answering research questions. For her, the focus has shifted from the method to the questions that the research seeks to answer. Those of us who find methodology fascinating can sometimes lose sight of what is ultimately important in research and can become more concerned with using as pure a version of our favoured methods as possible. We can become guilty of methodolatry – a slavish attachment and devotion to method (Chamberlain, 2000).

This, of course, raises a question about the value of this book. With its focus on presenting the principles and practicalities of five popular qualitative research approaches and methods in psychology, does this book run the risk of promoting qualitative methodolatry within psychology? The answer to that depends partly on the way in which the material in this book is used.

For students and researchers who are using a particular qualitative method for the first time, it can be useful to have a set of steps that can be followed. Otherwise, lacking a clear sense of where to begin and how to move an analysis forward, students or researchers may experience anxiety about whether what they are doing qualifies as a legitimate version of whatever approach or method they are using. This can lead to the researcher becoming analytically immobilized. Hence, each of the five chapters that present the focal methods in this book (Chapters 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12) outlines steps or strategies that can be useful ‘road maps’ to guide the student or researcher who is new to these methods. However, continuing the analogy, it is important to remember that each of these maps represents only one route to an analysis. If the researcher becomes fixated on that route and regards it as the only possible way to achieve a legitimate analysis using that particular method, they are in danger of slipping into a methodolatrous stance. They are also in danger of producing a limited analysis,

which could have been improved if they had explored different analytic routes that might have taken them along more creative and unexpected paths. It is worth noting that there is a theme of flexibility running across the five chapters that present the focal methods. Each of the writers on these methods acknowledges that there is more than one acceptable way to conduct an analysis using their approach.

So, it is fair to say that this book does not necessarily contribute to methodolatry, provided its chapters are not regarded as presenting the sole and definitive ways of applying the focal methods. Instead, the chapters should be seen as providing useful initial routes through the methods for novice researchers. With time and experience, these researchers should devise their own ‘takes’ on these methods and might even creatively develop the methods for future researchers.

### BITE-SIZED SUMMARY

3

We have noted the importance accorded to reflexivity in qualitative research. The researcher’s reflections on how their speaking position shaped the research process and outcome are not seen as indicating ‘bias’ in qualitative research but as acknowledging a necessary and important dimension of the research process and enhancing the transparency of the research. We have considered criteria by which qualitative research might be appropriately evaluated. Evaluative schemes for qualitative research centre on the contextualization of participants, the provision of detailed accounts of the analytic process, the consistent grounding of interpretations in research data, and reflexivity. Finally we noted the risks of lapsing into methodolatry – a slavish attachment and devotion to method – and recommended that researchers should ultimately aim to apply qualitative methods with flexibility and with a consistent focus on the research question.

## Combining research methods and approaches

In recent years, it has become increasingly common to see both qualitative and quantitative methods being used in the same research project. Such a **mixed-methods** approach is a welcome development because it guards against methodolatry and can enrich research outcomes. Quantitative research and qualitative research perform different functions and so a project that incorporates both can benefit from what each offers, most obviously breadth and depth.

What can be challenging, though, is to integrate qualitative and quantitative findings that may have been generated by approaches and methods based on quite different epistemological assumptions. If we see integration as requiring all the findings from a research project to be united within one framework, that will be difficult to achieve. However, if we are more



## INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

modest about what integration involves, possibilities open up. For example, Moran-Ellis et al. (2006) suggested that integration requires that different methods, which are oriented to the same research goal or question, are given equal weight within a project. Using this definition, a project could consist of relatively discrete qualitative and quantitative elements, with each equally contributing something different to the task of answering the research question(s).

I know from experience that this can work effectively: I was part of a team that examined public attitudes to new genetic technologies through a quantitative national survey, a quantitative study involving vignettes and qualitative studies using data from focus group interviews and the media. The data were analysed using statistical approaches, content analysis and discourse analysis but in ways that enabled the findings to ‘speak’ to each other (for example, see Shepherd et al., 2007). For more on the place of qualitative methods in mixed methods research, see Frost and Shaw (2014).

It should not be assumed that a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is inherently superior to research that adopts a single approach. The sorts of research questions that are presented in the chapters on the focal methods (and in the empirical reports in Appendix 2) in this volume could not have been addressed using quantitative methods without losing richness and detail. The decision to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods should be determined by how best to answer particular research question(s).

In recent years, work has been conducted in psychology on a purely qualitative mixed methods approach. This has been undertaken by Frost and colleagues (Frost, 2011; Frost and Nolas, 2011; Frost et al., 2010) who have explored the value of applying different qualitative methods with different ontologies and epistemologies to a single data set. This has been termed a **pluralistic analysis**. Its aim is to produce rich, multi-layered, multi-perspective readings of any qualitative data set through the application of diverse ‘ways of seeing’. Differences between the methods are not ignored: instead the task is to find ways of working creatively with differences to advance the research aims. Although we never intended it, the present volume can be seen as embodying a pluralistic approach. In Chapters 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13, researchers report on the process and outcome of applying each of the five qualitative methods addressed by this book to a common data set of two interview transcripts (which can be found in Appendix 1).

These developments in combining research approaches and methods may point to a new phase in the story of qualitative psychology. It may be the case that I belong to a generation of psychologists who have had to adopt a purist approach to qualitative research as part of a process of advocacy in order to shift the methodological terrain in British psychology. That process has come a long way and we should never assume that the advances that have been made are secure, especially given how enamoured the discipline has become with cognitive neuroscience perspectives. Nonetheless, it may be the case that new generations of researchers will be able to adopt a routine, pragmatic stance towards the selection of research methods, whether qualitative approaches (singly or in combination), quantitative approaches or a mixture of qualitative and quantitative, while remaining attentive to epistemological considerations, to produce comprehensive, creative and useful answers to psychological research questions.

If you are of that generation, I wish you well as you carry forward the work that my generation has undertaken in qualitative psychology and I hope that this book will help equip you for the journey.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has presented some core issues that are relevant to and will help to contextualize the five qualitative research methods that are addressed in this volume. Readers who attend carefully to the material presented and who consult other important work that is cited here will find themselves equipped to undertake good qualitative research. However, the key factors in determining the ultimate quality of their research will be the skill and creativity with which they apply the principles of the various methods.

### Further reading

Those who are coming to qualitative research for the first time are in a fortunate position because there are now many good-quality books available that, like the present volume, provide a background to the emergence of qualitative research in psychology and details of specific approaches and methods. The *magnum opus* of qualitative research across disciplines is Denzin and Lincoln's (2011b) edited volume, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. In the UK, noteworthy examples include Willig's (2013) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* and the edited volumes by Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008), entitled *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, and by Smith (2015), entitled *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. Further reflections on assessing the quality of qualitative research can be found in an article by Meyrick (2006). To help guard against becoming fixated on method, it is worth reading Chamberlain's (2000) article about the dangers of methodolatry.