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# Editorial

The last couple of decades has witnessed a dramatic shift in psychological work with the formal acceptance of qualitative research and new appreciation of diverse epistemological positions (Levitt et al, 2021). The fact that the Qualitative Section of the British Psychological Society (established in 2005) is the largest section of the organisation speaks volumes.

Alongside this qualitative zeitgeist, we have witnessed a shift in standards for the design, review and reporting of qualitative research. Qualitative research has become increasingly sophisticated with associated demands to be more systematic, rigorous and/or attentive to epistemological commitments. That there are many routes to doing qualitative research means that methodological coherence becomes all the more important. Any chosen research method needs to attend to the researcher's position and perspective. Researchers are encouraged to be reflexive about the usefulness and fit of their methods and to be clear about their evaluation criteria. What are we looking for? Scientific rigour? Ethical integrity? Evocative artistry? (Finlay, 2006)

The concept of **methodological integrity** is key here. This concept was developed to address the methodological foundations of trustworthiness ensuring that designs and procedures adequately support research goals and researchers' epistemological positions. Levitt et al (2017) state that integrity in qualitative research is established when:

*research designs* and *procedures* (e.g., autoethnography, discursive analysis) support the *research goals* (i.e., the research problems/ questions); respect the researcher's *approaches to inquiry* (i.e., research traditions sometimes described as world views, paradigms, or philosophical/epistemological assumptions); and are tailored for *fundamental characteristics of the subject matter and the investigators*. (2017, pp. 9-10)

They go on to propose that integrity is understood as the establishment of *fidelity* and *utility*. High fidelity refers to researchers' ability to connect with and express the phenomenon being studied. Is the data appropriate and the findings sufficiently grounded in that data? Are researchers sufficiently reflexive? High utility occurs if the data are useful, rich and insight-generating, and when the patterns of findings are coherent.

The different papers in this volume span a diverse epistemological spectrum that encompasses explicitly scientific critical realist-constructivist, post-positivist positions which prize scientific rigour and objectivity (as shown in the mixed methods studies), to explicitly relational and interpretivist explorations which value more subjective, artful renditions (as shown in the reflexive, personal accounts). Each author, in their own way, transparently and reflexively enacts their methodological integrity. Combined together the articles show the richness, depth and breadth of what qualitative research can offer.

**Lennart Lorås, Sari Lindeman, Andreas Breden**, and **Hege Almeland Hansen** have produced a fascinating *collaborative autoethnography* which reflexively explores their experiences of becoming researchers. In this methodology - which goes beyond autobiography - the authors act as both participant and researcher as they analytically explore personal and social-contextual aspects. In their findings, they detail the demands and difficulties encountered during their transition from professional practice to academic research. The challenges confronting them range from the practical, personal sacrifices to feeling overwhelmed, threatened and lacking in confidence. While they have all gained a new much valued and satisfying identity, their struggle to become academic is one that many practitioner-researcher readers will share.

**Peter Blundell, Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond** interviewed 7 practising counsellors about their understanding and experience of boundaries. These interviews were analysed using *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* offering a vivid and deep glimpse into the challenges of being a therapist. In their larger study, the findings show the function of boundaries as offering protection to both self and others. In this paper, the authors selectively focus on how boundaries are seen to offer necessary protection to the therapist. Specifically, the therapists use boundaries to restrict, limit and defend themselves when working with clients. As therapists can be confused about boundaries, the authors argue the need for therapists to reflexively engage boundaries towards developing more client-focused and/or relational approaches. The authors also offer an in-depth critical evaluation of their methodology highlighting the utility of their approach.

**Linda Finlay** and **Joanna Hewitt Evans** engage layers of embodied reflexive-reflection as they explore the lived experience of finding a "relational home" in psychotherapy. They demonstrate fidelity to their phenomenon in their use of a committed *relational-centred, reflexive methodology* which intriguingly mirrors the very therapeutic relationship they are exploring. Zoom dialogues were engaged with six

psychotherapists experience of being a client and of finding a relational home and the data were analyzed using phenomenologically orientated Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The utility of their approach is shown in the results of a tentative, emergent model highlighting the importance of offering clients a safe-enough, welcoming space, where they can feel attuned to, held, and appreciated by their solidly present therapist which in turn helps them embrace more of themselves and feel they truly matter.

**Frances Basset** shows some courage in tackling the politically contentious and personally sensitive topic of therapists' understandings of the social construct of "whiteness." Her mixed-methods survey purposively sampled fifty therapists in the United Kingdom. Utilizing statistical analysis and Reflexive Thematic Analysis, her findings recognise "white culture" as reflecting a dominant, yet often invisible, force. She systematically argues there is a pressing need to have discussions about whiteness, privilege and racial identity, a move which could enhance anti-racism in psychotherapy. She also recognises the concern that racially-minoritized members of training groups can be retraumatized by such discussion and how much care needs to be taken when facilitating such discussions in training. Her paper powerfully and sensitively offers a starting point for such dialogue.

**Alan McPherson** explores the myths and assumptions about the therapist's role that persist among the public and within popular culture. He utilizes the intriguing new methodology of *Story Completion survey* where survey participants are offered a story stem to complete. In this case, participants were invited to say "what happens next" when one friend asks another what it is like to have a friend who is training as a therapist. Employing statistical analysis and Reflexive Thematic Analysis, his results highlight how the stereotypical image of a psychoanalytic male therapist persists but that there is also greater public awareness of the challenges of being a therapist. The importance of friendship, along with appreciation of the special qualities required of people intending to train as therapists, are heart-warming messages which touch along the way.

**Alistair McBeath** champions *mixed methods research* persuasively arguing that both quantitative and qualitative data harvested in combination results in deeper understandings. He details the development of the Reflective Online Practitioner Survey (Metanoia Institute, London) and offers expert teachings about how to produce an effective survey. Touchingly, he acknowledges how writing this paper was a powerful and thought-provoking experience of "emotional labour" – something he found unexpected given his previous experience as primarily a quantitative researcher. He shows his methodological integrity and commitment to mixed methods in his interesting embrace of both the third person (scientific) and first person (personal) voice.

**Maarie Kovisto**, **Tarja Melartin** and **Sari Lindeman** explore the subjective experiences around self-concept and identity of five individuals with borderline personality disorder. The authors show fidelity to their topic as they explore patients' lived experiences within a medical framework correlating subjective narratives with symptom change. Their *mixed methods study* employs method triangulation and usefully examines process and outcome issues which demonstrates the utility of their methodology. They follow up these individuals 12 months after a psychosocial therapeutic intervention highlighting layered and painful self-concept and identity issues at stake. As well as demonstrating the value of the intervention, the authors recognise how they were reminded about the importance of remaining empathetically engaged with clients – a point which can get lost in some outcomes research.

The research by **Frederico Bento** and **Daniel Sousa** utilizes *descriptive phenomenology* to explore systematically the subjective experiences of therapists' own experience of therapy and its impact on clinical practice. Their aim was to understand the psychological essence of that phenomenon through the scientific method of rigorous "eidetic analysis" (the identification of invariant, common aspects of participants' experiences) which demonstrates methodological integrity. While their findings show therapy is generally growth enhancing, a significant addition to the literature is how participants claimed they had become better therapists through therapy: more passionate, more mature, more efficient, more capable and more self-critical**.**

Providing an idiographic counterpoint to the paper by Bento and Sousa, **Megan Hayes** offers a profound, precious, personal story of her experience of therapy. Case narratives are a valued tool for much qualitative research and they can take different forms. This paper offers one version which we are placing under the rubric of "short report" and comprising reflexive, creative, *arts-based narrative research*. The authentic, first-person voice speaks to us directly with raw power and poignancy. We are reminded about the importance of a protective safe relationship with a therapist (who "watches over" her) and the ever-present horizon of grief that accompanies the therapy journey - even as transformational change is celebrated. As Etherington reminds us, "Stories resonate and outlast their telling or reading… . They change us in ways we may not always anticipate because they can move us emotionally" (2020, p. 80).

## References

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