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Reflecting on qualitative survey psychotherapy research: A feminist phronetic case study

Elizabeth Peel

Communication and Media Department, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, UK
E-mail: e.peel@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract: This reflective commentary offers a case study of being an experienced qualitative researcher conducting psychotherapy research as a novice practitioner. I focus on the blending of insider-outsider positions, drawing on a feminist phronetic approach which entails prioritising the particular and the context-specific. In so doing, I foreground the importance of thoroughly reflecting on research processes as a mechanism for linking research to practice. This case study also highlights that, rather than understanding insider-outsider positionality in dichotomous terms, a beyond binary approach can allow for different configurations of the professional self to inform praxis. Moreover, this reflection elucidates advantages and disadvantages of qualitative survey methods, an underutilised but fruitful method for conducting psychotherapy research.

Keywords: Animal companions; Qualitative survey; Reflexivity; Insider-Outsider positions; Feminism; Phronetic research

Feminist psychotherapists Liz Bondi and Judith Fewell (2016) outline the importance for practitioners of phronetic research "which prioritises the particular and the context-specific, since that is how practical wisdom is exercised" (pp. 39-40). This reflective commentary sits in this tradition, providing a case study of being an experienced qualitative researcher conducting psychotherapy research as a novice practitioner. In exploring this particular context, the article offers some practical insight into what may be learned from the qualitative survey research process for practitioners.

There has been much debate in qualitative and feminist psychology and across social sciences about the relative challenges and opportunities associated with being an 'insider' or 'outsider' or a blend of both - depending on specific aspects of the research process or context or multiple *personal* identities (Breen, 2007; Bukamal, 2022; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Kanuha, 2000; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996; Yip, 2024). It is moot though how this debate intersects with qualitative psychotherapy research-practice. This article contributes a novel angle to this literature by scrutinising psychotherapy research and through exploring the *professional* identities associated with conducting my first psychotherapy research as a person-centred therapist while also being an experienced critical health and social psychologist. Therefore, I reflect on my dual and merging positionality as a 'novice' therapist and an 'expert' qualitative researcher. Both of these professional identities are grounded in a feminist approach to work, and life (Ahmed, 2017). A feminist approach is grounded in, and borne of, personal experience and as such – despite the 'debate' which polarises

'insider' and 'outsider' identities – the messy reality of research and practice is more akin to Audre Lorde's (1984, p. 112) often quoted phrase "there's no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives". In other words, personal identities are intersectional and, as I suggest in this article, so too are professional identities.

The insider-outsider debate typically centres on discussion of *personal* identities and the alignment, or not, of the researchers' identities with their research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Dwyer and Buckle (2009), for example, explore being an insider regarding researching White parents of children adopted from Asia and being an outsider with respect to researching bereaved parents, respectively. They also highlight the concept of 'the space between' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) which disrupts the dichotomy of an insider versus an outsider researcher. And Hayfield and Huxley (2015) compare and contrast their insider bisexual and outsider heterosexual identities with respect to researching bisexual women's appearance and lesbian and bisexual women's body image respectively. As such, reflecting on my professional insider-outsider positions brings something relatively novel to this discussion. This case study also illustrates some of the ways in which "a binary approach to insider/outsider positionality is overly simplistic […] the two positions are not clearly delineated but are fluid and situated within a continuum" (Yip, 2024, p. 223). The article also contributes to wider conversations about psychotherapy practitioners and academic research (McBeath et al., 2019), the journey from dissertation research to published article (McPherson, 2020) and also offers another dimension to discussion of experiences and understandings of boundaries (Blundell et al., 2022).

Background: Researching therapists' perspectives as an insider and outsider

Before delving into the specific learning from this research process it is important to contextualise the study (see Peel, under submission a, b, c). I chose to study therapists' perspectives about companion canines rather specially trained assistance-dogs, asking the research question 'What are the potentials (and challenges) of canine companions in therapy?'. In exploring a balanced question such as this - actively recognising there can be negative as well as positive aspects to pet dogs in therapy - I aimed to offer a holistic representation of the phenomena. While there has been much research on Animal Assisted Therapy/Counselling (AAT/AAC) since the 1960s (Levinson, 1962; Chandler, 2017) the literature on therapists' perspectives about AAT/AAC is limited (cf., Hartwig & Smelser, 2018). Therefore, I had identified a gap in the extant literature both as a researcher and as a developing therapist interested in practicing outdoors, potentially with my dog.

I also wanted to challenge the taken-for-granted human-centrism in counselling through feminist lenses and be attentive to speciesism (Dhont et al., 2020) within both the research process and the analysis. Speciesism is analogous to racism, sexism, heterosexism, disablism and so on, though speciesism is a less well known 'ism' referring to the presumption of human superiority over other animals and resulting discrimination. In hoping to challenge human-centrism in psychotherapy in this way I was mindful that, although someone who occupies multiple marginalised identities woman/non-binary, queer, working-class heritage and who considers themselves equity-sensitive (Cameron, 2020), speciesism is an 'ism' I am more likely to lack awareness of or enact. (Noting simultaneously though that I also occupy axes of privilege too as a white, Western, well-educated person with social capital.) It felt harder to think myself outside of my frame of reference when considering a more-than-human 'Other' (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996), which is likely an aspect of speciesism. Although asking a 'balanced' research question, I acknowledged too that studies of canine-human connection typically convey zooeyia, that is the multiple benefits to human health and wellbeing from interacting and bonding with companion animals (Dell, 2024). This research sits within this zooeyic tradition.

The study, which for the purposes of the MSc dissertation I called *'The Potential of Pawsitivity? A critical feminist exploration of companion canines and therapy'* was exploratory. I was interested in understanding patterns of meaning in therapists' experiences on the topic and so chose a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Given RTA is epistemologically and ontologically flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023, 2024) this offered me freedom to apply my longstanding feminist politics and epistemology to the research. A feminist philosophy and politics complement a critical stance on taken-for-granted knowledge (Riggs & Peel, 2016), has been aligned with the person-centred approach (Proctor & Napier, 2004) and is promulgated by some therapists (e.g., Bondi & Fewell, 2016). In this case, it was the literal underdog in therapeutic encounters being centred through the research emphasis on non-human actors. Epistemologically, "thinking through a feminist lens" involves scrutinising lens of power, social justice, ethics, representation and intersectionality, and reflexivity (Frith & Capdevila, 2022, p. 25). It is the intersectional and reflexive lens that I particularly apply in this case study.

In what follows I introduce the rationale for a wholly qualitative survey before exploring feeling insider *and* outsider through the design and recruitment process and then discuss the positives and pitfalls of the qualitative survey method. I conclude by highlighting the importance of a feminist phronetic approach in psychotherapy research and the key learnings for qualitative researchers completing psychotherapy training.

Using a wholly qualitative survey

Surveys tend to be associated with quantitative methods (e.g., McBeath, 2020), although they can be an illuminating and expedient way of collecting *qualitative* data (Terry & Braun, 2017; Braun et al., 2021). As Braun et al. (2021, p. 641) note:

> Because participants respond by typing responses in their own words, rather than selecting from pre-determined response options, fully qualitative surveys *can* produce the rich and complex accounts of the type of sense-making typically of interest qualitative researchers - such as participants' subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positionings, and discourses [...] Yet *qualitative* surveys remain a relatively novel and often invisible or side-lined method. (original emphasis)

That the purely qualitative survey is "relatively novel" and "side-lined" fitted with my feminist approach of challenging the taken-for-granted, and my confidence as an experienced qualitative researcher in using a method that had not been taught in psychotherapy training. In psychotherapy research training my sense is that a small number of qualitative interviews or a self-study methodology is more common than a method that generates a larger sample. My experienced qualitative researcher identity aligned with Braun et al. (2021, p. 643) in seeing the value of a 'wide-angle lens', as qualitative surveys:

> circumvent the risk, which can occur in the typical smaller samples of interview research, that a participant who speaks from a particular non dominant social position gets treated as 'spokesperson' for their particular demographic or background, rather than *just an individual*. (original emphasis)

Given too that it was important to me that knowledge informs practice – in this instance therapeutic spaces becoming more inclusive of ordinary rather than specially trained dogs – I thought I was more likely to generate an evidence-base of sufficient validity to impact therapists through including a larger and more diverse range of perspectives. Essentially, I knew through prior experience of conducting qualitative surveys in other research (e.g., Peel, 2010; Peel & Newman, 2020) that they can generate rich and detailed data, which are more exhaustively aligned to the research aims than interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Feeling insider-outsider: Design and recruitment process

In the qualitative survey I chose not to mandate answering any of the questions in order to maximise participant agency in-line with BACP ethical research principles (BACP, 2019). Following University ethical approval (Number 22006797SPEC), both participant information sheet and consent form were embedded in the Qualtrics survey platform. This included further sources of generic support and specifically regarding dog loss. (One participant indicated evidence of emotionality in participating, writing "It has actually felt quite emotional - I always get emotional when calling on my experiences with my old dogs as they have both passed now and I genuinely owe those two my life" (F,42,PC).) Because my recruitment included course colleagues, and was slow, I was able to monitor some of the responses and, despite participation ostensibly being anonymous, in this instance I was able to connect with the participant and check-in on her wellbeing. Following explicit agreement that the information had been understood and the participant wished to proceed to the survey there were 11 demographic questions (including primary modality [e.g., person-centred] and primary way of working [e.g., online]). These led on to the five substantive open questions presented in Table 1.

How do you think dogs matter in therapy, if at all? Please explain in detail providing examples if possible._____

What, in your experience, are the therapeutic benefits of dogs, if any? Please write about examples from your practice where a dog being present or being discussed has positively influenced the therapeutic alliance and/or relational depth?_____

What, in your experience, are the therapeutic challenges of dogs, if any? Please write about examples from your practice where a dog being present and/or discussed has detracted from the therapeutic alliance and/or relational depth?_____

Thinking about the core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence, what – if anything – can therapists learn from dogs? Please explain what canine companionship has given your practice. For example, you might want to reflect on specific client groups or individuals; the qualities of your own and/or others' dogs; and/or specific significant moments where there has been therapeutic change._____

Finally, please share anything else you would like on the topic of dogs and therapy.

_____

Table 1: Companion Dogs in Therapy Qualitative Survey Questions

Following the recommendation of Braun et al. (2021) I explicitly encouraged participants to 'explain in detail' and 'please provide examples' in order to try to solicit as much depth as possible in their written accounts.

Unlike my previous experiences of conducting online surveys (e.g., see Harding & Peel, 2007; Peel, 2010, 2025) survey responses were initially very limited. After a week of promoting the survey on social media, to email lists, and on the BACP research noticeboard, just seven therapists had participated (six women/one man). At this point in the process, I was feeling despondent about the project given I had posted on my personal X/Twitter account (1.7K followers) which was shared 20 times, including by *The Psychologist* (185.4K followers). I had shared on my own Facebook timeline and also to the 'Taking Psychology Outdoors' and 'Humanistic Counselling' Facebook groups. I had circulated to the International Society for Critical Health Psychology email list with over 1000 members, emailed five AAT organisations/practitioners and shared with fellow MSc students and staff from the course and my personal counsellor/s, supervisor/s and placement.

I received correspondence from two of the 15 University counselling services I had contacted unable to share the survey because "our team does not have experience with dogs in their therapeutic work" and declining to participate because "we don't incorporate therapy dogs in our CMH [Counselling and Mental Health] support". My sense early on in the recruitment process given the ubiquity of *therapy* dogs was that 'companion dog' was not a widely intelligible phrase, so I adjusted my recruitment information so that the word 'pet' was mentioned. I also gained permission for the study to be promoted in the *Person-Centred Association Quarterly*.

Given by the end of the second week of recruitment I had only gathered 14 responses I started reaching out to individuals whom I knew were counsellors and animal-friendly. I also found an article in *Counselling Directory* about dogs in the therapy room (Dance, 2019) which prompted me to search the directory for 'animal-assisted'. This resulted in 93 therapists, and I emailed all those who explicitly mentioned animals, or working outdoors or appeared to be from underrepresented groups (i.e., men and those ethnically minoritized). Interestingly, only two of these therapists mentioned working with their dogs, although some who did work with their dogs contacted me sharing "I think research in this area is crucial". I also joined the BACP postgraduate research (PGR) group of circa 120 members and shared my study with them. I had five responses offering help from the BACP PGR group and, as such, this was the most overtly successful recruitment avenue. Colleagues on the course also shared the survey in their networks and kept me abreast of engagement as they recognised at this stage in the process I needed "a bit of encouragement".

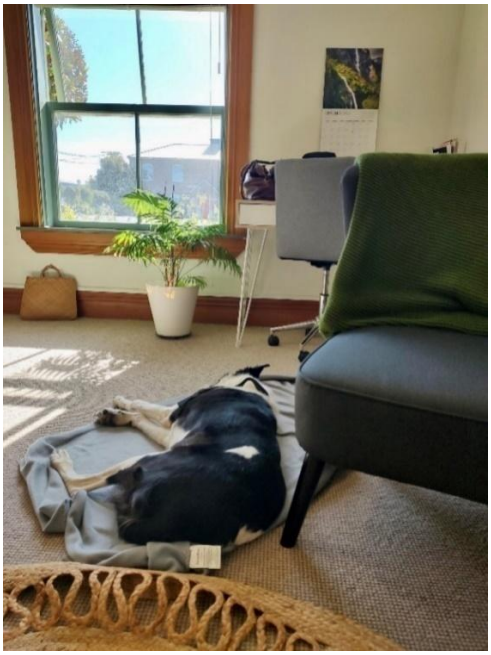
Contrary to my previous research experience with survey responses quickly flooding in (e.g., see Harding & Peel, 2007) – an observation borne out by others such as Terry and Braun (2017, p. 21) who collected most of their data "over one weekend" – I needed to revise my expectations regarding sample size. I had initially followed Braun et al. (2021) in estimating a sample size of 100 based on the mean of the example studies they discuss in detail but, given for small qualitative studies they suggest "20-49" (p. 649) participants are sufficient, I recalibrated to aim for this sample size. I reached the minimum small sample size (n=20) 17 days after advertising the research.

As mentioned above, I had previously felt that a key strength of the online survey method was expedient and comparatively large opportunistic sample sizes. Indeed, my own studies had generated from 60 (Peel, 2010) to 3,101 (Peel & Newman,

2020) responses, with a recent dog walking and talking survey yielding 673 (Peel & Slocombe, 2022). Though I recalibrated my recruitment expectations, reflecting on the emotion work that goes into data collection (Hallowell et al., 2005) I changed from seeing this as failure to being potentially facilitative in this research context. I also learned from those who had participated. For instance, one participant emailed me a photograph of her sleeping dog lying comfortably in her therapy room (Figure 1) along with the caveat that her "responses were not as fulsome as they might have been as done in a gap between clients". This crystalised for me that I was more of an 'outsider' than I had appreciated (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Being a dog owner, having some limited personal experience of dogs in therapeutic spaces, and being a trainee with a small number of client contact hours a week under my belt I *had* felt something of an 'insider'.

An experienced practitioner sharing the practical pressures of participating really underscored for me the challenge I had set for busy, time pressed therapists. It is not that this isn't relatable for me – I too am a busy person – but there is a significant difference in that my professional life isn't subject to that particular rigidity of multiple back-to-back client hours. For instance, a counsellor who has a therapy dog emailed saying "you've caught me on my paperwork day so I've replied immediately – otherwise it would have gone into the email abyss!".

It struck me too that the method wasn't relational or, indeed, 'caring' like, for example, the research interview (Peel et al., 2006). As an experienced qualitative researcher, I have conducted hundreds of research interviews. I am a highly skilled interviewer and actively relish listening to others' stories and experiences. Ironically it is because of this that I chose a less relational data collection method because I wanted to render myself more of a methodological 'outsider'. Moreover, during the first year of psychotherapy training I had to 'unlearn' my embedded and often tacit interviewer skills and techniques in order to learn the person-centred modality. I didn't want to inadvertently undo this important learning. Nevertheless, I felt I was, through the anonymous survey method, purely 'taking' as a researcher (BACP, 2019). The lack of dialogue and sense of reciprocity embedded in survey research has remained with me. Because of this, I share the remainder of the exchange with this participant in Figure 1.



Thank you so much for doing my survey and for getting in touch. I really appreciate it. Can I have your permission to use your picture in my dissertation and if I publish the study? Your dog looks fast asleep ☺️

With best wishes,
Liz

Yes you may use with pleasure. His name is Brutus but he is the most unbrutus like dig you can think of. Sleeping is the best way to spend a day in his book.

Figure 1: Participant's dog and resulting dialogue

Figure 1 exemplifies how illuminating reciprocity and dialogue is during data gathering. Of note is that this exchange was from an international email address, which does underscore a key advantage of the method, a wide geographical reach.

Positives and pitfalls of the qualitative survey method

As the survey responses 'dripped' in I checked and read each one, and while the insights offered were de facto amenable to an RTA pattern-based analysis (Braun et al., 2021), I also felt some methodological regret. First, that I was not able to probe or solicit more detail, stories, and examples as I would have if these data were co-constructed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). Second, although there was no evidence from participants that the anonymity meant they were "not tak[ing] the task seriously" (Terry & Braun, 2017, p. 34) there were a number of elements that coalesced to make the sample size smaller than I had anticipated and responses more succinct and generic than they would have been if I had conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews:

- The topic being 'niche', not part of mainstream therapist experience and qualitative questions requiring "more mental (and sometimes emotional) expenditure from the participant" (Terry & Braun, 2017, p. 26);
- Time constraints of participants and no mechanism in Qualtrics to exit and return to the survey later; and
- An ethical sensibility (e.g., from BACP, 2018) which means that disclosing details and specifics about therapeutic experiences and clients isn't compatible with professional and personal values and practice. This was borne out by at least one participant commenting "I don't feel I can give specific examples because of confidentiality" (F,59,CAT).

Finally, in terms of positives and pitfalls of the unfolding qualitative survey research process, there was some evidence that anonymity enabled more authentic accounts without participant concern for managing researcher perceptions and expectations. In other words, there was good 'felt anonymity' (Jowett et al., 2011). For instance, in an interview setting it would be hard to imagine a therapist expressing wholly negative views in such a direct and forthright way:

> I don't think they [dogs] do matter at all. I struggle to see why anyone would need an animal to function in the world (excluding guide dogs of course). I cannot see any benefit of having any animal in a therapy setting […] I don't feel that therapists can learn from dogs. I don't feel that this would be an area of work for me as I am not a dog (or any other animal) type of person. (F,55,PC)

Moreover, the labour associated with a wholly qualitative survey definitely generated what Terry and Braun (2017) call 'roll-off' given there were around 20 participants who entered all their demographic information and then did not answer the substantive questions. Having monitored response rate and patterns carefully and having re-shared in *Counselling Tutor* (a Facebook group of over 50,000) with no new responses, I closed the survey after four weeks with a final opportunistic sample of 40.

Conclusion

Learning through experience, and the concomitant reflection which enables this learning to be maximised is crucial in counselling and psychotherapy research (Bondi & Fewell, 2016). This focused case study on my learnings through being an experienced qualitative researcher undertaking a psychotherapy training study aligned with my feminist phronetic framework in valuing the personal as a legitimate basis for deeper analysis (Bondi & Fewell, 2017). This is an essential element of feminist reflexivity (Wilkinson, 1988) and something which resonates with qualitative researchers and psychotherapy practitioners alike. Following Bondi and Fewell's (2016, 2017) feminist insights around the value of a phronetic approach and its importance for developing practitioners examining the context-specific, this particular process has generated a number of insights. In concluding, I offer key learnings from this specific research process which I hope might resonate with qualitative researchers, trainee psychotherapists and researcher-practitioners.

With respect to insider-outsider positionality, I observed through this process that there were times when my experienced qualitative researcher position situated me as both 'insider' and 'outsider'. For example, this professional identity enabled me to comfortably navigate the methodological terrain of psychotherapy research training and choose a method, the qualitative survey, which was not taught to trainees. In other words, I was 'insider' to the business of qualitative research. But this positionality also generated 'outsiderness' with my own past experiences with the method because I simply couldn't generate the levels of engagement from therapist participants that I had when conducting preceding types of survey research. My experience also elided sharp distinctions between 'insider' and 'outsider', given that I was 'expert' and 'novice' concurrently. These professional dynamics were in flux throughout the process and were most visible in relation to others. For instance, it was when therapist participants highlighted how challenging it was for them to find time to complete the survey that my expectations as a researcher realigned for this context and my empathy for full-time practitioners heightened. There was also something humbling about the development of a less ambitious perspective regarding the scale and scope of qualitative psychotherapy research as a trainee. This was crystallised

through the shifting sample size goal as the recruitment process unfolded, though it also symbolised a merging of my two professional identities.

Although this reflection has focused on the professional 'outer' identities of novice psychotherapist and experienced qualitative researcher rather than personal positionalities or intrapsychic parts, researcher-practitioners may find analogy to the person-centred concept of 'configurations of self' pertinent (Acres, 2016; Mearns & Thorne, 2010, 2013). The configurations of self construct denotes multiple, fluctuating, inner selves which, arguably, are "a way to become an expert in social living and preserve sanity" (Mearns & Thorne, 2000, p. 116). The reflection on my research process has offered some insight into the "thoughts, feelings and behaviours" associated with these two configurations of mine which were, at times, "in *dialogue* with each other" (Mearns & Thorne, 2013, p. 29 original emphasis). The fluctuations in emphasis, I hope, have been demonstrated through this case study, and ultimately these 'configurations' became more aligned through this developmental research journey. As Acres (2016, p. 72) acknowledged his "'learner' is one of my many selves, my 'plurality of selves'". Similarly, the 'learner' has been a significant part of this phronetic process for me. Rather than the experienced qualitative researcher dominating the exploration or 'advice-giving' to the developing psychotherapy researcher, I prefer to see these positionalities as equally valid and valued parts of the team. We bring a multiplicity of positions, identities, roles and experiences to research processes and practices, and articulating and exploring them enriches experiential learning.

In conclusion, engagement with professional and personal identities embedded within *research* processes seems in-keeping with the depth, equivocality and 'messiness' needed for effective psychotherapeutic *practice*. I have explored how, during the qualitative survey data collection for my dissertation, I occupied insider-outsider identities and inhabited both experienced qualitative researcher and trainee therapist positions. In so doing, I have brought discussion of professional identities alongside ongoing debates about insider-outsider personal identities in a context-bound way that will likely resonate with researcher-practitioners. Taken together, this case study highlights that, rather than understanding insider-outsider positionality in dichotomous terms, a beyond binary approach can allow for different configurations of the professional self to inform praxis.

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About the Author

Elizabeth Peel PhD, MSc, MBACP is Professor of Communication and Social Interaction in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, UK.
They are an Editor for *Feminism & Psychology: An international journal,* a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a person-centred psychotherapist with a small private practice https://personalgrowththerapy.wordpress.com/.