



Post-qualitative research can help us think differently about knowledge, says **Manu Bazzano**

As many therapists will know, counselling and psychotherapy research tends to be either qualitative or quantitative (or 'mixed methods'). Clear differences are often assumed between the two methodologies, often privileging the former. Quantitative research has a long history, going back to the early years of the 20th century and the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle, which dominated the world of psychotherapy studies between the 1930s and the 1960s. Its main principles were *verification* (nowadays we would say 'evidence') and *logical proof*. The central idea here is applying the methods of the natural sciences to the

human sciences, with the assumption that science is always objective. This was held to be true until Thomas Kuhn came along with his milestone of a book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*,¹ where he made it clear that sciences too go through cultural and political changes and that there are paradigm shifts every few decades or so.

In comparison, qualitative research is relatively new – the first volume of the journal *Qualitative Inquiry* was published in the mid-1990s. There are crucial distinctions between the two modalities, the most obvious being *primary* and *secondary*:

a) *primary* distinction relates to the production of data and the nature of

indicators – numbers in the case of quantitative research; words in the case of qualitative research.

b) *secondary* distinction relates to assumptions about knowledge: how do we know what we know? How do we articulate it? Do we rely on causal explanations? Do we perceive what we study in research as external, solid 'objects' from an imaginary vantage point? Do we, in other words, apply a positivist explanation? Or do we instead approach our topics through empathic attunement, applying what is called *hermeneutical* explanations?

If we stick to the above distinctions, the two methods appear to be incompatible. This has vital implications for counselling and psychotherapy. Consider Rogers' well-known definition of the 'person' as a 'fluid process [rather than] a fixed and static entity; [as] a flowing river of change, not a block of solid material; [as] a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits'.² This fluid perspective is seemingly incompatible with a positivistic, quantitative stance and more in step with an empathically attuned, qualitative stance.

Various attempts have been made in recent years within the person-centred approach (PCA) to bridge the two modalities, with several practitioners leaning, surprisingly, in favour of quantitative methods.

What these stances may ignore is the *political* element implicit in quantitative methodologies. Positivistic, quantitative ontologies and epistemologies have historically enjoyed full patronage from institutional power, leading to what some authors call 'quantitative imperialism'.³ The empathetic stance found in qualitative research has arguably been quashed in recent years through the impositions of fixed rules and standards – something that may be understood as a reflection of the turn, at the beginning of the 1980s, from the managed market economy and rational micro-economic-level actions of Keynesian liberalism (1945-1980) to neoliberalism – a mode characterised by unbridled individualism and the rhetoric of 'natural' free markets.⁴

Waiting for Rogers at the wrong station

The ideological pull of logical empiricism that took hold first in Europe and then the US when members of the Vienna Circle fled Germany is not to be underestimated; it has been called the epistemological unconscious.⁵ To be uncritically sympathetic to quantitative methods means to turn a blind eye to the political pressures on psychotherapy on behalf of an audit culture of 'accountability' to bend to positivist agendas. It also means forgetting that a *number* is a *signifier like any other*,⁶ rather than a privileged signifier. We would be operating under the influence of what Andrew Natsios calls 'obsessive measurement disorder',⁷ a 'pathology' that has invaded not only government policies but also the therapy world. We would be waiting for Carl Rogers at the wrong station.

Could it be, however, that in some way *no fundamental distinction* exists between quantitative and qualitative methods? And in what way can one make that claim?

In a recent paper on psychotherapy research, Julia Cayne⁸ writes of 'approaches to qualitative phenomenological research... as stemming from the dominant discourse around a positivist paradigm'. Hers is a surprising statement – qualitative methods may well be at heart positivistic, just as quantitative methods are, despite the differences in their respective language. Why? Because, as she goes on to say, they may be a way to 'manoeuvre us *around experience* rather than recognise how we are *subject* to, in this case, language and importantly language as *bodily phenomena*' (emphases added).

Within qualitative methods, she then adds, 'primacy is still given to universal truths' rather than the 'contextual, temporal, cultural' dimensions.⁸

A few years ago, I would have balked at the very idea of a positivist continuum between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. My default had always been to instinctively defend the qualitative ethos against dehumanising

metrics. But after years of learning and subsequently teaching research methods, I began to feel disillusioned with conventional humanistic qualitative methods and increasingly unhappy about my own need to defend them.

Could it be that the ethos reigning over most therapy trainings is the preservation and perpetuation of a set of existing canonical tenets rather than genuine questioning? Have 'universal' and metaphysical truths (whether coated in numbers or words) taken over the irredeemably asymmetrical and contingent aspects of, say, our case study or particular topic of research? Is the solidity, coherence and substantiality of the researcher not scrutinised but seen as solid? When codes of belief are confirmed, then the claim that conventional qualitative research is still in the grip of positivism begins to make sense.

Is there a way out of the impasse? One possible way is moving the goalposts by looking at postqualitative research^{4,9,10} and see what it may offer to counselling and psychotherapy.

Postqualitative research

In Foucault's words: 'Transformation [is] very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible.'¹¹

Being sympathetic and supportive towards the conventional qualitative style of conducting research is a valid stance, but is that enough? To make our home there may well mean turning qualitative inquiry into yet another stale formula routinely recycled from one generation of practitioners to the next. The implicit promise of *postqualitative* research is that it would allow for the openness and experimentation psychotherapy training, practice and

research badly need in order to open new avenues of inquiry. This is preferable to the present situation within most orientations, with two main tendencies arguably wrestling for ascendancy: on the one hand, precious upholding of the conventionally humanistic tenets; on the other, insistent calls for a renewal that rely on a positivist ethos at variance with the soul of the therapeutic endeavour. The first one looks to the past, the second looks not so much to the future as to an *upgrade*.

The added potential benefit of postqualitative research is that it not only can provide an engaging critique of quantitative and qualitative methods but it can also point the way towards a *new epistemology* – in other words, a way to think differently about knowledge. In so doing, it may renew the original purpose of qualitative research, maintaining a refreshingly tentative, exploratory ambience.

There are different cultural and philosophical sources within the nascent postqualitative 'movement'. The ones I personally draw from are poststructuralism and (aspects of) critical theory, in particular the work of Walter Benjamin.

Identity and emancipation

Poststructuralism is the broad term given to a set of diverse philosophical practices emerging around the 1950s, mainly but not only in France, and reaching an extraordinary flowering in the 1960s and 1970s with the publication of pivotal works by authors such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, Blanchot, Lyotard, Cixous and Irigaray – to name a few. Inscribed within a wider political project of emancipation, these writings influenced politics, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, philosophy, art and science. Simply put, poststructuralist texts provide us with, among other things, a formidable *critique of identity*.

Critical theory, from its heyday of the early Frankfurt School (particularly Adorno and Benjamin) through to Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick,

'Postqualitative research can point the way towards a new epistemology'

provides us first of all with a useful correlate to the above, with greater emphasis on our everyday interaction alongside concrete others. My 'identity' – its 'imprint' – is clarified through expression and action (the domain of history, ethics, of finite, embodied existence) with others. It cannot be mere assertion of subjectivity. Emancipation then becomes political subjectivation – in other words, the formation of an identity that is not a 'self' but a concrete, conflictual/loving relation of self/others.

Applications

Most counselling and psychotherapy trainings would benefit from exposure to poststructuralist and critical theory texts as required reading. What would this mean in terms of research? What key points can be outlined? I will sketch a few, drawing mainly on Le Grange.¹⁰

- **De-centring of the 'I'.** In postqualitative research, the human 'I' is 'ecological, embedded in the material flows of the earth/cosmos, constitutive of these flows'.¹² It is never isolated from the three ecologies – **mental, social, environment**.¹² For Deleuze and Guattari,¹⁴ the human is not separate from the world of 'matter'. Furthermore, the latter, far from being inert matter, is gifted with *agency*:¹⁵⁻¹⁷ in other words, with self-organising (self-actualising) capabilities.
- **Re-envisioning epistemology.** Excessive importance is given to knowledge in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The latter may at times criticise knowledge but it still continues to attach great importance to it. Also, not enough attention is paid to the close proximity of knowledge to, and even complicity with, institutional power and, among other things, to the links 'between knowledge and ethics [and] how knowledge produces reality.'¹⁸
- **Non-representational research.** Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies rely on the view, central in Western science and philosophy, that assumes the existence of a fundamental unity

between language and reality. It also tends to ignore difference by privileging logic and the structures of language. The postqualitative researcher goes beyond this view, attempting a non-representational mode of research, which Ingold explains as 'a *correspondence*, in the sense of not coming up with some exact match... for what we find in the things and happenings going on around us, but of *answering* them with interventions, questions, and responses of our own.'¹⁹

- **Pure experience.** Here the invitation is to go beyond boring codes and categories. In habitual data analysis, the researcher examines 'data' as an object out there, separated from them. This can and should be resisted in postqualitative research. The invitation is to go beyond 'subject' and 'object' and access pure experience.²⁰

Patti Lather offers an evocative way to think of this anti-method stance in relation to data. She calls it 'making love to' one's data: 'Making love to' one's data becomes thinkable as a kind of ethics, something quite different from 'better or smarter', something more akin to the in-between places of pleasure and pain. Struggling with and against, becoming more and other, 'in a field of production of desire', analysis moves way beyond interpretation.²¹

- **Axiology** (from *axioein*, to 'hold worthy') is the science of ascribing values. It is central to psychotherapy.²² It means determining the balance of active and reactive forces in the organism. A force is active when it is allowed to do what it can do. A force becomes reactive when, diverted by what Rogers calls an external locus of evaluation, it turns against itself. An example of an active force is any micro-disposition – emotion, feeling, instinct, affect and so on – that is trusted enough to be allowed to 'do its thing' and reveal the inherent wisdom and innocence within an overall tendency to act itself out – or actualise. Conversely, a reactive force is that very

same micro-disposition mistrusted, judged and turned against its own natural momentum. The task of psychotherapy is then to work in the service of active forces, facilitating (organismic) actualisation and further advancing Rogers' central recognition of 'life [as] an active process, not a passive one' – a recognition that 'the behaviours of an organism' move in the direction of maintaining, enhancing and reproducing itself'.²³ Enhancing is the key word here; when working in the service of active forces, we affirm the life of the organism as an expansive force revelling in the sheer pleasure of knowing itself as different through its individualised expression. This is wholly different from attempts to measure, regulate and ultimately control the life force of an organism in the service of the dominant ideologies and the market.

As for drawing from critical theory, the other influence behind the present article, I sketch a few key ideas drawn from Walter Benjamin.²⁴

- **Forma fluens.** What then is 'Benjamin's method'? And why do I find it so congenial? Inspiration comes from a notion already present in medieval theology, according to which *forma fluens*, the 'flowing shape' of matter, is organised by the force of divine intellect. Adorno had been rightly concerned that the view expounded by his friend was too mystical and non-dialectical. In their 12-year correspondence (1928-1940), Benjamin explains that it is not divine intellect that does the organising but 'our own historical experience'. And here is the crucial point: matter itself assembles and 'actualises' in a process of autonomous construction that could be applied to research. Construction is not imposed in the aftermath of data analyses; it emerges from its own movement, which is how Benjamin conducted his own. Interested in just about everything, looking at every corner for emancipatory possibilities, he personified the distant travels of

philosophy outside its arbitrary borders and fences. Could this way of conducting research be what phenomenology is in its purest sense? Probably not, if we consider that phenomenology is often stuck with subjectivism, despite the best efforts.

Lather and Kitchens²⁵ have brilliantly outlined other key points that draw on Benjamin and can be useful to postqualitative research. I will summarise and adapt some of them below, in no particular order, adding some of my own.

● **Reading ('data') against ourselves.**

This implies resisting the compulsion to mastery and reduction to one point of view in favour of contradiction, movement and uncertainty.

● **Giving primacy to 'becoming'.**

Focusing on surprises, incongruities, novelties, repetitions. Paying great attention to cracks and contradictions without turning the 'material' into linear, logical narratives.

● **Becoming an unreliable researcher.**

This implies outright refusal of official knowledge and of the alleged power of the reporter/chronicler, alongside a resistance to what the 'truth' of our findings might be. This point acknowledges that the truth we tell ourselves and others is, at the most, expedient, utilitarian and subject to change.

● **Paying attention to how we tell a story.**

Whether writing a case study, investigating racism in therapy trainings or writing about dream work, we could do well to notice how we put together a story, what we exclude and why, what we deem irrelevant, unacceptable, embarrassing and so on.

● **Establishing a sacred cow-free zone.**

This relates to engaging deeply with our sources, including and especially texts of our particular approach/tribe/parish, noticing how they speak to us and making room for critique. The latter is another word for freedom, essential in research.

● **'Weighing up' your sources.** As with the earlier discussion on axiology, here

the question is: 'Does the source I'm drawing on express an expansive, life-affirming, emancipatory ethos?'

Many things (virtually everything) can and should be deconstructed in postqualitative research. For example: the *interview*,²⁶ *authenticity*, *empathy*,²⁷ *reflexivity*²⁸ – they can all be ousted and re-thought, thus making space for the new.

A guide to getting lost

Keeping psychotherapy research alive and able to respond to ever-changing contingencies means in many ways getting lost rather than getting knowledgeable, unless one understands (with Plato) knowledge as love, in which case knowledge is getting lost – losing oneself, relinquishing the Cartesian 'I', making love to our data and being forever changed.

A counselling and psychotherapy practice that cares about emancipation, difference and transformation can no longer rely on the tired and trite tenets of quantitative and conventional qualitative methods. The organism seeks greater actualisation. We need to experience/experiment in the crucible of practice, in the midst of unpredictable contingencies. I believe postqualitative research offers an exciting way out of our current impasse. ■



About the author

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