Chapter 1

Qualitative Relational-centred Research: A ‘Voyage of Discovery’

Qualitative relational-centred research can be likened to going on a voyage of discovery, a journey into unknown territory which promises excitement and surprises on the way as well as frustrations and uncertainties. As with the practice of psychotherapy where we find ourselves drawn into our clients’ worlds, our research venturing brings us face to face with the unfamiliar and the challenging. In research, as in therapy, we seek to build a bridge to the Other, using our own special awareness, skills, experience and knowledge. We reflect on the Other’s stories while simultaneously analysing our own responses and the dynamics of the evolving relationship between us.

There are, of course, major differences between psychotherapy and research (be it qualitative research in general or relational-centred specifically). In research we aim to understand individuals and their social world with an eye to producing knowledge. Our contact with those we research may well be short-lived, involving perhaps just a couple of hours of conversation. In psychotherapy, on the other hand, we aim to understand and also enable another in some way, influenced by the goal or purpose of our modality. What links psychotherapy and research are the elements of mutual discovery and the sense of being in a ‘process’ which calls to be engaged and examined. In both psychotherapy and research there is potential for the experience to be transformative.
In this book, we (Linda and Ken) set out ways to do qualitative relationally orientated research which mirror our practice, values, skills and concerns as psychotherapists (McLeod, 1999). We argue that many of the familiar clinical skills and interests of psychotherapists (such as interviewing skills, empathy, reflexive or intuitive interpretations and inferential thinking) are directly transferable to the research domain. As we use these skills we can find that our co-researchers (participants) may experience the research process as empowering or healing in some way. We are also of the view that knowledge of the research process and awareness of the findings (of both qualitative and quantitative studies) can enhance the practice of psychotherapy. As we see it, research can provide us with vicarious therapeutic experiences (Polkinghorne, 1999), broadening our understanding of clients’ worlds as well as challenging our assumptions and beliefs about therapy (Cooper, 2004). Psychotherapists have much to give and much to gain when it comes to relational-centred research.

In this introductory chapter we start by outlining the purpose and process of the qualitative research voyage of discovery. We explain how the qualitative approach in general is different from the traditional view of science embraced by quantitative research. We then move on to define ‘relational-centred research’ and describe what it specifically involves.

The Qualitative Research Voyage

One way of conveying the purpose and process of qualitative research is to tell a story …

In 1492, Christopher Columbus set out from Spain with three ships in the hope of finding India. There were times during the voyage when a fair wind caused them to make good progress but at other times the wind fell away, the sea turned to glass and the ships floated rudderless, without purpose. Worse, were the times when thunder roared, lightening flashed and huge waves threatened to overwhelm ships and crew. After over two months of sailing into the unknown land was eventually sighted!

Columbus had set out to discover a new route to India but instead discovered a new world. Like Columbus, as qualitative researchers we embark on an ‘adventure’ (Willig, 2001), fired by the vision of a rich and tantalizing land ahead. Like Columbus, we make careful preparations for the expedition, despite our uncertainty about what will happen en route and where we will finally end up. And as with the late 15th-century adventurer, the
significance of any discoveries we make will not be properly understood until later.

Unlike Columbus, however, as qualitative researchers we avoid making predictions (hypotheses): there are no declarations that ‘India’ will be discovered. Instead, we keep ourselves open to unfolding encounters and celebrate the possibility of landfalls. The new worlds that open up, both during and at the end of the voyage will almost certainly be beyond what we could have imagined when first setting forth.

What are these new worlds that open up? How do we keep our senses open? And what is it, exactly, that qualitative researchers do? How does qualitative research differ from quantitative?

Qualitative researchers study the social world of subjective meanings. This is a point of contrast with the research conducted by quantitative researchers which generally focuses on quantifiable, objective measures and behaviours. Qualitative researchers aim to offer rich, textured, nuanced descriptions of emotions, thoughts, experiences and/or discourses in order to highlight personal experience or taken-for-granted social practices.

Qualitative research is inductive and exploratory rather than deductive. Researchers start with open research questions rather than seeking to test a hypothesis. We aim to understand the social world rather than predict, explain and control behaviour. The focus is on the ‘hows’ and ‘whats’ rather than the ‘whys’ and ‘whethers’. For instance, when investigating whether a treatment intervention is effective, the qualitative researcher would not proceed by comparing a treatment group with a control group. Instead, we would pose the question: ‘How does this client experience this treatment?’ Rather than asking participants to answer a questionnaire whose responses are quantifiable, the qualitative researcher poses open-ended questions such as: ‘How do you understand…? What do you mean by…?’

Qualitative research takes place in natural, real-life settings and attempts to capture people’s experiences in context. ‘Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Qualitative researchers also recognize that we are influenced by what’s in the field – including wider social relationships and our historical and cultural ‘situatedness’ in the world; this recognition is subsumed into our work. Being extra sensitive to issues around cultural diversity and anti-discriminatory practice, we try to be conscious of our own social location and how this may impact on participants and on the research in progress.

Qualitative researchers understand that meanings are fluid – subject to interpretation and negotiated within particular social contexts. Qualitative researchers are aware that multiple meanings can be inferred and that
interpretations can be made according to chosen frames of reference. Whereas a researcher who is a psychotherapist may interpret a participant’s responses as ‘being defensive’ or ‘being resistant’ or ‘engaging substitute projection for retroreflection’, a lay person would be unlikely to derive such specialist understandings.iii Researchers therefore acknowledge that different re-searchers with their different backgrounds, using the same data, are likely to unfold different meanings.

Qualitative researchers accept that the researcher is a central figure who influences (and actively constructs) the collection, selection and interpretation of data. Researcher subjectivity – called ‘bias’ in quantitative research – is celebrated rather than shunned; it is considered an opportunity rather than a problem. In addition, as qualitative researchers we recognize that research is dynamic and co-created. It is a joint product of researchers and participants (and readers), and the relationships they build.

In qualitative research, the world is understood as too chaotic to be represented in unambiguous, clear-cut ways, or in straightforward cause-and-effect terms. As a result, researchers tend to eschew unduly rigid methodologies and prefer to work flexibly and creatively in response to the situation at hand. Data may be collected, and then presented in all manner of ways including employing creative art forms to deliver ironic or evocative presentations to maximize impact. As Braud and Anderson (1998, p. xxvii) playfully suggest, ‘We need an imaginative, even outlandish, science to envision the potential of human experience … not just tidy reports.’ Qualitative findings are typically complex and messy, reflecting the ambivalent, uncertain world of life experiences. They can be raw, painful and resonant; researchers can be deeply moved by the stories they encounter.

To illustrate the ideas above and show some of the different ways they play out in practice, consider the following four examples of qualitative studies.

Example 1.1 Exploring psychotherapists’ experiences of erotic transference

Aim of study: to explore psychotherapists’ own experiences of erotic transference
Methods: Semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 psychotherapists which are analysed using ‘grounded theory’ methodology.
Findings: Emergent themes identified from therapists’ descriptions of their ‘process’ highlight issues around attachment including emotional inhibition, passionate experience and obsessive love (Josselson, 2003). A provisional theory is developed showing how past developmental deficits (such as lack of intimacy) are replayed in currently experienced needs and issues (such as the search for intimacy).
Example 1.2   Explicating a mother’s grief

Aim of study: to explore the lived experience of a mother coming to terms with the death of her child
Methods: Three in-depth interviews plus communications through letters/emails over the course of a year are transcribed and analysed ‘phenomenologically’ in dialogue with the co-researcher-participant.
Findings: A narrative of the mother’s lived experience is created revealing powerful themes concerning the bereavement process and describing existential issues of loss, death, the meaning of life and identity issues of being a parent. The research process itself is shown to have played a part in this mother’s healing.

Example 1.3   Evaluating an art group

Aim of study: to contribute to the pool of evidence-based practice by evaluating an art psychotherapy group, run by two co-therapists who aim to support individuals dependent on alcohol as they engage their rehabilitation
Methods: (1) A questionnaire is given to group members at the end of the group evaluating how useful and supportive members found it. (2) Participants’ artwork is analysed thematically for significant qualitative themes arising in the group.
Findings: The mixed methodology employed offers both quantitative and qualitative findings which demonstrate the value and limitations of the group as well as offering insights into change processes and the concerns of the group members.

Example 1.4   Examining relationships in a group home

Aim of study: to examine how relationships between staff and residents are managed in a group home for people with learning disabilities
Methods: ‘Participant observation’ is used as the researcher is both a support worker in the group home and a researcher.
Findings: Findings explore the researcher’s own involvements with the residents as well as examining broader interactions and relationships that take place in the home. The analysis focuses on how power and control are enacted in complex and subtle ways by both staff and residents. Analysis also highlights dominant discourses and the ways in which the wider social, political and cultural context influences relationships in the home.
The four examples above show something of the diverse range of qualitative research possible. *(See Chapter 2: Competing Qualitative Research Traditions for a more in-depth discussion of the range of methodologies at our disposal.)* Which study appeals most to you, and why? If you are about to engage in research, your choice here may indicate which approach best suits your own values and interests.

Whatever methodology qualitative researchers choose, they know they are embarking on a potentially transformative exploration of relationships and meanings within our social world; a voyage whose capacity to open fresh horizons alerts us to how much more lies waiting to be discovered. As Braud and Anderson (1998, p. xxvii) put it,

> When the inquiry proceeds further than the sketchy maps left by others, following the surprises and ‘chance’ occurrences of the inquiry will guide the way to more gratifying insights and far-reaching conclusions and understanding.

**The Relational-centred Research Voyage**

If qualitative research refers to voyages of discovery in general, then ‘relational-centred research’ might be usefully seen as a particular type of expedition.

At one level, of course, all qualitative research inevitably contains relational elements in much the same way as all psychotherapy contains relational elements. Both attempt to analyse the impact of the social world on individuals. Not all qualitative research is specifically relational-centred, just as not all therapy is relational-centred.

Qualitative research can only be considered *relational-centred research* if relational dimensions between the researcher and co-researchers, and/or their wider social context, are foregrounded in some way. All four of the examples above have the potential to come under the category of relational research in that they all focus on aspects of social relationships. However, our (Linda’s and Ken’s) definition of relational-centred research goes further. We would say that qualitative research is ‘relational-centred’ when the research relationship between researcher and co-researchers is explicitly examined. Using this more precise definition, only Examples 2 and 4 mention the researcher/co-researcher relationship as a specific focus, so only these two are fully relational-centred in our view.

In practice, relational-centred research comes in many shapes and forms. Pick up any qualitative research book or journal and you will almost cer-
ertainly come across relevant examples. There are, for instance, a range of approaches which foreground active collaboration between researcher and co-researcher, such as Participatory Action Research or PAR (Reason, 1994), Co-operative Inquiry (Heron, 1996) and the Collaborative Narrative Method (Arvay, 2003). In these methods participants take part in the analysis of data as well as generating data becoming ‘co-researchers’ in the fullest sense. Feminist Research (for example, see Fonow & Cook, 1991) also aims to ensure that research is collaborative and egalitarian, with particular attention paid to gender, power and emancipation issues. In the phenomenology and existential fields exploring lived human experience, much research can be considered relational though the dialogal approach (Halling, Leifer & Rowe, 2006) stands out as, here, the researchers dialogue as a group until they reach consensus. Broadening the focus of both phenomenological and feminist inquiry to include spiritual dimensions, Transpersonal Research methods (Braud & Anderson, 1998) also foreground researchers’ qualities and their relationship with co-researchers.

Central to all these versions of relational research is the understanding that the research relationship involves an interactional encounter in which both parties are actively involved. Relational research – like relational forms of psychotherapy – does not involve a participant talking to a passive, distanced researcher who receives information. Rather it involves a constantly evolving, negotiated, dynamic, co-created relational process to which both researcher and co-researcher contribute (Evans & Gilbert, 2005). Relational dynamics between researcher and co-researchers are explored ‘reflexively’ (i.e. in a self-aware way) (Finlay & Gough, 2003), mirroring the kind of work therapists do. For one thing, the research relationship may help co-researchers to feel listened to and valued, in potentially profound and transformative ways, and this impacts both co-researcher and researcher. The reflexive process also includes taking into account dimensions of power, control and inequality, with the researcher attending to issues of gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality and so forth that may be impacting on the evolving relationship with the co-researcher. The researcher’s negotiations with their co-researcher can involve considerable ‘emotional labour’ (Hoffmann, 2007).

An example of relational-centred research in practice comes from Lewis’ (2008) grounded theory study of social workers’ narratives about critical incidents in their practice. Describing how she identified with one male practitioner who had distanced himself from the pain of his client’s suicide, Lewis acknowledges her struggle to keep focused on her participant’s experience. To give another example, Gilbert (2006) describes feeling some shame when she undertook her research on the impact of the death of a child on Social Services staff:
I was aware of carrying the feelings of shame, that we should not be talking about C’s death and that in raising the issue I was breaking a taboo … co-researchers may not have been aware of its presence, projecting it outwards so I carried the feelings for them. (2006, p. 6)

We explore these kinds of relational dimensions further in Chapter 3: Embodied Co-creation: Theory and Values for Relational Research and in Part II of the book. Then, in Part III, four particular examples of relational research are discussed in depth.

Reflections

Our … journey requires us to be touched and shaken by what we find on the way and to not be afraid to discover our own limitations …, uncertainties and doubts. It is only with such an attitude of openness and wonder that we can encounter the impenetrable everyday mysteries [of our world]. (van Deurzen-Smith, 1997, p. 5)

We (Linda and Ken) see qualitative relational-centred research as an adventure into uncharted territory. We enjoy the excitement, challenges and ‘unknowing’ involved. We like the fact that qualitative research is both science and art; that it requires researchers to act from both mind and heart; and that it can touch both intellect and soul. When qualitative research is at its best, we appreciate its transformative power and resonance. We particularly cherish the possibilities opened up by relational-centred research, which acknowledges our complex and multifaceted links with others.

We believe that a competent, relationally oriented therapist, equipped with an appropriate introduction to qualitative research methods, can be a competent researcher. Psychotherapists, with their professional competencies and emotional literacy, have a great deal to offer the research world and also much to gain. Like du Plock (2004, p. 32), we believe that good research ‘should leap off the page to revitalize some aspect of our way of being as therapists.’

If you are new to research, we hope this book will encourage you to take that first bold step into the unknown. If you already have research experience, we hope you will be inspired to engage more deeply and reflexively with the relational processes involved. Whatever your experience, the following chapters are offered as your compass, providing guidance and support as you venture into the intriguing, perplexing, endlessly exciting world of qualitative research …
Notes

i This story has been adapted from one told in Evans and Gilbert (2005). In this, a psychotherapist (Ken) uses the story of Columbus to introduce and explain the process of psychotherapy to a client.

ii With the kind permission of John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. the following account of qualitative research has been developed from the description offered by Finlay (2006a) on pp. 6–7 of “Going exploring”: the nature of qualitative research’, in Qualitative Research for Allied Health Professionals: Challenging Choices, edited by Linda Finlay and Claire Ballinger.

iii It is unlikely that researchers will offer in-depth psychoanalytic interpretations (for example, about deep structures of personality) on the basis of an interview lasting an hour or two. However, there will be some opportunities to probe latent meanings and the researcher’s own responses, including possible projections and transferences, might offer valuable clues.