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Deductive qualitative research: an integrative approach to designing studies

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing emphasis in qualitative methodology on the development of processes for deductive analysis, but there remains a need for broader frameworks for organising deductive investigation. We set out a five-part integrative approach for conducting deductive qualitative research, covering (1) appropriate aims and sampling strategies, (2) devising research questions, (3) data collection, (4) analysis processes, and (5) standards of quality. We argue that both case studies and multi-participant studies fit with a deductive ethos and provide guidelines for conducting both types of study. We suggest that hypotheses are best avoided in deductive qualitative research and provide guidance for formulating deductive research questions instead. We critically discuss issues to consider during data collection, analysis and in applying research quality standards. Overall, our integrative approach provides a flexible and coherent approach to the vital deductive task of building on inductive studies, thus facilitating cumulative progress in qualitative research.

KEYWORDS

Case study; deduction; deductive; integrative; qualitative method

Introduction

A conceptual duality that was imported from philosophy into science is the distinction between inductive and deductive reasoning. In inductive reasoning, specific observations or evidence lead to general conclusions, while in deductive reasoning, initial general principles or concepts lead to a conclusion about a specific set of instances (Carnap 1950). When applied to science, inductive reasoning is the core of exploratory research, while deductive reasoning is the core of confirmatory research. When qualitative research methodologies first emerged, they were all inductive in focus (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Reason and Rowan 1981). They embraced an open, exploratory ethos that was in explicit contrast to the confirmatory deductive approach that had become hegemonic in quantitative research by that time. However, since the

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late 1990s, qualitative methods in psychology and beyond have seen a growing openness to deductive analysis, within forms of thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun, Clarke, and Gray 2017; Robinson 2022), in Gilgun's (2013) more deductive version of Grounded Theory, in mixed-methods research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007; Proudfoot 2023) and in Fife and Gossner's (2024) approach to deductive analysis. However, there remains a need for general approaches to deductive qualitative research that include guidance on matters of sampling, research question formulation, data collection and reflexivity too.

In this article we present a new, integrative approach to designing deductive qualitative research studies, which provides a pluralistic and flexible set of design options across five key decision points. We are both academic psychologists by profession and our perspective on qualitative methodology is situated in that discipline. However, we are confident that the framework presented below is also relevant to researchers across the social sciences who wish to undertake or teach deductive qualitative research, given that the epistemological arguments we present are not discipline-specific. For example, we will argue below that deductive qualitative research should be de-coupled from Popper's hypothetico-deductive framework, and this is salient not only to psychology, but also to sociology, political science, management science, and other disciplines where Popperian logic is prevalent (Yao 2024). Popper's system is based on the setting of a fixed prediction prior to data collection and then testing that prediction against data. We argue that for qualitative studies, flexible research questions that are tailored to deductive designs work better than hypotheses. We describe this in more detail later in the article.

Arguments for deductive qualitative research

The central argument for balancing inductive and deductive research is that they have a cyclical and mutually formative relationship in science. Inductive research facilitates the exploratory development of theories, models, taxonomies and conceptual frameworks, while deductive research facilitates the continued development, modification and elaboration of these general schemes. Deductive research can also lead to insights for new inductive work, for example by showing where a theory has limitations and where new exploratory work is needed, and so the cycle continues (Fife et al. 2023; Overton 1991).

Given that a cyclical relationship between inductive and deductive research is ideal, if a research environment is dominated by inductive work, it has the tendency to become defined by many isolated pockets of exploratory activity (Cooper, Bailey-Rodriguez, and Fragkiadaki 2023), where individuals are building anew each time, each study starting from scratch, and therefore struggling to benefit from what has come before and build a corpus of integrated knowledge. In contrast, if deductive work dominates, there may

be a lack of innovation and exploration into new domains. When inductive research is in balance with deductive research, this helps to gain the benefits of both exploration and confirmation, which in turn allows theories to be developed cumulatively, over locations and time, as ideas build on prior ones (Fife and Gossner 2024).

A further argument for deductive qualitative research is that it helps to develop theories at increasing levels of rigour and generality. Once a theory is developed through initial inductive research with a specific sample, with deductive work it can then be tested across multiple samples and cultures using deductive designs. Only then will it be known if the theory applies broadly and has wide generalisability or applicability. Deductive work can also interrogate general theories and seek ways of updating them, improving them or showing them to be cross-culturally applicable. Theory that is shown to be applicable or useful across multiple contexts is likely to have a higher level of generality. For example, see Bailey-Rodriguez (2018) for attachment theory; Statton et al. (2024) for moral disgust, and Frost et al. (2019) for sexual identity development.

An example psychological research topic that has been studied extensively with inductive methods is the transition to first-time motherhood. Inductive studies on this topic include grounded theory studies (e.g. Darvill, Skirton, and Farrand 2010; Edwards et al. 2021), discursive analysis work (e.g. Miller 2005), and research with reflexive thematic analysis (e.g. Gray and Barnett 2022; Staneva and Wittkowski 2013). Rather than continually building anew with separate inductive work, this phenomenon would gain from including more deductive qualitative designs to integrate, build, modify and consolidate findings, and hence to see whether any theory or model applies at a more general level across different contexts and samples of mothers, which in turn could inform parenting or policy guidance across varied contexts.

The 5-point integrative approach to designing deductive qualitative research

Our integrative framework for undertaking and designing deductive qualitative research, which we term the IDQR (Integrative Deductive Qualitative Research) approach, provides a set of problem-focused processes for five challenging decisions that are specific to deductive research. Figure 1 summarises these five points. We present real or hypothetical examples to illustrate the process of each decision point.

Prior to describing these five decision points in more depth, it is important to clarify how our approach differs from Deductive Qualitative Analysis (DQA) by Fife and Gossner (2024). Firstly, DQA is focused on analysis, while ours is a more holistic approach that includes guidance on design, sampling, data collection and analysis. Secondly, DQA explicitly requires

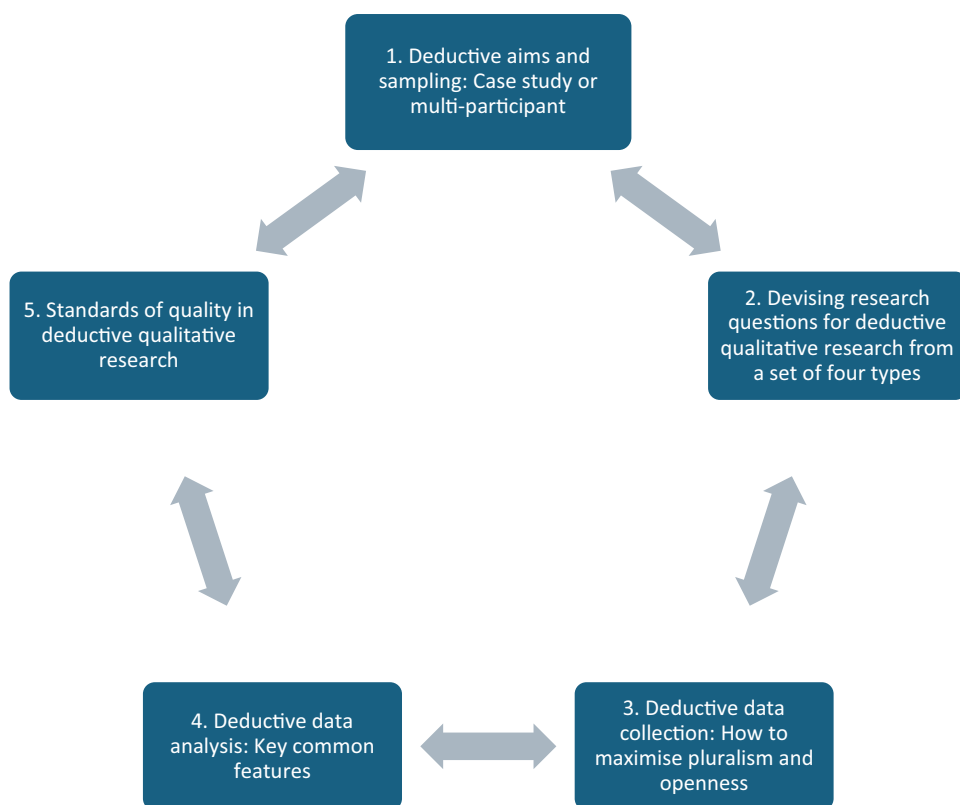


Figure 1. The five-point integrative framework for deductive qualitative research.

that the researcher start with a theory, but our approach also allows for deductive research based on just an existing study or set of themes that has not yet been worked up into a theory or model, and so facilitates more small-scale and local deductive work. Thirdly, DQA always involves a hybrid of deductive and inductive analysis. While this is a central option within our approach, our approach allows for strictly deductive research too. Fourthly, a key element of our approach is the use of small sample or single-case deductive research, which is given less attention in DQA. Fifthly, while DQA generally uses hypotheses, we prefer deductive-type research questions that do not entail hypotheses, as mentioned above and elaborated further below.

Point 1: Deductive sampling for multi-participant or case study designs

Deductive research can be conducted with multi-participant samples or case studies. Whether with multi-participant or single case design, a key epistemological point is that there is no intrinsic requirement for generalisability beyond the sample (Mook 1983). To understand this, a brief recapitulation of inductive and deductive logic is helpful. In inductive logic, the conceptual

movement is from *specific to general*; findings from sampled cases are generalised (at least tentatively) to the broader population from which the sample was drawn. In contrast, the logical movement in deductive research is from *general to specific*; the research *starts* with a generalised scheme or theory, and then investigates if it applies in a meaningful way to the chosen sample. If it does apply, this provides important information about the theory or findings, but there is no subsequent logical need to then generalise the findings to the broader population as there is in inductive research.

Multi-participant studies

In multi-participant deductive research, the researcher aims to explore whether an existing model or theory can be applied across a range of new individual and/or contextual instances. If the existing model or theory is interpretatively applicable to these new cases, it is given further empirical support. If the model or theory is refined or, extended, then the theory development process continues. In terms of deciding on sampling criteria for a multi-participant sample, whether the researcher uses the same criteria as the past study they are building on depends on whether they are aiming for increasing the *depth* or *breadth* of existing findings. If aiming for increased *depth*, the researcher should continue sampling in the same population, with the goal of finding new and deeper information about that group. So, the sample of participants should be drawn from the same sample universe as the original study (i.e. keeping the inclusion and exclusion criteria the same). Alternatively, if the aim is increased *breadth* (i.e., exploring if existing findings or theory apply in a different context or culture), the deductive study sample should be drawn from a new sample universe, based on amended inclusion and exclusion criteria.

In multi-participant deductive qualitative research, purposive sampling strategies help to ensure diversity on key parameters of difference (such as gender, age, ethnicity) within the target population. They are particularly important if the sample is small or recruitment resources are limited, hence the sample would be unlikely to include minority groups without purposive strategies (Robinson 2014).

Case studies

Deductive research can be effectively conducted with single cases. There are two distinct arguments for working with single cases, one of which is nomothetic, and the other is idiographic. The nomothetic argument for single case work is that theories can be challenged, modified or extended based on insights from single cases (Robinson and McAdams 2015). An example from past research is the study of John Dean's memory in his testimony at the

Watergate scandal, which was a qualitative analysis of archival transcript data (Neisser 1981). In this study, Neisser compared John Dean's testimony of past conversations with taped versions of the same conversations. Based on his findings, Neisser proposed that there was a category of memory called 'episodic' that extant memory theory did not recognise. This was presented as a theoretical insight for further validation, resulting in more systematic research directed towards it (e.g., Ward, Armstrong, and Golestani 1999).

The second rationale for using a single case in deductive research is idiographic (Robinson 2011). Idiographic deductive research aims to interpret and/or explain a specific individual or group that has social or academic importance, through the lens of one or more existing theories (Robinson and McAdams 2015). An example is the qualitative study of George W. Bush conducted by McAdams (2010), in which life story theory was used to deduce an understanding of George W. Bush's life and identity. Another past example of an idiographic deductive case study was the qualitative analysis of an alien-worshipping cult by Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter (1956), interpreted through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory.

When selecting a participant or social group for an idiographic case study, there are various purposive sampling processes for choosing the case in question. The first is significance sampling, where an individual is chosen based on their historical or theoretical importance (Simonton 1999), such as the aforementioned example about George W. Bush. The second is an intensity sampling strategy, which can be used where a case is selected that is information-rich, thus is a particularly comprehensive and rich example of the phenomenon of interest (Miles and Huberman 1984). A third strategy for selecting a case study is to select a deviant or unique case, given that such cases may provide helpful challenges for existing theory (Small 2009). For all these methods of selecting cases for deductive case-study based work, the goal is locating cases purposively for their social or informational significance, rather than any statistical representativeness (Mitchell 1983; Small 2009).

Point 2: Devising research questions for deductive qualitative studies from a set of four types

We argue that deductive qualitative research works better with research questions rather than hypotheses. The aim of deductive research is to build on existing work, but the process need not assume that the end point is known or predictable in advance. Hypotheses can be defined in a variety of ways (Donovan, O'Rourke, and Looney 2015), so it is important to clarify explicitly what we mean by the term. We define a hypothesis as a testable statement that proposes the predicted outcome of a research study in advance, based on prior knowledge (Farrugia et al. 2010). While hypotheses are logically sound for

deductive research where a researcher is confident of the outcome based on prior work, we argue that they have several issues when applied to qualitative deductive work. Firstly, they can lead to confirmation bias or selection bias (Schumm 2021). Secondly, they can limit the openness and flexibility of analysis that is defining of qualitative research (Silverman 2020).

Research questions are open-ended questions that stipulate what question(s) a study is aiming to help answer. Deductively-framed research questions are different in form from inductive research questions. They seek an answer to whether findings from existing research can be applied and developed further with a new case, sample or method, and the wording of the question needs to reflect this. In Table 1, we present a four-way typology for devising deductive research questions based on crossing two dichotomies; whether the research is (a) case-based or multi-participant-sample-based distinction from the prior section, and (b) whether the research is working with existing themes from a particular study (that have not yet been developed into a theory) or an established existing theory (NB. we use the term themes as a shorthand for referring to any conceptual categories that are developed from a qualitative analysis). When crossed, these two dichotomies create a four-part typology, as shown in Table 1. In each cell of the table we provide a general form for research questions as a template for researchers to use and adapt, along with an example for menopause research as an illustration. The general form always mentions ‘describe/interpret/explain’, as all of these are valid objectives for deductive qualitative research, dependent on methodological assumptions.

Point 3: Deductive data collection for maximising pluralism and openness

Working deductively means the researcher has a commitment to build on what has come before, but data collection should still be focused on being open and unleading. When devising an approach to data collection in a deductive study, a key challenge is to phrase questions to participants in ways which avoid biasing data into pre-existing categories or phrases, or that force participants to answer in a limited number of ways. Whether the data collection method is with a written format, an interview format, a focus group format or any other that requires the phrasing of clear questions, they should be open, and as free from conceptual jargon and assumptions as possible.

As an example for best practice in research on menopause, Mahadeen, Halabi, and Callister (2008) investigated the experience of menopause in Jordanian women, and found “embracing wisdom” as a key theme. If a deductive study aimed to explore this in a new sample, a more leading question would be “*do you feel that menopause helped you to embrace wisdom?*,” whereas a more open question would be “*what personal qualities do you feel changed through your experience of menopause?*.” By committing to

Table 1. Four types of deductive research question.

	Case-study	Multi-participant sample
Theme-based	General form: How do the themes from [x previous study] based on [info re sample and methodology of previous study] help to [describe, interpret, explain] [info on single case]? Example: ‘How do the themes from Hobson and Dennis (2024) about the experience of menopausal brain fog based on UK women extend to make sense of a single case of menopausal brain fog from the USA?’	General form: How do the themes from [x previous study] based on [info re sample and methodology of previous study] help to [describe, interpret, explain] [info on proposed context and methodology]? Example: ‘How do the themes that emerged from the interview study by Cifcili et al. (2009) on Turkish women’s experience of menopause help to interpret data from a sample of menopausal women in London, collected via focus groups?’
Theory-based	General form: How does the theory or model developed by [info re previous empirical or theoretical research] help to [describe, interpret, explain] [info on single case]? Example: ‘How does the life course theoretical perspective to menopause described by Yisma and Lu (2018) help to explain the way that Steinke (2019) represents her autobiographical story of menopause?’	General form: How does the theory or model developed by [info re previous empirical or theoretical research] help to [describe, interpret, explain] the data from [info on proposed context and methodology]? Example: ‘How does the bio-psycho-socio-cultural theory of menopause described by Hunter and Rendall (2007) help to interpret retrospective descriptions of menopause from a sample of Australian women, collected via semi-structured interviews?’

open questions, the researcher limits the chance that they lead participants in particular directions in their narratives that may create a confirmatory bias in findings. We consider further ways of minimising bias, such as reflexivity practices, in Point 5 of the approach.

Deductive qualitative research not only involves seeking if prior findings apply in new samples (as discussed above), but also whether different data collection methods will elicit similar or overlapping findings. Hence an important and legitimate take on deductive research is to change the kind of data collection approach from previous studies to see if theory or constructs still apply. We encourage researchers to use the full range of data collection approaches available in qualitative deductive work to undertake this task; interviews, focus groups, diaries, brief written texts, vignettes, online comments, archival or journalistic narratives, story completion methods and more (Braun, Clarke, and Gray 2017).

Point 4: Common features of deductive data analysis

Most analytical approaches can be used in deductive qualitative research, with notable mentions being thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), Fife and Gossner’s (2024) DQA, and Gilgun’s (2013) deductive approach to Grounded Theory. Here we provide a concise synthesis of key points to consider in all deductive approaches to analysis. In any form of deductive analysis, two processes are non-negotiable. Firstly, the analytic scheme into which data is to be ordered and categorised must be developed into an explicit form before

starting analysis (e.g. Coulburn, Miller, and Susilawati 2024; Pearse 2019; Yang et al. 2022). This analytic scheme can be modified as the work progresses (particularly in inductive-deductive hybrid designs), but it must be initially set out before the analysis starts. This ensures that the deductive ethos of intentionally building on existing work via pre-existing findings of theories is transparently achieved. Secondly, any existing theory needs to be operationalised into a form that can be used to frame the analysis, for example by parsing theoretical concepts into analytic themes or categories—this is an active process rather than a passive one.

The second common feature in a deductive analysis is that the researcher must engage with the challenge of being able to interpret instances of the a priori themes or categories in the data when reading through texts. This requires a recognition of relevant patterns in the data. Such pattern recognition requires a thorough process of committing the deductive scheme to memory through memorisation, repetition and practice. Only then will a deductive analysis be possible. In support of this, it is useful to organise the pre-determined analytic scheme into a structured coding template or manual (e.g., see the coding framework used in Coulburn, Miller, and Susilawati 2024; or the Code Book applied in Pearse 2019).

As a third common feature, we concur with Fife and Gossner (2024) in their assertion that deductive qualitative researchers must purposefully attend to four types of evidence: supporting, contradicting, refining, and expanding evidence. In so doing, the analyst commits to *any* potential outcome with the a priori theory or findings, thus minimising the chance of confirmation bias or missing anything that could further develop the theory or themes being researched.

A key decision for researchers with regards to analysis is whether to use a pure deductive approach, or whether to use an inductive-deductive hybrid. Inductive-deductive hybrids, as outlined by Fife and Gossner (2024), allow for the flexible combination of a deductively applied theory or model from previous research combined with an open focus on emergent themes and the possibility of refining the theory or model as data collection proceeds. This combination is appropriate for studies where the explicit aim is to continue the development of existing theory. For example, Stratton et al. (2006) used an inductive-deductive hybrid approach in an interview study with family therapists about their views and added to an existing outcome questionnaire they called the Systemic Clinical Outcome and Routine Evaluation (or SCORE). Their approach allowed for combining an a priori analytical template and emergent flexibility.

Pure deductive research may be more appropriate if the study is applying a very established theory that has been tested in many studies, and the aim of the study is to determine if it applies to a new set of cases, with something of a binary “it does apply or it does not apply” conclusion. For example, a research study that aims to apply Gilligan’s (1982) theory of moral

development in adolescents to a study with a non-Western culture may choose simply to ascertain whether it does or does not work as a theoretical scheme, with no objective to continue developing the theory; hence a purely deductive approach would be justified.

Point 5: Standards of quality in deductive qualitative research

Approaches to quality standards concur that qualitative research should strive to be conducted systematically and rigorously, to ensure the process and outcome are both of high quality (Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez 2019; Spencer et al. 2003; Tracy 2010; Yardley 2000). Below, we highlight issues that should be given particular consideration in deductive qualitative research, in the matters of paradigmatic positioning, trustworthiness through teamwork, transparency through auditability, and reflexivity.

Paradigmatic positioning

Ensuring a rigorous approach to deductive research requires consideration and contextualisation of the study within an underlying paradigm (or set of paradigms), to establish a coherent positioning relative to an understanding of reality (ontology) and of what makes for an acceptable knowledge claim or interpretation (epistemology). When conducting deductive research, the researcher must make their paradigmatic positioning as explicit as possible. We argue that most, if not all, paradigms benefit from the use of deductive research, yet the epistemological and ontological framing of the deductive work will differ. For example, a critical realist may argue for deductive research on the basis that, although we can only know the world imperfectly through language and interpretation, there is a real world against which our knowledge can be developed and checked via inductive then deductive means, in the direction of an increasingly veridical representation of the phenomenon (Fletcher 2016). In contrast, a social constructionist may argue that a deductive research study that builds on existing findings from inductive work may help to determine whether socially constructed categories that were created from the inductive study apply across different cultures, languages or dialects.

Trustworthiness

An overarching quality principle that applies across paradigms is trustworthiness (Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez 2019; Spencer et al. 2003; Tracy 2010). Deductive research is based explicitly on existing knowledge of the researcher(s), therefore the capacity of the researcher to influence the research outcomes in biased ways is arguably more pronounced than in inductive research. Following on from Fife and Gossner (2024), we propose that team-based design and analysis acts against the

potential for individual bias such as confirmation bias in deductive work. The research team provides a social space to debate and discuss preliminary conclusions and to highlight any issues with the approach of a single analyst. Working with a research team also helps ensure findings will capture the complexity of the phenomenon being studied (Gilgun 2013).

Transparency

A transparent approach to deductive qualitative research is important to demonstrate that a systematic and clear approach has been taken to design and analysis (Tracy 2010; Yardley 2000). To enhance the standard of transparency in deductive research in the design phase, there should be an explicit description of whether the deductive design aims to work with an existing set of findings, or a more established model or theory. This should go together with a clear rationale for sampling, for example stating whether the sampling criteria will be the same or different from the prior inductive study. There should be (a) an auditable trail of research design decisions, within a deductive research framework such as the integrative approach presented here, or another recognised protocol such as DQA (Fife and Gossner 2024), (b) a statement of how any existing theory or constructs are operationalised into a form for framing the analysis in the study, (c) and how these will be critically interrogated to ensure that the deductive approach limits bias in data collection or analysis. For example, keeping track of how the analytic scheme is developed is one such way of promoting an audit trail. This should include noting the timing and process of key phases of the analysis and any decisions made on analytical developments or revisions.

Reflexivity

Given that the researcher's a priori decisions are central to deductive research, reflexivity is a particularly important standard of quality, to ensure that the potential for biases (including confirmatory bias) to negatively affect data collection and analysis are minimised. This includes having an enhanced awareness of what the researcher is bringing to the study, their positionality and how they may be influencing the study to minimise or limit this (Frost 2016; Frost and Bailey-Rodriguez 2019; Tracy 2010). One way to enhance reflexivity is for each researcher to keep a reflexive journal and for the team to engage in reflexive discussions, actively exploring positionality and experiences in relation to the research as well as recording how decisions have been made.

During analysis in a team-based study, there are various approaches that can be taken to limit risk of confirmation bias. For example, the researcher(s) who are conducting the coding analysis should consult regularly with the rest of the team. Alternatively, it may be that the entire research team

independently conducts some of the coding process and then they come together to discuss their conclusions with each other. When there are disagreements or alternative interpretations, it is particularly important to review these and decide which interpretation most closely aligns with the data.

Reflexive considerations in deductive qualitative research should particularly focus on the reasons for undertaking deductive research, as well as other questions from inception to completion. The questions that could be explicitly addressed in a reflexive statement include: Why did we choose a deductive rather than inductive approach? Why did we base our deductive study on the existing work that we selected? What is it about the existing work that seems to warrant deductive examination? What assumptions beyond the theory/themes are we bringing to the development of the analytic scheme? Why have we coded the data in this particular way? How does our deductive coding vary between the research team and why might this be? How have we reached consensus following disagreements or alternative interpretations in the coding or analysis?

Conclusion and implications

The historically predominant focus on inductive research in qualitative methods has brought important ways of investigating phenomena in open and exploratory ways, capturing depth, complexity, nuance and contextual understandings. However, the relative lack of accompanying deductive qualitative research has led to many isolated pockets of fragmented exploratory activity, and a lack of progressive development of theory and constructs. In this paper, we have argued that deductive work, building on the progress of others, has an important place alongside inductive work, and we have presented an integrative approach for deductive qualitative research, providing the researcher with practical guidance to design coherent and rigorous deductive qualitative studies. Our approach presents five key decision points, covering sampling, research question formulation, data collection, analysis and quality standards particular to deductive qualitative research. We contend that the wider use of deductive logic in research designs can help to give the $N=1$ case study a more prominent place in empirical qualitative enquiry.

Furthermore, deductive research is an ideal option for student projects. The inductive task of developing a model or theory from scratch can be a daunting task for a student and there may be a propensity to over-generalise findings. Arguably a more viable task for student projects is the deductive task of showing whether and how existing theory helps to interpret specific cases. Such deductive work on a modest scale, even with a single participant, can contribute meaningfully to the literature, as described earlier.

We believe that the future of deductive qualitative research is bright. Indeed, the more widespread adoption of deductive designs by qualitative researchers will help to ensure that the qualitative research community contributes integrated, comprehensive theories to psychology and the social sciences, which have been investigated across a range of contexts or cultures. We maintain that there is more than one way in which to embark on the voyage of discovery to knowledge, and different valuable ways in which to embody the role of the qualitative explorer. We hope to promote discussion, application and further development of deductive qualitative research, and we invite researchers to apply the presented integrative deductive qualitative approach as a way to further enhance and strengthen the collective power of the qualitative researcher community in psychology and the social sciences.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

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