

**Qualitatively-driven mixed methods approaches to counselling and  
psychotherapy research**

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## **Abstract**

Many researchers and clinicians take an 'either, or' position regarding factors responsible for change when conducting research. Qualitatively-driven mixed methods privilege the qualitative approach and offers the opportunity to generate multi-dimensional material, permitting a more holistic insight into experiences that can be understood from a combination of epistemological and ontological stances. A qualitatively-driven mixed methods applies a 'both, and' position when exploring the elements that produce change or that are under investigation, which can be of particular value to counselling and psychotherapy research.

There are various ways of engaging with qualitatively-driven mixed methods. Some designs include both qualitative and quantitative components, where the former is the core element. The secondary component may also be qualitative, known as a multimethod design. Yet other designs mix different qualitative approaches, through the application of different qualitative analyses to the same data (pluralistic qualitative research).

This paper discusses the application and value of qualitatively-driven mixed methods in counselling and psychotherapy research through the presentation of two research case studies; one which mixes both qualitative and quantitative components to investigate the experiences of pain alleviation following a CBT pain management programme; and one which applies a pluralistic approach to a counselling psychology doctorate exploring the experiences and meanings attached to self-harming. Through illustration and discussion of the case

studies' mixed methods approaches, this paper demonstrates that qualitatively-driven mixed methods produce a more enhanced and holistic understanding into phenomena, and therefore a more balanced perspective to counselling and psychotherapy research.

**Keywords:** qualitatively-driven mixed methods, multimethod, pluralism, multi-dimensional, counselling research, psychotherapy research

## **Introduction**

Qualitative approaches aim to understand how individuals experience and make sense of their worlds; these approaches recognise that the social world is subjective and varied and therefore, there are multiple stories of lived experience. Qualitative approaches favour exploration of human meaning-making, an important factor in counselling and psychotherapy research.

Nevertheless, many researchers and clinicians take an 'either, or' position regarding factors responsible for change when conducting research (Cooper & McLeod, 2007). Some methods emphasise lived experience, others focus on identity construction, and yet others focus on cognitive processes and so on.

Qualitatively-driven mixed methods privilege the qualitative approach and offers the opportunity to generate multi-dimensional material (Gabb, 2009), permitting a more holistic insight into experiences that can be understood from a combination of epistemological and ontological stances (Frost & Nolas, 2011). A qualitatively-driven mixed methods approach applies a 'both, and' position when

exploring the elements that produce change or that are under investigation, which can be of particular value to counselling and psychotherapy research. This paper will explore how these *together* can produce change, and may be important to the reality of the individual. It will specifically look at the application of a qualitatively-driven mixed methods approach to produce more holistic and multi-dimensional insight into phenomena by using a combination of methods. There are various ways of engaging with qualitatively-driven mixed methods, such as by combining qualitative and quantitative methods, or by combining several qualitative methods; these will be explored in this paper.

### **Qualitatively-driven mixed methods**

People's experiences and lived realities are multi-dimensional; if phenomena have different layers, then choosing to view these phenomena from the perspective of a single dimension may mean that our understanding is inadequate and incomplete (Mason, 2006). Mixed methods research refers to the use of two or more methodological strategies in a single research study with the purpose of gaining insight into another aspect of the phenomenon under investigation, which cannot be accessed by the use of one method alone. Therefore, mixed methods research is a systematic way of using at least two research methods in order to answer a single over-arching research question; these research methods can be either all quantitative or all qualitative, or can be both quantitative and qualitative (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). The value of combining methods is that it provides a more enhanced understanding than using a single method provides (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), which in turn offers a more balanced perspective of phenomena (Morse & Chung, 2003).

Furthermore, mixing methods goes beyond the mixing of type of data solely, such as whether it is quantitative or qualitative, but rather, it is also concerned with the mixing of worldviews and ways of understanding these (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006).

Qualitatively-driven mixed methods privilege the qualitative approach (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015). Drawing on qualitatively-driven mixed methods offers the opportunity to generate multi-dimensional material (Gabb, 2009) and permits a more holistic insight into experiences that can be understood from a combination of epistemological and ontological stances (Frost & Nolas, 2011), suggesting that the ability to perceive these layers is rooted in paradigmatic flexibility. Qualitatively-driven mixed methods offer the opportunity to explore and understand phenomena and its complexities in a manner that is not bound by methodological dogma and constraints (Elichaooff et al., 2014). This approach also pursues access to unique perspectives on experience and seeks to highlight the dynamism and complexity of phenomena by its use of multiple paradigms (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

The use of several paradigms may incur tension, but the dialogue between contrasting ideas can provide a space for new insights and understandings (Creswell, 2009). Gabb (2009) puts forward the notion of 'messiness' of research in analysis and representations of phenomena, rather than the tidying away of experiential loose ends that illustrate lived lives, which may be particularly salient in counselling and psychotherapy research. The retention of messiness in the representation of findings does not indicate that analytical rigour is at risk, rather, it reflects the complexity of experiences that may

otherwise be lost; loose ends do not mean frayed ends (Rodriguez & Frost, 2015). This may go some way to further illustrate how the richness of multi-dimensionality can be understood through the use of qualitatively-driven mixed methods. Therefore it is recognised that multi-dimensionality and multi-methodological perspectives offer some means to access these additional layers, conflicts, contradictions and messiness (Frost et al., 2011), where a co-operative relationship between question, epistemology, paradigm and researcher is part of an ongoing reflexive process (Chamberlain et al., 2011).

It is also important to note that methods are tools in a researcher's toolkit, and it is the researcher's methodology (theoretical perspective) which determines how the tools (methods) will be used to best address the issue (research problem).

One such framework which supports the mixing of methods is pragmatism, which focuses on determining the meaning of phenomena (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004); it looks at what is meaningful and understands that different knowledge claims arise from different ways of engaging with the world (Biesta, 2010). It achieves this by placing the research question in a central position in order to attain the richest possible response to it and by basing itself on the assumption that there is not a single set of methods that is correct (Mertens, 2012). Choice of method(s) is subsequently driven by the aim of finding those that are best suited to addressing the research question rather than being hindered by debates of incommensurability (Elichaoff et al., 2014). Furthermore, adopting a pragmatic approach helps to avoid the issue of methodolatry, where the privileging of certain research methods and their underlying frameworks (as opposed to the topic under investigation)

discourages the adoption of methods to suit said research topic (Chamberlain, 2000; Chamberlain et al., 2011).

### **Approaches in qualitatively-driven mixed methods**

An important characteristic of qualitatively-driven mixed methods research that combines both qualitative and quantitative aspects is that the qualitative component forms the core or dominant aspect of the overall study, with the quantitative element performing a secondary or auxiliary role in the research design. To reflect this, the qualitative core component is depicted in all uppercase letters (QUAL), with the secondary quantitative element depicted in all lowercase letters (quant) (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

The secondary or auxiliary component may also be qualitative; this secondary qualitative element would take on this role in support of the dominant qualitative component. This type of qualitatively-driven mixed methods is called a multimethod approach due to its use of two different qualitative components that comprise the research design. To reflect this, the qualitative core component is depicted in all uppercase letters (QUAL), with the secondary qualitative element depicted in all lowercase letters (qual) (Morse & Niehaus, 2009).

Another way of acknowledging and upholding the multi-dimensionality of experience is through pluralistic qualitative research (PQR). This recognises that different perspectives produce distinct understanding of meaning-making, and the layering of different qualitative approaches create an array of insights to the same phenomenon (Bailey-Rodriguez, 2017). A qualitative pluralistic approach recognises that there are multiple ways of viewing phenomena rather

than there being a single 'truth'; it also understands that different methods set out to achieve different things, and thus can provide diverse insights to the same phenomena. Reality and existence are seen to be multiple (Johnson, 2015), and people's experiences are multi-dimensional as well as fragmentary and contradictory. Pluralism argues that a single method cannot convey everything there is to know about a phenomenon, therefore a choice should not have to be made between which method to use, as employment of two (or more) can provide multi-perspectival and holistic understanding (Bailey-Rodriguez, 2017; Frost, 2011; Willig, 2013). Consequently, the presence of multi-ontological stances and the tensions they generate are strengths of a pluralistic approach, which involves moving away from an 'either, or' position to a 'both, and' position (Frost & Nolas, 2011). This means that all qualitative components are considered to be dominant, and can be reflected through depiction of all uppercase letters (QUAL-QUAL) for the two or more elements that comprise a qualitatively-driven pluralistic approach (although this QUAL-QUAL depiction is not often used in literature on qualitative pluralism).

Overall, qualitatively-driven mixed methods approaches seek to avoid reductionism and allow for a holistic view of experience, which would not be possible from the use of a mono-method approach (Frost, 2008). They are particularly appropriate approaches when there is a lack of clarity in a theoretical framework and when exploring areas which have not received much attention. Whichever qualitatively-driven mixed method approach is better suited to the research problem at hand, these designs can be particularly helpful in research that seeks to understand the complexity of perspectives of



those for whom reality and meanings can change (Frost, 2011), such as for clients in psychotherapy or counselling.

### **Qualitatively-driven mixed methods research designs**

Generally, mixed methods research has tended to have a more positivist leaning, where the qualitative component takes on the role of the auxiliary or secondary element in assistance of the dominant or core quantitative one. The most frequent sequential mixed methods designs tend to use an initial piloting secondary qualitative element before a larger dominant quantitative survey, illustrating the typical use of the qualitative element in service of the quantitative component (Brannen, 2005).

Nevertheless, there are a multitude of reasons why mixed methods researchers, or indeed qualitative researchers, might want to mix methods which feature the qualitative component as the core or dominant one in counselling and psychotherapy research. Presented below are some examples of a range of designs, or templates, reflecting the dominant status of the qualitative component in mixed methods research, including QUALitative-quantitative, QUALitative-qualitative multimethods (adapted from Hesse-Biber 2010; Hesse-Biber et al., 2015; Morse, 2010) and QUALitative-QUALitative pluralistic research (adapted from Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020). This is not an exhaustive list, and it should be noted that these designs should be amended or modified according to the particular research problem at hand. It may also be the case that during the research project, its design may need to

change or adjust in response to new findings, as can be the case with qualitative research (as an iterative research process).

#### QUAL-quant design examples

*A secondary quantitative element may be employed first in order to obtain a representative sample, in order to enhance the subsequent dominant qualitative findings. quant-QUAL*

In order to obtain a qualitative sample that is representative of the target population, a demographic survey could be conducted first, from which this sample can then be selected.

*A subsequent secondary quantitative element may be used in order to generalise or test the theoretical ideas generated by the core qualitative element's findings. QUAL-quant*

In order for the researcher to generalise to a larger population from the in-depth exploratory qualitative findings, or to test the theoretical ideas produced, the qualitative findings can be used to inform and design the ensuing quantitative element.

*A quantitative study may result in unexpected outliers, and then iteratively takes on the role of a secondary element as a dominant qualitative element is then required for further exploration. quant-QUAL*

In an initial quantitative study, unforeseen outliers may materialise, providing an opportunity to expand knowledge regarding the research aim, and/or stimulates

new research questions that necessitate further and in-depth exploration in the form of a qualitative element. The initial research design is adapted to include the dominant qualitative component, to reflect this serendipity.

*A secondary quantitative element is used first to produce research questions to be addressed in the subsequent qualitative element. quant-QUAL*

An initial quantitative component can be employed in order to investigate, in a broader manner, contemporary matters and interests, with a view to generate new research questions that can then be explored in an in-depth manner in the dominant qualitative component.

#### QUAL-qual design examples

*A dominant qualitative element may be supplemented by a secondary qualitative component in order to gather a multi-perspectival understanding of a phenomenon from those involved in it. QUAL-qual*

In order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of an experience, a dominant qualitative aspect can be supplemented by secondary qualitative datasets centering specifically on aspects of the experience that have been generated by the dominant element.

The secondary component, informed by the primary qualitative element, subsequently focuses on gathering particular types of information from the different perspectives of those involved in the experience. The findings of this secondary component cannot be interpreted or understood outside of the context of the primary element (they cannot stand alone).

*A core qualitative component may be followed by secondary qualitative elements looking at sub-groups to further explore specific issues identified in the core component, with a view to compare and contrast the findings of these subgroups. QUAL-qual*

Once the initial dominant qualitative component has been employed and the analysis completed, issues pertaining to particular sub-groups are then identified and are subsequently explored in secondary qualitative elements.

These secondary elements are developed specifically to explore the similarities and differences between the findings of the independent sub-groups. Therefore, this design aims to compare and contrast these findings, understood within the context of the core qualitative component, thus producing a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

*An initial secondary qualitative component is employed to explore the 'before' experiences of participants, followed by a core qualitative element to explore the 'after' experiences of different participants who underwent a similar phenomenon, in order to explore changes. qual-QUAL*

In order to explore changes in participants after they have experienced a particular phenomenon without having to wait for the phenomenon to have finished taking place, a 'before' and 'after' approach can be undertaken. An initial secondary qualitative component is used to understand the 'before' perspectives of a group of participants experiencing the particular phenomenon.

This is then followed by a core qualitative element with a different group of

participants who have undergone a similar experience, to understand the 'after' perspective.

#### QUAL-QUAL design examples

*Multiple core qualitative methods might be combined with equal use and status, to gain more holistic insight to the multiple layers of an experience. QUAL-QUAL*

Several qualitative methods are employed within the same study (qualitative pluralism), with the understanding that each qualitative component applied accesses a different dimension of the phenomenon under exploration in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of it. This multi-layered qualitative approach reflects the complexity and messiness of human experience and emotion. It does so by valuing all qualitative methods used as being equal to each other in use and status, and it does not prioritise one qualitative approach over either a secondary qualitative or quantitative component, as the previously discussed designs do. There are several ways to engage in qualitative pluralism:

#### *Methodological pluralism*

This refers to the use of multiple methods of qualitative data collection, to enable insight to the different dimensions of human experience. Methodological pluralism takes the view that human experience is formed by a variety of dimensions (affect, vision, discourse and so on) and so is best understood by

exploring different forms of data (also see multi-modal approaches to qualitative research; Reavey, 2011, 2020).

### *Analytical pluralism*

This refers to the mixing of several methods of qualitative data analysis on a single dataset (Clarke et al., 2015), with the understanding that it can tell us several various things depending on the different questions we ask of it, and on the different ways we analyse it (Willig, 2013). The use of multiple methods of qualitative data analysis enables different things in the data to be attended to, as diverse forms of knowledge are produced through different methods of analysis. Therefore, a pluralistic analysis produces multi-layered and multi-perspectival interpretations which allows for a richer understanding of phenomena. The analyses are viewed as complementary rather than in competition with each other; each analysis reflects another dimension of the experience (Frost et al., 2011).

### *Within-method pluralism*

This refers to using the same analytical qualitative method in different ways to analyse data in different ways, but with an underpinning of the same philosophical assumptions. The aim remains to explore the data in a way which is as open as possible, whilst addressing an overarching research question. The findings of each layer of analysis can be considered separately to address the question brought to the data by the use of individual methods, and together

to build a fuller picture than possible with the use of one application of the method.

### *Across-method pluralism*

This refers to using different analytical qualitative methods to analyse the data in different ways, and so this approach may be underpinned by differing philosophical viewpoints, allowing for distinct ways of exploring the data. By combining different methods of qualitative analysis, there is an understanding that meanings can be accessed in different ways, and that meanings constructed from the analysis are not constrained by what one method alone is able to convey. Sometimes, meanings found using different methods can complement each other; sometimes there are new findings; sometimes there are findings that contradict those of another method. This is not a problem in pluralistic research as its aim is not to triangulate, but instead to understand the many ways in which human experience can be understood in different contexts and with different audiences. The use of each method contributes to an overall understanding of the experience at the centre of the research, even if this means there is an apparent lack of coherence in the meanings that are derived.

These discussed designs are but a few examples and there are others, and other reasons for engaging in qualitatively-driven mixed methods. The presented designs above are also simplified examples, and there are more complex templates. For example, a qualitatively-driven researcher may firstly employ a secondary scoping quantitative questionnaire on a large sample which

includes nested qualitative open-ended questions (quant+qual) on a topic which has not received much research attention. The separate analyses conducted on the qualitative and quantitative data informs the design of a core qualitative component consisting of a focus group which is qualitatively analysed (QUAL), allowing for an in-depth exploration of the topic, informed by the more open and exploratory secondary element. Therefore, the template might look as such: quant+qual → QUAL (for qualitatively-driven mixed methods designs in action, see Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

Overall, qualitatively-driven mixed methods designs, whether it is using a qualitative core component with a secondary quantitative element; or a secondary qualitative component; or even using qualitative methods where each element is equal in status, may be particularly suitable when there is a lack of clarity of the theoretical framework, and when exploring areas that have not received much attention, or have not received any attention thus far.

### **The practice of qualitatively-driven mixed methods approaches to counselling and psychotherapy research**

This section of the paper presents and discusses the application and value of qualitatively-driven mixed methods in counselling and psychotherapy research through the use of two illustrative case studies. The first case study employs a QUAL-quant design, and the second case study applies a pluralistic QUAL-QUAL design. Unfortunately, to the best of the author's knowledge, there is no



published study of a counselling and psychotherapy nature that has used a multimethod QUAL-qual design (see the Conclusion section of this paper for a discussion as to why this may be).

### **QUAL-quant mixed method design**

*A mixed-method study exploring suffering and alleviation in participants attending a chronic pain management programme.*

Dysvik et al. (2013) set out to investigate the experiences of the suffering arising from chronic pain, as well as to explore the alleviation of this suffering within a chronic pain management programme based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). The authors understand chronic pain as being a complex and multi-faceted experience, which inescapably includes subjective meanings and a phenomenological dimension. Therefore, employing a qualitatively-driven mixed method design enabled them to investigate this in a way that privileges the complexity of the experience of chronic pain.

Dysvik et al. drew their sample of 34 participants from university hospital outpatients who were taking part in a group CBT pain management eight-week programme which included a six-month follow-up. The participants were between 18-67 years of age, had experienced chronic non-malignant pain lasting for more than six months, had completed medical investigations and/or treatments prior to starting the intervention, had no ongoing litigation related to the cause of pain, and were motivated to complete an active pain rehabilitation programme. The CBT pain management programme was run by two counsellors and a volunteer, and it consisted of 'supervised dialogues,

therapeutic writing, physical activity, education and corresponding homework' (2013, p. 868).

The authors used a qualitatively-driven simultaneous and sequential mixed method design (see Figure 1). It was qualitatively-driven as its emphasis was in exploring the participants' suffering and experiences associated with the intervention in order to build a theoretical model of suffering during chronic pain. The dominant qualitative (QUAL) component consisted of written reports, describing the participants' suffering and experiences of the programme, with some open-ended questions as prompts. These reports were completed at two time-points: the first within a week of completing the intervention (*t2*) and the second just before the six-month follow-up (*t3*). The secondary quantitative (quant) element consisted of a standardised pain questionnaire to detect changes in suffering over time, from the 'Norwegian Pain Forum', with additional questions included from the 'Brief Pain Inventory', the 'Coping Strategies Questionnaire', and the 'SF-36 Health Survey'. Further additional questions were added regarding patients' experiences of living with long-term pain, patient satisfaction and the experience of change. The questionnaire was administered at three time-points: the first before the intervention commenced (*t1*), and the second (*t2*) and third (*t3*) at the same time as with the qualitative reports described above.

The QUAL and quant analyses were conducted separately. A phenomenological hermeneutic approach was used to obtain the meanings of the participants' experiences at both *t2* and *t3* separately. Paired sample *t*-tests were used to test for differences over time; chi-square and a one-way ANOVA

were used to test for differences between participants with different degrees of pain distribution across the time-points (pp. 869-870).

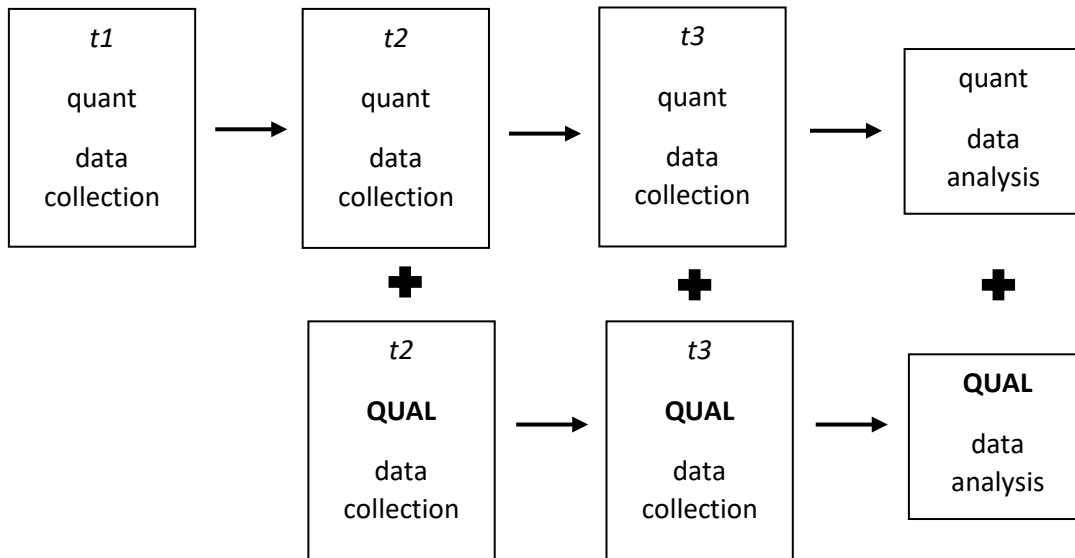


Figure 1: Dysvik et al.'s (2013) qualitatively-driven QUAL-quant design

The findings from the dominant qualitative component resulted in themes relating to the participants' experiences. In the analysis of the *t2* data, two major themes were extracted: 'Increased understanding about the importance of their own efforts' and 'Support from the group participants and the group leaders was valuable'. In the analysis of the *t3* data, three major themes were formulated: 'Knowledge of the healthy components of the change processes', 'Awareness of emotional, cognitive and behavioural changes' and 'Movements towards a better life' (p. 870). The results from the auxiliary quantitative element demonstrated that there were significant changes between *t1* and *t2* regarding an increased health status, and reduction in minimum pain and average pain.

There were also significant changes from *t1* to *t3* concerning reduced catastrophe thinking and pain intensity (p. 871).

Dysvik et al. then combined the respective core qualitative and secondary quantitative findings to produce two overall themes, where the results of the secondary quantitative component both informed and supported the findings of the core qualitative element. These overall themes were: 'The need for a change of focus' and 'Active involvement to achieve a meaningful life'. To illustrate the participants' lived experience and how this was supported by the quantitative results, the following is a brief presentation on some of the key aspects of both overall themes respectively.

One of the main points discussed in the first overall theme related to the participants having a more positive focus away from pain, and increased motivation and enhanced commitment to self-management. This was demonstrated by one of the participants who stated "*Now I focus more on possibilities*" and another said "*A foundation for a positive spiral is now established*", showing their understanding that the pain management programme was a starting point, and the realisation of the importance of incorporating their practices and knowledge into their day-to-day lives (p. 873). This was supported with the auxiliary quantitative results which indicated the participants' levels of satisfaction to be highest with procedures that promoted positive change and focus, such as therapeutic dialogue, physical activity and education.

Regarding the second overall theme, one of the main points related to the alteration in participants' beliefs about their life situations, stemming from their active involvement in attaining a meaningful life. This active involvement was illustrated in the qualitative findings, and is exemplified when participants said "*Changes lie in how to deal with the pain. I am no longer on the bottom floor as before*", "*Have become more aware of my situation and that only I can do something about it*" and "*Managed to put painful/difficult thoughts away*" (p. 869). These findings were supported with the quantitative results showing a decrease in catastrophe thinking from t1 to t3.

The accounts of lived experience represent rich and nuanced descriptions of the issues relating to the suffering of patients with chronic pain and their alleviation of this pain within the programme. Together, the findings of both components illustrate a deeper and more critical interpretation of the experiences of chronic pain and suffering during the CBT pain management programme, and that the intervention indeed reduced suffering. For more details on the overarching themes combining all findings, please see the discussion in Dysvik et al. (2013).

Dysvik et al.'s (2013) qualitatively-driven mixed methods exploration of the impact of a therapeutic intervention on pain management is a good example of a QUAL-quant design in counselling and psychotherapy research as it enabled further insight, clarification and comprehensive understanding of different aspects of the phenomenon otherwise not possible with the use of one method alone.

## **QUAL-QUAL pluralistic mixed method design**

*Wording the pain: An exploration of meaning-makings around emotions and self-injury.*

In her counselling psychology doctorate, Josselin (2013) set out to explore the individual meanings attached to self-harming, and the particular ways in which an individual who repetitively engages in self-injury experiences this, and constructs and communicates their unique experience. Josselin highlights that self-injury is a complex and multidimensional behaviour which is influenced by many factors, and that the unitary approaches and theories to understanding self-harming cannot capture the multi-layered sense-making process of this individual experience. Josselin posits that even if a model of self-harming behaviour were to be developed in a way that captures all of the multiple factors surrounding this experience, it could still be problematic for therapeutic practice as self-injury has highly unique meanings attached to it by each client; this unique sense-making should be discovered with each individual client.

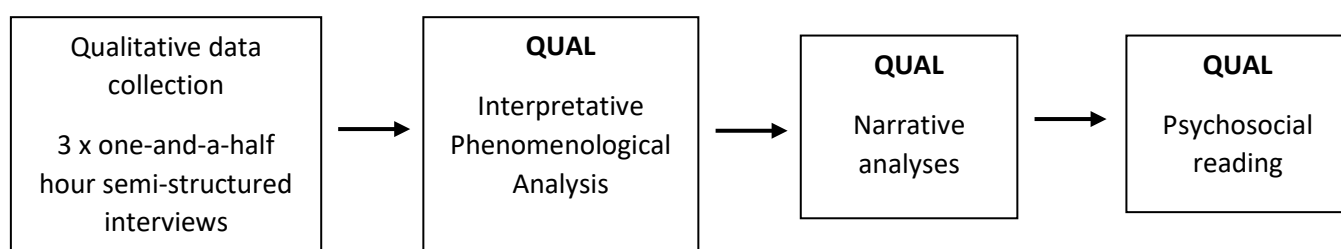
Therefore, Josselin chose a qualitatively-driven pluralistic approach with the aim of understanding how an individual who has a history of self-injury makes sense of their behaviour (p. 57). Josselin emphasises that making sense of self-harming is multifaceted in that it can be explored phenomenologically, in order to make sense of the lived experience of self-injury; it can be investigated in an autobiographical manner by making sense of self-injury in the context of one's history; it can be studied by taking a constructionist approach where it can be made sense of in the context of wider social and cultural discourses. However, rather than choosing 'either, or', Josselin employed a 'both, and' pluralistic

approach which explored several layers of the self-harming experience in order to provide a new multi-dimensional understanding that would inform counselling and psychotherapeutic practice.

Josselin used a single case study and carefully selected an individual to participate in the research after taking into consideration various ethical issues. The participant was a female (Tina, a pseudonym used to preserve anonymity) who had received a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and who at the time of the research had engaged in various years of self-injury behaviour and was still engaging in the behaviour; this ensured greater ease of access into the experience. Tina was interviewed three times at weekly intervals for an hour and a half each time (using semi-structured interviews), permitting the collection of sufficient rich and in-depth data that would lend itself well to a pluralistic approach.

Josselin employed a sequential analytical pluralistic design, where the same data is analysed using multiple methods of qualitative analysis. The first method applied to the interview data was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in order to understand how the participant made sense of her repetitive self-injury behaviour. This was followed by the application of two layers of narrative analyses; the first layer (Gee's poetic approach) to explore the framing of the personal significance of the self-injury experiences in the context of the participant's life story, as well as to focus on the linguistic properties of the data; the second layer (Frank's illness narratives) to understand stories both in the context of illness, and as a way to repair the damage the illness has done to the person's sense of where they are in their life and where they may be headed.

The third and final method of data analysis was a psychosocial reading which combined discursive and psychoanalytical lenses to contextualise the participant's sense-making of the self-injury behaviour, regarding their own sense of self and sense of their family relationships, as well as regarding the cultural and discourses they had drawn on. Together, these different methods of analysis applied to the same data created a rich, complex, and multi-layered understanding of the experiences of self-injury, using an analytical pluralistic design (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Josselin's (2013) qualitatively-drive analytical pluralistic design*

A brief summary of the findings of each of the analytical qualitative methods is now presented, but see Josselin (2013) for an in-depth presentation and discussion of each.

The IPA findings revealed the various functions of the self-harm, as well as a link with diffuse emotional distress. At times, the self-harming behaviour was impulsive and triggered, but at other times it was premeditated, although there seemed to be a sense of continuity in the behaviour. Tina felt a sense of control over self-harming, but it could also turn into something that controls her, as well



as feeling exhilarating. It was a way to manage her life and to communicate her distress, as exemplified when she referred to her scars resulting from self-harming behaviour: *"For me they allow other people to see the magnitude of how difficult things can get"*.

Another key finding from the IPA related to a fragile sense of self, which was underpinned with distress, and even in good times, the distress could only be kept at bay for so long. The fragile sense of self was also underpinned by a divided and confused inner world, and a self that she would try to hide: *"Until somebody properly knows me, they won't actually see that in me (...) cause I'm often wearing a smile on my face"*.

The suffering underlying the self-injury behaviour related to the impact of the participant's early experiences and to her experiences of the 'other' and of her family. The 'other' is seen to be judgemental, controlling and as being out of touch with the participant's reality. Tina's experiences of her family illustrate the impact on her sense of self and her self-harm. These experiences included early childhood abuse which at times triggered her self-harming behaviour, using denial as a way to cope and a sense of isolation and being trapped.

The findings also illustrated Tina's increasing comprehension of her experience of self-injury, and of this behaviour as a way to achieve control over her life. She displays a newfound understanding of her self-harming, often tied to making sense of her emotional difficulties. This came with a new ability to verbalise out loud her experience, illustrated when she said *"through doing DBT and through*

*my studies, I actually have the words for things,” and “when I say that out loud (... ) makes me realise how far I’ve come so... it’s good”.*

Nevertheless, the theme of control was prevalent across most of the sub- and super-ordinate IPA themes. This method of analysis identified several ways of making meaning around self-harming behaviour. The IPA findings illuminated that these aspects of the participant’s experience were closely intertwined and multifaceted.

The first layer of narrative analysis (Gee’s poetic approach) focused on an episode of self-injury in the participant’s accounts, where Tina spoke about having shot herself in the shoulder with a friend’s gun. These findings also presented self-harm as a way to regain control and a means to communicate distress. However, this interpretation focused on new elements such as the importance of social connection or disconnection for Tina: *“And I remember looking through this anatomy book and thinking to myself/ where could I shoot myself that it would be bad enough that/ people would realise how/ how much pain I’m in emotionally/ but that wouldn’t be so bad that/ I would die.”*

These findings also illuminated a complex account which blended Tina’s external circumstances and inner experiencing in making sense of this episode, creating new insight into the logic and self-defeating nature of the self-injury behaviour. It became a way to achieve mastery over fear, and as a way to effect impact on others, as well as a desperate way in which to make others notice and empathise. However, her actions were futile, losing control of her body and senses and ended up feeling guilt and regret: *“I seem to remember a lot*

*actually/ I remember lying saying to myself/ I wish I hadn't done this/ I wish I hadn't done this.*" Gee's poetic approach provided a further reading around the participant's self-harming behaviour by paying close attention to structure and prosody.

The second layer of narrative analysis (Frank's illness narratives) focused on the participant as a 'wounded storyteller', weaving her story around her self-harming behaviour as an illness narrative.

Key findings centred around restitution and quest narratives which related to Tina's journey as a story of change, 'from getting better to bearing witness' where Tina as a child had struggled and Tina as a young adult had been very ill. However, the more mature Tina had gained a sense of control over herself, found her own space and could look to the future in a hopeful manner, illustrated when she says "*Because then you realise how... much better things are when you don't self-harm...*" and "*this is how I want to do it, by doing X, Y and Z. You know, you can see where you're going.*"

Another key finding of this analysis pertained to a chaos narrative around 'self-harm and chaos', allowing insight into Tina's disordered world. The content of the story suggests a complete loss of power and of bearings, including her sense of the future, illuminated in the following: "*It's really really hard to think beyond the next minutes or the next few seconds even. It's like: I can't stand this any longer, um... So you don't... it's like you just don't have this foresight. You don't have, um... you know, it's really really hard to be able to stop yourself.*" Frank's illness narratives allowed the placing of the participant's

account of self-injury within a wider meaning-making process, concerned with her overall sense of self illustrating alternating stories around restitution, quest and chaos.

Overall, both layers of narrative analyses illustrated the tension between the different meanings, and produced different insight to the participant's process of meaning-making around self-harm.

The findings of the psychosocial reading revealed how the participant constructed herself as an external, reflective observer of her own experience, who worked hard in the interviews to provide the researcher with the required materials with transparency and honesty, and to convince the researcher of the value of her subjective and at times chaotic account. Nevertheless, this position was co-constructed along with one of being out of control; this dualistic position conveys the tension between Tina as being capable of analysing and regaining control over her self-injury behaviour: *"I was able to stop myself"*, and with Tina as being out of control and influenced by inner and outer forces: *"some power in me"* and *"someone else at the steering wheel"*.

The self-harm was framed as always being an addictive and external behaviour controlled by external forces of which the participant had little say in, illustrated when Tina said *"I don't know if it's physical or psychological or what it is, but there's something about it that keeps bringing you back to it."* Tina repeatedly externalised the internal, and used it as a way to reduce blame and to deflect responsibility for the self-injury behaviour.

Tina's credibility as a rational observer is also strengthened by repeated references to her academic achievements, her use of technical anatomical words, her knowledge of neurochemistry and of psychology as well as of the transmission from her father to herself about logic and science. The purpose of this construction is to validate Tina as an objective co-researcher, to frame the self-harming behaviour as a result of external forces and to excuse her powerlessness. It can also be seen as a way for Tina to resist popular representations of those with mental illness.

Another key finding of the psychosocial reading related to Tina's construction of herself as being child-like with condemnation to others for failing to take care of her. This sense is underpinned by an absence of containment from an attuned caregiver and of being pulled back into a bleak and violent family home where she was unable to fend for herself, as well as the hospital for failing in its duty of care when Tina managed to buy some blades from the hospital shop and cut herself deeply, resulting in substantial blood loss. However, she surrendered in a child-like manner to the care of others she craved but could not ask for: "*when it comes to the point that other people have to come and help me, then I just close my eyes cause I just can't deal with it*".

Feelings of anger and guilt constantly reappeared, contributing to Tina's complex positioning around self-injury. Her accounts were peppered with internal aggression and hostility, and a symbolic association between her self-injury scars and the aggressive part of herself. Tina's accounts of self-harm were constructed as a great source of guilt, capturing her internal battle with her

punitive and critical superego: *“on top of the worries that you already had before you self-harmed, now you feel guilty, now you feel, um... Yeah now you feel... you’ve done something really wrong.”*

These findings from the psychosocial reading permitted insight to the impact of unconscious dynamics to illustrate an additional and different layer of meaning-making, thus enabling a different understanding to emerge.

Each qualitative analysis performed on the same data was equal in status, and produced a distinct layer of the participant’s meaning-making around self-injury, but which were often also echoed and developed across the different interpretative lenses, and some of the findings were unique to each method.

Rather than attempting to force the findings of each analytical method to the same data to fit with each other, the pluralistic readings can be seen as creating multiple layers of meaning-making. Together, the variety of insights produced a multiplicity of insight and understanding, which is valuable for therapeutic practice .

Josselin’s (2013) qualitatively-driven mixed methods counselling psychology doctorate study is a good example of analytical pluralism in counselling and psychotherapy research as it illustrates well how the multiple analyses offered a range of competing yet complementary ways in which to understand the participant’s subjective experience of a complex behaviour in a multi-dimensional manner.

## **Conclusion**

The case studies described above provide a glimpse into the practice of qualitatively-driven mixed methods research in counselling and psychotherapy, illuminating some of the specifics of how it is possible to implement this, and illustrating its value in providing more comprehensive and multifaceted understanding and insight to the phenomena under investigation. Qualitatively-driven mixed methods designs offer researchers methodological approaches that privilege the qualitative perspective, which seeks to minimise reductionism and enhance more holistic understandings of experiences, changes and practises in behaviours in context by applying a 'both, and' position and engaging with a multiplicity of meanings. This approach highlights the dynamism and complexity of experience, and enables research designs to be customised to explore this, focusing on research questions that seek to access in greater depth the complexity and multiplicity of experience than one approach alone permits.

A qualitatively-driven mixed methods approach is particularly suitable, valuable and important to counselling and psychotherapy research, given the multiplicity of meanings and multifaceted understandings of client experiences. As discussed, this type of research allows for a deeper engagement with the subjective meanings attached to multi-dimensional experiences and behaviours (Josselin & Willig, 2014).

Nonetheless, at present there are few studies in this field that employ qualitatively-driven mixed methods designs despite its notable value. In contrast, there has been a growth in the use of quantitatively-driven mixed methods approaches to counselling and psychotherapy research, in line with a

general rise of this type of methodological approach as it has become more established, popular and 'mainstream' over the last 30 years (see Hanson et al., 2005 for a discussion on mixed methods designs in counselling and psychotherapy research). However, qualitatively-driven mixed methods approaches are still relatively in their infancy in comparison, and so there is currently a dearth of its use in general, and particularly in research in counselling and psychotherapy. Furthermore, although QUAL-quant and QUAL-QUAL pluralistic designs have been written about more widely (e.g. Hesse-Biber, 2010; Hesse-Biber et al., 2015; Morse, 2016; Morse & Maddox, 2014 for QUAL-quant designs; and e.g. Chamberlain et al., 2011; Frost, 2011; Frost et al., 2011; Willig, 2013 for pluralistic designs), not much has been written about QUAL-qual designs so far (see Hesse-Biber et al., 2015; Morse & Niehaus, 2009). This scarcity applies to the general research field, much less research in counselling and psychotherapy research, illustrating this approach's newness still.

However, a qualitatively-driven mixed methods approach has huge potential to advance the understanding of human experience, support, relationships, interaction and more, by avoiding reductionism and embracing human complexity, all of which has a valuable place in counselling and psychotherapy research. It is hoped that this paper will help to encourage researchers in counselling and psychotherapy to engage with these qualitatively-driven mixed methods approaches.



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