

Section Three:

Critical Appraisal

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Critical Appraisal

I have recently conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) study¹ and a synthesis of qualitative literature using meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988)². Via this Critical Appraisal, I will consider my epistemological stance, discuss the limitations of these studies in further detail, explore the utility of qualitative research findings and consider practical challenges I encountered.

My Ontological and Epistemological Position

There is clear association between “implicit theories on the nature of reality (ontology), the justification of knowledge claims (epistemology), and how knowledge is constructed (methodology)” (Tebes, 2005, p. 214). It has been suggested that, in order to offer credibility and coherence to their work, researchers should consider their ontological and epistemological stances (Walsh & Evans, 2014). What follows is an account of my perspective and how this relates to my research.

Epistemological positions can be understood to lie on a spectrum with positivism positioned at one extreme and social constructivism at the other. Researchers who adopt a positivist stance believe that, via vigorous and controlled experimental testing, we can uncover incontrovertible ‘truths’ (DeForge & Shaw, 2012) which can be easily generalised across populations and contexts (Walsh & Evans, 2014). I do not adopt this perspective as I do not believe that ‘truths’ are universal and independent of the influence of context.

Researchers who adopt a social constructivist perspective consider knowledge to be subjective and influenced by language, social organisation and power (DeForge & Shaw, 2012). From this perspective, what we ‘know’ can never accumulate as findings only ever relate to the context in which they are generated. I do not subscribe entirely to this approach as, while I acknowledge the role of contextual factors and privilege individual experience, I

¹ Please refer to Section Two: Research Paper for further information regarding this study.

² Please refer to Section One: Literature Review for further information regarding this synthesis.

believe that research can reveal elements of objective 'reality', even if this 'reality' is seen through the subjective lens of the researcher. Furthermore, adopting a social constructionist stance may result in the generation of silos of knowledge which prevent the development of theoretical constructs and limit the furthering of understanding.

I most closely identify with a critical realist perspective which lies between the two opposing extremes outlined above (Braun & Clarke, 2013). From a critical realist stance, knowing and knowledge are not reduced to either "unknowable chaos or a positivistic universal order" (Clark, Lissel & Davis, 2008, p.e68). According to Bhaskar (2008), critical realism is best understood as a stratified concept comprised of three levels; that which can be observed (the empirical), that which is known but cannot be directly observed (the actual) and underlying mechanisms which represent that which is real (see Walsh & Evans, 2014 for a useful diagram which depicts this conceptualisation).

Bhaskar (2008) suggests that even if something cannot be directly observed or fully explained, it can still be considered to be 'real' because its effects can be observed. However, from a critical realist perspective, what we 'know' is incomplete and revisable (Walsh & Evans, 2014). This has led philosophers to question the legitimacy of critical realism as 'knowledge' is never considered to be entirely certain or uncertain. However, Deforge and Shaw (2012) suggest that research conducted from a critical realist perspective retains explanatory power as it attempts to illuminate the foundations (i.e. the actual and the real) which underpin the observable (i.e. the empirical).

I believe that my critical realist stance is well-suited to qualitative research as it allows for the acknowledgement of social, political and cultural influences and recognises the relationship between the research and the researcher. Furthermore, a critical realist stance allows for the generation of "demi-regularities" (DeForge & Shaw, 2012, p. 85) which

contribute to the development of more widely applicable knowledge whilst abstaining from claims to the ‘truth’.

Critical realism and meta-ethnography. I believe that a critical realist perspective relates to meta-ethnography as this methodology is based on the assumption that the synthesis of data results in greater explanatory power than individual studies alone (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). This is complementary to a critical realist perspective as it is implied that, via meta-ethnography, knowledge can be transferred between contexts and accumulate in order to illuminate that which cannot be directly observed. In relation to my literature review (See Section One: Literature Review), my epistemological stance assumes that, via the synthesis of studies exploring young people’s experiences of self-harm, my research findings contribute to the generation of novel understandings which may be able to illuminate underlying psychological processes and mechanisms which are not directly observable. Furthermore, meta-ethnography involves interpretation and therefore, “supposes a degree of constructivism” (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009, p. 64). Therefore, I consider it appropriate to adopt a critical realist stance which I believe allows for retention of these elements of interpretation and constructivism.

Critical realism and IPA. IPA focuses upon the specific, personal accounts of individuals who share a particular experience and, via interpretation, relates these accounts to broader, psychological concepts (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). From a critical realist perspective, IPA allows for a focus on reflections and observations of the individual (the empirical) and consideration of how these experiences relate to unobservable, underpinning mechanisms. Furthermore, IPA researchers “do not access experience directly from these accounts, but through a process of intersubjective meaning-making” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 103). Therefore, IPA complements a critical realist stance due to a shared

acknowledgement of the influence of the relationship between the researcher and the research.

In relation to my research project (See Section Two: Research Paper), the adoption of a critical realist perspective is based on the assumption that psychological constructs act as useful metaphors for processes underpinning the development and maintenance of young people's relationships. It also assumes that qualitative research allows for insight into these processes via interpretation of young people's experiences, reflections and meaning making. I suggest that qualitative research findings contribute to the refinement of these constructs which, subsequently, influence the development and delivery of mental health services for young people. Furthermore, I believe that, via interpretation, I am able to position participant's experiences in a broader context which allows for consideration of social, political and cultural influences (Harper, 2012).

Considering the Utility of Qualitative Findings

As I conducted my research, I explored debates surrounding the status of qualitative research findings and specifically, their generalisability. Generalisation has been defined as "making an inference about the unobserved based on the observed" (Polit & Beck, 2010, p. 1541). While this construct is central to quantitative research, debate exists regarding its applicability to qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Spencer & Ritchie, 2012). The concept of generalisation in relation to qualitative research has been considered to be fundamentally flawed as it is suggested that, as qualitative findings are interwoven within the contexts in which the research is conducted, attempts to apply this knowledge to different contexts are futile (Schwandt, 1997).

However, Firestone (1993) suggests that there are three types of generalisability, statistical generalisation, analytic generalisation and case-to-case translation, which vary in relation to their relevance to qualitative research. A detailed exploration of these constructs

is beyond the scope of this appraisal (See Polit and Beck, 2010 for a review). However, brief consideration will be given to analytic generalisation and case-to-case translation as these ideas apply to qualitative research.

Analytic generalisation refers to a process of generalising from specific information to a wider theoretical construct. For example, in my research paper (See Section Two: Research Paper) I have considered how data relating to participants experiences of their relationships relate to broader psychological theories relating to attachment (Bowlby, 1969) and social identity (Tajfel, 1982). This process occurs during analysis and interpretation as researchers identify the commonalities between participants which can be used to support a particular perspective (Polit & Beck, 2010).

Case-to-case translation, which is more commonly referred to as transferability, has been defined as “the extent to which qualitative research results can be ‘transferred’ to other groups of people or contexts” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 338). For example, I have briefly considered how the findings of my synthesis of young people’s experiences of self-harm might relate to the specific experiences of those who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (See Section One: Literature Review). This process is understood to be a shared enterprise between the researcher and the reader as researchers are responsible for providing a “thick description” (Polit & Beck, 2010, p. 1453) which allows the reader to make a judgement regarding the relevance of findings within a particular context.

My own view on this issue is that qualitative research findings may be best considered in relation to these two constructs as qualitative research is well placed to contribute to theoretical development via the provision of rich, detailed and insightful findings (Misco, 2007). In order to enhance the transferability of my research findings, information has been provided regarding the context in which the research took place to allow readers to make a judgement regarding the relevance of my findings.

Ensuring Quality in Qualitative Research

There is a long-standing debate regarding the assessment of quality in qualitative research (Spencer & Ritchie, 2012). Smith (1990) argues that it is inappropriate to assess the quality of qualitative research as this activity is considered to be contrary to the philosophical underpinnings of this type of enquiry. Chamberlain (2000) refers to the concept of “methodolatry” (p. 286), a term used to describe a preoccupation with methodology at the expense of considering the meaningful findings which emerge from qualitative research. Chamberlain (2000) suggests this preoccupation promotes the idea that there is a correct way of conducting qualitative research which, consequently, inhibits creativity as researchers become bound by the ideals and rules.

The concept of quality appraisal in qualitative research has been challenged further as attempts have been made to transfer ideas of quality from quantitative approaches. This approach has been criticised as it is argued that concepts such as validity, reliability and empirical generalisability do not apply to qualitative research (Kitto, Chesters & Grbich, 2008; Walsh & Downe, 2006). Furthermore, attempts to assess the quality of qualitative research have been complicated by the variation within qualitative methodologies which render the use of tools such as standardised checklists inappropriate (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2008; Sandelowski, Docherty & Emden, 1997). Further complexity is associated with the range of epistemological positions adopted by qualitative researchers, all of which take different stances on the nature and stability of knowledge created by qualitative enquiry (Walsh & Downe, 2006).

However, the absolute rejection of assessments of quality in qualitative research has been challenged (Walsh & Downe, 2006). It is suggested that adopting this stance may endanger the status of qualitative research findings and, consequently, their contribution to the development of health care provision (Walsh & Downe, 2006). According to Barbour

(2001), the appraisal of qualitative studies allows for those who are unfamiliar with this area to evaluate or review qualitative work, therefore enabling the development of critical discourse. Furthermore, the provision of quality appraisal checklists is thought to enhance the standard of research as they promote the adoption of systematic approaches (Seale, 1999).

I suggest that appraisal is necessary if we are to use research findings responsibly and appropriately in clinical practice. However, I also agree that the appraisal of qualitative research demands flexibility and sensitivity. It has been suggested that, rather than employing quality assessment checklists in a rigid and prescriptive manner, research consumers may benefit from using them as a guiding set of principles (Spencer & Ritchie, 2012). This flexible approach is thought to enable the assessment of quality while discouraging the mindless application of criteria. My stance has been influenced by the work of Barbour (2001), who warns that the use of a prescriptive approach may result in “a situation where the tail (the checklist) is wagging the dog (the qualitative research)” (p.1115).

Using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP, 2013) tool to assess quality.

The debate outlined above influenced methodological decisions taken in my review of qualitative studies exploring young peoples' experiences of self-harm. As has been detailed elsewhere (See Section One: Literature Review), I chose to employ the CASP (CASP, 2013) tool to assist in my assessment of the quality of the papers identified for inclusion in my review.

The CASP is a commonly used tool which prompts consideration of three recurring principles underpinning concepts of quality in qualitative research, “the contribution of the research, the credibility it holds and the rigour of its conduct” (Spencer & Ritchie, 2012, p. 229). The CASP can be used to generate numerical scores to the inclusion, and exclusion, of studies in a synthesis of research. However, given that this approach has been criticised as being prescriptive and unsuitable when applied to qualitative research (Barbour, 2001), I

chose not to use the CASP in this way. Instead, I used the CASP to identify areas of strength and weakness within each paper. The results of the CASP prompted further exploration of the studies and consideration of the potential impact of the areas of weakness (See Section One: Literature Review for examples of how this approach was used to determine the exclusion of studies from my synthesis).

It is recognised that the use of quality checklists does not necessarily ensure quality or rigour (Kitto et al., 2008), especially as tools such as the CASP only allow for consideration of information included in the final published paper. Therefore, these tools may be more accurately described as assessing the quality of a write-up as opposed to the research itself. However, the CASP enabled me to follow a sequence of steps which prompted consideration of the value of the papers identified. Furthermore, the use of this tool enabled me to compare opinions with a colleague who also rated the studies following the same guidelines and procedure. Similarly, as the CASP is a commonly used and freely available tool, consumers of my research will be able to refer to it when considering my findings. Therefore, the use of the CASP enabled the adoption of a transparent approach and provided context which allows readers to make judgements regarding the methodological decisions taken.

Using the CASP tool to assess the quality of my own research. I have utilised the CASP quality assessment tool (CASP, 2013), which is comprised of 10 questions, to prompt further consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of my research project (See Section Two: Research Paper). It is hoped that using this tool to scrutinise my own work demonstrates my commitment to generating high quality research.

Questions one and two relate to the communication of research aims and the appropriateness of the utilisation of a qualitative methodology. I believe that I provided a clear statement of my research aims which were embedded within discussions regarding

existing research and wider psychological theory. Furthermore, as my research focussed on lived experiences, I feel that the use of a qualitative methodology was appropriate.

The third question posed by the CASP relates to the justification provided for the specific methodology used. My research clearly states that IPA was selected as I endeavoured to conduct a focussed exploration of a significant experience for a specific population. Furthermore, I feel that I have addressed the fourth question, which relates to recruitment, as I provided information regarding the advertisement of the study, my recruitment strategy and exclusion criteria. However, I recognise that it may have been beneficial to gather further information regarding the reasons potential participants gave for choosing not to take part. If I were to conduct this study again I would attempt to gather this information in order to contextualise the details provided regarding recruitment.

The fifth question of the CASP relates to data collection. I believe that I have addressed this question via provision of details regarding the development and use of the interview schedule, how data was collected and the form of the data. I have also addressed question six, which relates to researchers relationship with their participants, by providing information regarding my epistemological stance and the context in which the research was conducted. Furthermore, via this critical appraisal, I have provided an expanded account of my reflections relating to the interview.

I believe that I have provided a full account of the ethical issues considered including seeking consent and assessing capacity and have, therefore, adequately addressed the points raised in question seven of the CASP (This information is expanded upon in Section Four: Ethics Section). Question eight relates to the process of analysis. In an attempt to ensure transparency regarding the process undertaken during analysis, I have provided examples of data abstracted from transcripts and demonstrated each step of analysis as suggested by Smith et al. (2009). However, I recognise that it may have been beneficial to consider how I

selected data for presentation in the final write-up and to explore how this may have been influenced by potential bias. On reflection, I experienced the process of selecting supporting quotes as being intuitive as I was so familiar with the data. If I were to conduct this research again I would ensure that I attended fully to this process in order to enable deeper reflection regarding the potential influences which may have impacted on it.

Question nine relates to the statement of findings. I feel that I have provided a clear account of my findings and effectively demonstrated how they relate to my research question. However, I acknowledge that due to difficulties maintaining contact following their discharge, I was unable to discuss my findings with the research participants. If I was to embark on this research again, I would consider utilising alternative strategies which would allow me to confirm the credibility of my findings. Finally, question ten focuses on the perceived value of the research. From my perspective, I feel that I have given consideration to my findings in the context of existing research and have, therefore, demonstrated its value and contribution. Specific consideration has also been given to future research.

In summary, using the CASP as a guide, I have been able to consider the strengths of my research paper and identify areas for development. However, despite my research paper allowing me significantly more words than the average publication, I still had to make difficult decisions regarding the balance between participant quotes and findings and the provision of a detailed account of methodology. This tension presents a challenge, especially as my values as a researcher and clinician relate to the importance of acknowledging individual experience. Therefore, I am mindful of the difficulties researchers face when attempting to fully address the issues raised by quality assessment tools such as the CASP within restrictive word limits.

A Reflection on the Specific Challenges Encountered during Data Collection

This section relates to specific challenges I encountered as I conducted research interviews with young people. I aim to reflect on these challenges and consider how they may have influenced data collection and analysis.

Managing power dynamics. It has been suggested that researchers working with young people may benefit from considering the impact of the power imbalances within the research interview (Mack, Giarelli, & Bernhardt, 2009). Given that my research was conducted in an inpatient setting, it could be argued that this is extremely relevant as participants could be perceived as belonging to a vulnerable and disenfranchised population.

I have reflected upon the ways in which my position as a researcher, a professional and an adult impacted upon my interactions with participants and therefore, the data collected. For example, I noted that Hannah³ used tentative language as she described her experiences, e.g. “Erm there’s a lot of sort of quite a bit of bitchiness let’s say. Not sure if I’m allowed to say that?”. It appeared that Hannah was conscious of how I might interpret her criticisms of professionals and other young people. However, it is recognised that there may be additional factors contributing to Hannah’s use of cautious language. For example, Munro (2001) notes that it is not uncommon for young people to demonstrate a reluctance to share their experiences due to concerns regarding the maintenance of confidentiality.

I interpreted Hannah’s hesitancy as being a product of the power imbalances within our relationship as she appeared to be motivated by a desire to please me by providing information she considered to be more palatable. I attempted to mitigate these difficulties by ensuring that I validated the information Hannah offered while creating an environment in which she felt able to share her experiences. I achieved this by using a combination of summarising statements and open questions. I also commented upon the value of young

³ Please note that all participants have been assigned a pseudonym in order to protect their anonymity

peoples' contributions. This is demonstrated in the following extract from Amy's interview, "Ok ... can you give me some more about what went on? ... I'm really interested to hear about that experience".

However, in common with Laenen's (2009) investigation of young people's experiences of research participation, my research featured examples of young people expressing themselves directly to convey their dissatisfaction or the intensity of their emotion, e.g. "I like very few things about being on an inpatient unit and I've had a very bad time with, you know. I just can't wait to get out" (Rob). These examples were interpreted as evidence that young people felt able to share their experiences without fear of disapproval. Therefore, I suggest that power differentials within the interviews did not unduly inhibit participants' responses.

According to Mack et al. (2009), the issues outlined above can be countered by offering young people control over issues such as interview scheduling. Personally, I found it helpful to use strategies such as adopting young people's own words to convey my interest. For example, during my interview with Tom I adopted his phrase "having banter" to communicate that I understood the importance of this aspect of his experience, "Before you were saying about having banter with the staff and how that was important".

Considering the emotional impact of conducting research. Lalor, Begley and Devane (2006) acknowledge the impact of "bearing to watch", "bearing to listen" and "bearing to support" for researchers exploring sensitive issues (p.607). Due to the nature of my research, I was aware that I may encounter young people experiencing significant distress. While steps were taken to protect participants, I did not fully appreciate the emotional impact that conducting this research would have on me as a researcher. The process of conducting the interviews was emotionally challenging work. On reflection, I recognise that this experience was challenging as I was working outside of my usual role as a

trainee clinical psychologist and was, therefore, not integrated into the care team.

Consequently, I was unaware of young peoples' presenting difficulties and did not benefit from the emotional containment provided by working in a team. While I was able to contain my emotional responses during the interviews, I experienced some effects during the transcription of particularly emotive data. I was able to access supervision which allowed me to acknowledge my own distress and consider how this might relate to young people's experiences and therefore, contribute to my analysis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as I completed the research projects outlined above I encountered areas of debate which influenced how I approached and conducted my research. Further consideration of these issues has allowed me to deepen my understanding of the complexities of conducting qualitative research. This process has contributed to improvements in my thesis as a whole and my development as a researcher.

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