

# Interpretation in Qualitative Research

Carla Willig

Interpretation is at the heart of qualitative research because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and the process of meaning-making. Qualitative researchers assume that people's actions are always meaningful in some way and that through the process of engaging with those meanings, deeper insights into relevant social and psychological processes may be gained. Furthermore, qualitative data never speaks for itself and needs to be given meaning by the researcher. Given that qualitative research is all about meaning-making one might expect qualitative research in psychology to be closely associated with the work of interpretation. However, this is not the case. The relationship between qualitative psychology and interpretation has been an uneasy one, and it is only recently that this has begun to change.

Traditionally, qualitative psychologists have preferred to use the term 'analysis' to describe their activities and they have distanced themselves from the language of 'interpretation'. Why might this be so? One reason may be the desire to distance qualitative psychology from an association with the arts and to fend off accusations of qualitative research being no more than intuition and lacking in validity.

The term 'analysis' invokes something sober and systematic, an activity that is carried out by

technical experts who approach their work with objectivity, rigour and attention to detail. By implication, a successful 'analysis' can be expected to provide answers to important questions and to shape interventions in the real world. By contrast, 'interpretation' is associated with the arts, with creativity and with the imagination. People 'interpret' novels and poems and we talk about the ways in which a performer has 'interpreted' their material. 'Interpretation' is seen as stimulating, it is interesting and it can be illuminating; however, it is not seen as something that provides us with empirical knowledge; the kind of knowledge, for example, that allows us to build houses and develop medical treatments. The language of 'analysis' is associated with science whereas the language of 'interpretation' is associated with arts and humanities.

An association with science as opposed to the arts was felt to be valuable in the early days of qualitative psychology when researchers found themselves in a position of having to justify their choice of qualitative methodology and to defend its validity as a psychological research method on a par with quantitative psychology. It has been argued that until relatively recently much qualitative research has implicitly adhered to a positivistic epistemology (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2002)

which has meant that researchers were reluctant to move beyond taking data at face value, focusing instead on the careful and systematic categorisation of the data into 'themes' which were hierarchically organised and then presented as 'findings'. Within this framework, interpretation is not an acknowledged part of the process of analysing data and, as we noted in the first edition of this Handbook, anything resembling explicit interpretation '(...) does not enter the picture until the very end, when the "findings" are reflected upon in the discussion section of the report' (Willig and Stainton Rogers, 2008: 8). As a result, 'analysis' became the preferred term to describe qualitative research activities in psychology.

The second reason why qualitative researchers may have been wary of the language of interpretation is to do with their commitment to 'giving voice' to research participants. Qualitative psychology grew out of an understanding that the psychological knowledge which had been accumulated over the years was not simply a reflection of reality, an objective assessment of how people function. Rather that it was an edifice of theoretical and empirical work which was grounded in a particular tradition of pre-existing knowledge and expectations and which reflected, rather than challenged, basic assumptions about people which circulated in society at a particular time (see Gergen, 1973). Qualitative psychology's roots in the critique of positivist psychology and its commitment to the idea that qualitative research is there to 'give voice' to those who had been excluded from traditional psychological research (such as women, ethnic minorities, disabled people; that is, those who are in one way or another marginalised or socially excluded) mean that qualitative psychologists are highly sensitive to the dangers associated with the imposition of pre-conceived theoretical formulations upon research participants' experience. Within this context interpretation can be seen to carry the risk of distorting or silencing the voices of research participants by the way in which interpretative researchers bring their own ideas, theories and perspectives to bear on the accounts obtained in the study.

In 2008, in the introduction to the first edition of this Handbook we noted that qualitative psychology had been witnessing a 'turn to interpretation' (Willig and Stainton Rogers, 2008). In recent years, this interpretative turn has continued to gather momentum, giving rise to the publication of increasingly sophisticated qualitative analyses which engage with interpretation explicitly and unapologetically. At the same time, whilst the value of interpretation is more widely recognised, ongoing methodological discussions around the challenges and opportunities inherent in different

approaches to interpretations ensure that qualitative psychologists continue to be mindful of the importance of reflexivity and the researcher's ethical responsibility in any interpretative act.

This chapter is concerned with qualitative psychology's relationship with interpretation. It identifies different approaches to interpretation and looks at how the most widely used qualitative methods make use of these. It also comments on the ethics of interpretation and reflects on ways in which interpretative research may be evaluated (a more detailed discussion of the use of interpretation in qualitative psychology and the issues raised in this chapter can be found in Willig, 2012). The chapter concludes with a review of recent developments in qualitative psychology which provide new interpretative challenges. These include pluralism, binocularity and the use of metasyntesis.

## APPROACHES TO INTERPRETATION

The term interpretation was originally used to refer to the activity of making sense of particularly difficult or obscure documents which had been revered and held sacred for a very long time, such as mythical or religious writings. Interpretation became necessary because these ancient texts did not make obvious sense to contemporary audiences. In order for these texts to continue to play their traditional role within a culture, they needed to be made relevant again through the act of interpretation (see Sontag (1994: 6). The meaning of the term interpretation (or 'hermeneutics') was later extended to refer to any activity that sought to elucidate the meaning of a written text and applied across disciplines covering the interpretation of the law (legal hermeneutics), interpretation of the bible (biblical hermeneutics) and interpretation of the classics (philological hermeneutics). Eventually, interpretation began to be understood as a generalised human endeavour ('universal hermeneutics') and it was proposed that interpretation comes into play whenever we try to understand spoken or written language or, indeed, any human acts (see Schmidt, 2006, for an excellent introduction to 'hermeneutics').

### *Two Forms of Interpretation*

Ricoeur (1970, 1996) suggested that there are two kinds of hermeneutics:

a 'hermeneutics of empathy (meaning-recollection)' where interpretation proceeds from

the bottom-up where the aim is to get closer to the intended meaning of a text;

a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' where interpretation is done top-down, generated on the basis of a 'suspicious' attitude which aims to reveal a deeper meaning beyond the surface.

He argued that these approaches to interpretation find different types of meaning in a text and generate different kinds of insights.

'Empathic' interpretations are motivated by a desire to get as close to the meaning of a text as possible by trying to understand it 'from within'. This means engaging with a text without importing theoretical concepts from the outside to make sense of it. 'Empathic' interpretations focus on what presents itself rather than what might be hidden; they seek to elaborate and amplify the meanings which are contained within a text rather than seeking to identify underlying structures that might have informed its manifest content. 'Empathic' interpretation involves paying attention to the characteristics of an account, making connections between its various attributes and noticing patterns. The aim of an 'empathic' interpretation is to gain a fuller understanding of what is being expressed rather than to find out what may be going on 'behind the scenes'. In other words, 'empathic' interpretations are concerned with how (rather than why) something is experienced and presented.

'Suspicious' interpretations, by contrast, seek to reveal a hidden meaning and in order to do this the researcher needs to interpret the clues contained within the text. This means that surface meanings (e.g. as contained in the words that are written/ spoken or the images presented) are not taken at face value but seen as signs which, if read correctly, will allow the researcher to access more significant, latent meanings.

Psychoanalysis (in its original 'classical' Freudian form) exemplifies 'suspicious' interpretation (see Ricoeur, 1970) by rendering apparently trivial or irrational phenomena (such as acts of forgetting or slips of the tongue) meaningful through following their traces right back to their origin so as to uncover their 'true' meaning. In order to be able to read the signs correctly and to decipher latent meanings, the 'suspicious' researcher requires a code with which to open up the text. This means that to produce a 'suspicious' interpretation the researcher needs to have access to a theoretical formulation which provides concepts that can be used to interrogate the text. 'Suspicious' interpretations seek to account for phenomena; as such they make sense of phenomena (be this a text, a symptom, a behaviour or a wider social phenomenon) by pointing to invisible underlying processes and structures which generate them.

Given the important role that prior knowledge of relevant theories plays in 'suspicious' interpretation, this approach to interpretation positions the researcher as an expert who has privileged access to the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation. This claim raises ethical questions that will be discussed later in this chapter.

'Empathic' interpretation does not share 'suspicious' interpretation's ambition to explain why something occurred or what structures, processes and/or causal mechanisms might have generated the observed phenomenon. However, 'empathic' interpretation offers more than a straightforward summary of what someone has said or done. Since all types of interpretation are carried out with the aim of amplifying meaning, interpretation inevitably means adding something to what is already there. What differentiates 'suspicious' from 'empathic' interpretation is that the former imports theoretical concepts from outside in order to make sense of the data, whilst 'empathic' interpretation seeks to elucidate meaning that is implicit in the data.

### *The Hermeneutic Circle*

While Ricoeur highlighted the differences between these two approaches to interpretation very effectively, he did not suggest that one of them should be chosen over the other. Instead, Ricoeur (1996) drew attention to the fact that the two approaches produce different kinds of knowledge, with one type of knowledge offering understanding (on the basis of an 'empathic' stance), and the other developing explanations (on the basis of a 'suspicious' stance).

The two types of knowledge complement one another as neither one of them can generate satisfactory insights on their own. In fact, the interplay between 'empathy' and 'suspicion' in the search for understanding is the driving force behind the hermeneutic circle through which all interpretative activity must move. The concept of the 'hermeneutic circle' (see Schmidt, 2006: 4 for a helpful account) acknowledges the impossibility of approaching a phenomenon without adopting a particular perspective in relation to it. Without adopting a standpoint we would not be able to find meaning in what we encounter, and so we need to draw on some ideas and assumptions in order to begin to make sense of it. At the same time, we do not simply project our expectations onto a blank screen in the outside world and then find what we are looking for. We do encounter something which we then make sense of with the help of the ideas and assumptions we brought to the



as evaluation criteria will differ depending on the approach to interpretation taken in the research.

The choice of terminology (*empathic* and *suspicious*) does not imply a value judgement regarding the desirability of the different styles, although I acknowledge that 'suspiciousness' is likely to be perceived as less desirable than 'empathy', particularly amongst psychologists. However, following Ricoeur, we need to remember that all approaches to interpretation have something to offer. We just need to make sure that we are aware of what a particular style of interpretation can and cannot deliver, what kind of insights it can generate and what its place may be within the wider project of the search for understanding.

In what follows I illustrate the interface between different qualitative methods and approaches to interpretation by reviewing the location of a range of methods on the continuum. Some methods map onto the continuum more easily than others and I have selected those which will serve the purpose of clarifying the relationship between a method's theory-base and its orientation to interpretation.

I have placed Phenomenological methods (Chapters 11 and 12) and Grounded Theory (Chapter 14) at the *empathic* end of the continuum. As it is primarily a research method's relationship with theory that determines its place on the continuum, both grounded theory and phenomenology qualify for this position. Phenomenology, with its mission of getting as close as possible to the quality and meaning of research participants' experiences by bracketing any expert knowledge and theories the researcher may already have about them, explicitly aligns itself with an empathic approach to interpretation. Interpretative phenomenological research (e.g. Chapter 12) is slightly more open to the idea of the researcher bringing meaning to the data by approaching it with their own pre-suppositions and expectations than descriptive phenomenological research would be. However, both methodologies caution against interpreting data through pre-established theoretical frameworks and both are committed to entering the phenomenon that presents itself in order to try to understand its meaning and significance 'from within'.

Grounded Theory, which was conceived in order to facilitate a process whereby new theories can be developed from data, would also need to be placed very close to the empathic position. As outlined in Chapter 14 in this volume there are marked differences between grounded theorists in terms of the strategies which they recommend to facilitate theory generation, with some (e.g. Glaser, 1992) advising against approaching the data with anything other than an open mind whilst others (e.g. Strauss and Corbin, 1990/1998)

recommend the use of a coding paradigm to sensitise the researcher to the role of process and context, and yet others (e.g. Charmaz, 2006) emphasise the role of the researcher in constructing theoretical understanding. Despite these differences, I would argue that since theory is the end product of grounded theory research rather than its starting point, grounded theory is a data-driven, bottom-up method which therefore belongs near the empathic end of the continuum.

Moving towards the midpoint of the continuum, we find Ethnography (Chapter 3). The aim of ethnographic research is to obtain an insider view of a particular dimension of people's everyday lives by participating in it, overtly or covertly, for a sustained period of time. Although the ethnographic researcher enters the field with an open mind and although the research question driving ethnographic research is usually an open question about the meaning of a phenomenon to a group of people, I would argue that there is a theoretical basis to such research in that ethnographic researchers are concerned with the meanings and functions of specific cultural practices. So whilst ethnographic researchers are open as to the precise nature and content of people's actions within specific contexts, they do presume that people's actions have cultural and symbolic meaning and that such meanings are significant. As Griffin and Bengry-Howell (2008: 16) point out, 'Ethnography is founded on the assumption that the shared cultural meanings of a social group are vital for understanding the activities of any social group'.

I have placed ethnography in the middle of the continuum because it is committed to a theoretical base which directs the researcher's attention to certain aspects of the data by supplying the researcher with sensitising concepts such as the notion of 'cultural practice' or 'cultural meaning', whilst at the same time demonstrating theoretical humility and an attitude of not-knowing, as the researcher is seeking to understand what is going on from the point of view of those who are involved in the action. The ethnographer rejects the role of expert and aspires to maintain a flexible and reflexive stance despite their theoretical commitments which suggests that the mid-point of the continuum is perhaps the most appropriate place for this approach.

Moving a little further along towards the *suspicious* end of the continuum I have placed Action Research (Chapter 4). Like ethnography, action research seeks to better understand the perspectives of its research participants and it distances itself from an expert role for the researcher. Action research seeks to develop practical knowledge through engaging in collaboration with research participants with the aim of bringing about some

improvement in their everyday lives. The nature and direction of this change emerges from consultation with the research participants. As with grounded theory, the development of a theoretical understanding (in this case, of some aspects of social change) comes about as a result of conducting the research. This could indicate that action research should have its place near the *empathic* end of the continuum. However, I think we need to acknowledge that action research does rely upon a theoretical base which takes the form of a series of commitments including the belief that the most effective way of bringing about an improvement in people's quality of life is through forms of collective action, the belief that it is social practices which inform how people experience aspects of their lifeworld, and the belief that it is these practices that need to be modified in order to enhance individuals' well-being. Action research is 'a value-based practice, underpinned by a commitment to positive social change' (Kagan et al., 2008; see also Chapter 4 this volume) with 'social change' being defined as involving the redistribution of power in one way or another through empowering those who traditionally have little control over the conditions in which they live and work. Some action researchers are committed to sophisticated theoretical frameworks (e.g. Feminism or Marxism) which provide them with a theoretical toolkit and a series of hypotheses about social processes which will inform the ways in which they interpret the data. This type of action research would need to be placed even closer to the *suspicious* end of the continuum than less theory-driven form of action research.

Narrative approaches to qualitative research (Chapter 10) are particularly difficult to place on our continuum because there are such a variety of versions of narrative research which are concerned with different aspects of story-telling (see Smith and Sparkes, 2006, for a review of differences in approach and tensions within the field of narrative inquiry). Narrative researchers do share an interest in the stories people tell and in how people organise and bring meaning to their experience through constructing narratives about their lives. However, some narrative researchers are primarily concerned with the content of a story whilst others are particularly interested in a story's structure and form, its internal organisation and use of linguistic features. This suggests that some forms of narrative research are more psychological in orientation in that they explore the relationship between the stories that are told and the story-tellers' subjective experiences (thus adopting a phenomenological perspective), whilst others focus on the narrative strategies through which particular versions of human experience may be constructed

(reflecting a discourse analytic orientation). It seems to me that a phenomenologically-inflected version of narrative research is less theory-driven and, therefore, would need to be placed closer to the *empathic* end of our continuum than a discursively-oriented version which needs to make use of theoretically-derived conceptual tools in its search for evidence of the various discursive strategies which are used in constructing a story and its characters. However, I would also argue that all narrative research is theory-driven, in that the researcher's theoretical premise (i.e. that telling stories is fundamental to human experience and that people make their lives meaningful through constructing narratives) will lead them to look for stories in their data. Because of this feature of narrative research I have placed this approach nearer the *suspicious* end of the continuum.

Psychoanalytic and discourse analytic approaches (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8 in this volume) are both placed at the *suspicious* end of the continuum. This may come as a surprise as these two approaches appear to have little in common given that one of them is concerned with internality (psychoanalysis) whilst the other focuses on the social construction of meaning through the use of language within specific social contexts (discourse analysis). However, both are theory-driven and take a top-down approach to interpretation in that they come to their data with a set of conceptual tools derived from theory. Both psychoanalytic and discursive approaches take a theoretical understanding of their subject matter (the 'psyche' in psychoanalysis and 'discourse' in discourse analysis) as their starting point and then read their data through this lens. Here, the theory underpinning the method of analysis provides the researcher with a clear direction as to what is of interest to the analysis and what is not, and it equips them with specific questions to ask of the data in order to drive the analysis forward. For example, theoretical constructs that can be mobilised by a discourse analytic researcher include 'discourse', 'discursive construction', 'interpretative repertoire', 'discursive strategy' and 'positioning' (amongst others) whilst psychoanalytic interpretations are informed by notions of emotional investment, the importance of relations within the family of origin, and the role of unconscious motivations (e.g. the need to defend against anxiety).

Thematic analysis (Chapter 2) appears at both ends of the continuum, indicating that it can be used to generate both *empathic* and *suspicious* interpretations. Thematic analysis is a method of analysis which helps the researcher identify patterns in the data. It guides the process of identifying themes in the data which capture meaning that is relevant to the research question. This means that it is the research question which will determine which

approach to interpretation is used in the analysis. In order to conduct a meaningful thematic analysis, the researcher needs to decide what these themes represent; and this decision will be informed by the particular research question the researcher has set out to address. A theme could represent a discursive construction, a thought, a feeling or a psychological mechanism, depending on what it is the researcher was looking for in the data. For example, themes could be taken at face value and understood as reflections of research participants' thoughts and feelings which would give the analysis a phenomenological inflection and place it near the *empathic* end of the continuum. Alternatively, the researcher could approach the themes identified in the analysis as something which still needs to be explained and turn to theory in order to do that. This would move the analysis towards the *suspicious* end of the continuum. Thematic analysis can underpin both 'empathic' and 'suspicious' interpretations and to reflect this, it has been placed at both ends of our continuum.

Similarly, Q Methodology (Chapter 13) engages with both types of interpretation but this time at different stages of the research process. During the first stage where patterns are identified through 'inverted' factor analysis (acting as a pattern analytic) the researcher adopts an empathic orientation to interpretation to produce a factor summary which encapsulates the key meaning elements that constitute a factor's point of view. This is followed by a suspicious interpretative phase where the researcher uses abductive logic to resolve the anomalies presented in order to come up with an explanation of 'what is going on'.

## THE ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION

The process of interpretation poses significant ethical challenges because it involves a process of transformation. The material that is being interpreted is given new meaning by the researcher and this enables the researcher to shape what comes to be known about it. With this power to transform meaning comes responsibility. The researcher needs to reflect on what they are bringing to the material and the angle from which they are approaching it in their attempt to make sense of it. They also need to be mindful of the possible effects of their claims to know or understand something, especially if that something is somebody else's experience.

Suspicious interpretations in particular call for caution as here the researcher's adoption of the position of expert is based on the assumption that

they know better than the research participants themselves what their experience means. As suspicious interpretations are informed by theories about what motivates people's actions (such as unconscious forces, socio-economic structures, cultural discourses, social norms and imperatives) they do not take accounts of experiences at face value. Looking for meaning beyond research participants' own understanding of what motivates their actions can generate novel insights especially in situations where research participants themselves struggle to provide an explanation for their actions. However, it carries the risk of imposing theory-driven meanings upon the data which may misrepresent participants and their experiences, for example by pathologising them. Some researchers (e.g. Flowers and Langdrige, 2007) are very uncomfortable with researchers reading theoretically-derived meaning into the data, and argue that in order to avoid the risk of misrepresentation it is better not to engage in suspicious interpretation at all. Others (e.g. see Hollway and Jefferson, 2005) argue that it is a risk worth taking as moving beyond the meanings contained within participants' own accounts of their experiences provides an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of what motivates people.

Interpretation in qualitative research clearly has an important ethical dimension and this means that researchers engaging in interpretation need to address ethical questions in relation to the interpretations they produce. There is the question about ownership. Who 'owns' the interpretation? Is it the researcher who produced it or is it the person who provided the account on which the interpretation is based? Another set of questions concerns the status of the interpretation. What does it provide information about? Does it actually tell us something about the phenomenon under investigation or does it tell us something about the interpreter and their assumptions and theoretical preferences? How much of each of these is present in the interpretation and how do we know how much each of them contributed? Finally, there are ethical questions about the effects of the interpretation. What may be its wider social and psychological effects and, in particular, what may be its consequences for those whose behaviour has been interpreted in a particular way (see also Willig, 2012: Chapter 3, for a more detailed discussion of the ethics of interpretation)?

## Evaluation

One more challenge that is associated with interpretation in qualitative research is to find a way of

evaluating interpretations. Given that interpretations are the products of a researcher's unique interaction with the data and of a process of meaning-making which can be informed by an empathic or a suspicious orientation, it is not so easy to establish what makes a 'good' interpretation.

As with any piece of qualitative research, an interpretation would need to be evaluated on its own terms by asking whether it has met its own objectives. Interpretative research can have very different goals; it can seek to capture the quality of an experience, or to identify underlying mechanisms or dynamics which generate the phenomenon under investigation. It can be concerned with understanding accounts of experience through the lens of existing theory, or it can seek to develop an entirely new theory. It can be empathic in orientation or it can be suspicious (or something in-between or a combination of the two). It is only once the (intended) remit of the interpretation has been established that an evaluation can take place.

In what follows, I outline some strategies for validating interpretations and identify ways in which we may try to form a view about their usefulness. I draw on Williams and Morrow's (2009) very helpful paper on achieving trustworthiness in qualitative research to frame my discussion of these issues.

Williams and Morrow (2009: 577) propose three major categories of trustworthiness which they argue qualitative research ought to be concerned with. They are:

- 'integrity of the data'
- 'balance between reflexivity and subjectivity'
- 'clear communication and application of findings'.

My reflections on the process of evaluating interpretations is structured around these three categories. However, my operationalisation of them differs somewhat from Williams and Morrow's (2009) original version as I apply them to the evaluation of interpretations specifically.

### *Integrity of the data*

This refers to the extent to which the data upon which an interpretation is based provide suitable and sufficiently rich material for the interpretation to be reasonably well grounded within it. To assess the 'integrity of the data' means examining the relationship between the data, and the claims that are made in the interpretation of it. As different approaches to interpretation require different types of data, it is important to ensure that the data that is being interpreted is compatible with the interpretative approach used. For example, in

order to produce a convincing psychodynamic interpretation the researcher needs to have access to information about participants' early life and relationships with caregivers, whilst a credible phenomenological interpretation requires access to detailed first-person accounts of experiences the research participants have actually gone through themselves.

During the early stages of transformation of the data (from 'raw data' into some form of 'meaning units', for example) the researcher sets the scene for the types of interpretation they can then make of the data. For example, breaking up narrative accounts by extracting themes means that information about the structure and flow of the account is lost and its narrative dimension cannot be analysed (see McLeod, 2001; Sullivan, 2008). The 'meaning units' identified and refined during the coding process (be they themes, categories or discursive constructions) steer the interpretation in a particular direction and as a result alternative ways of giving meaning to the data are inevitably bypassed. It is crucial that the researcher reflects on the consequences of their chosen data-transformation strategies including those applied in the very early stages of the research as even the chosen transcription convention constitutes a form of interpretation (see Kvale, 1996; Emerson and Frosh, 2004).

Williams and Morrow (2009: 578) draw attention to the importance of the quantity as well as the quality of the data when they argue that 'quantity of data is key to filling out categories or themes in such a way that the reader is able to grasp the richness and complexity of the constructs under investigation'. This means that even where an interpretation comes across as plausible and interesting, the reader's confidence in its trustworthiness will be low unless there is evidence that the data on which it is based is sufficiently rich and comprehensive to convince the reader that the interpretation is grounded in the data and can account for a variety of related manifestations of the phenomenon under investigation. To conclude, evaluating an interpretation's trustworthiness requires careful scrutiny of its relationship with the data which have informed it.

### *Balance between reflexivity and subjectivity*

Checking the 'balance between reflexivity and subjectivity' involves asking questions about the relationship between what the data offer up and the researcher's own perspective on the subject matter. It involves paying attention to the interplay between the participants' voices (subjectivity) and the researcher's interpretation of their meaning (reflexivity) (Williams and Morrow, 2009: 579).



The hermeneutic circle reminds us that in order to interpret an account the researcher needs to bring some pre-understanding with which to approach the text whilst at the same time being (and remaining) open to being changed by the encounter with the text. Interpretations of accounts produced by research participants, therefore, necessarily contain something that belongs to the researcher and something that emerges from the participants' accounts. What is seen as an acceptable balance between reflexivity and subjectivity will depend on the approach to interpretation taken by the researcher. For example, 'suspicious' interpretations invite more input from the researcher's chosen theoretical perspective than 'empathic' interpretations do. This means that an interpretation which claims to be informed by an 'empathic' approach to interpretation but which then proceeds to read participants' accounts through a highly prescriptive theoretical lens would need to be evaluated less positively than an openly 'suspicious' interpretation which has done the same.

The purpose of evaluating an interpretation is not to establish its absolute truth. Instead, evaluating an interpretation involves careful scrutiny of the balance between bottom-up (or participant-led) and top-down (or researcher-led) contributions to the meanings contained in the interpretation followed by reflection on the extent to which this balance is congruent with the researcher's declared approach to interpretation.

Strategies designed to increase the trustworthiness of interpretations such as participant validation or member checking are not appropriate to all types of interpretations. For 'suspicious interpretations', for example, a participant's lack of endorsement would not be a problem as the aim of the interpretation was not to reflect the participant's own understanding of their experience. Even a phenomenological reading can include interpretations of meanings which a participant may not necessarily recognise as their own (see Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). However, if the aim of the research was to capture the meaning an experience has for a participant, then the participant's endorsement of an interpretation is a valid criterion for the trustworthiness of the interpretation. By contrast, if the aim of the interpretation was to identify an unconscious motivation, for example, then the participant would not be in a position to validate the interpretation and participant validation would cease to be a meaningful criterion to assess trustworthiness (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

'Bracketing' requires the researcher to scrutinise their own assumptions and investments in particular ideas and perspectives, to be aware of them as something that belongs to them and to

hold them lightly and flexibly during the process of data analysis. Williams and Morrow (2009: 579) argue that qualitative researchers need to 'recognise their own experiences as separate from the participants' stories' and bracketing helps them to do this. An interpretation which demonstrates the researcher's ability to maintain a critical distance to their own material is likely to be more convincing than one where the researcher fails to differentiate between their own views and experiences and those of their research participants.

Finally, remaining open to alternative interpretations is another strategy that can help to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis. However, different approaches to interpretation require different relationships with competing interpretative possibilities. More tentative, bottom-up approaches to interpretation allow the researcher to remain open to alternative readings throughout the coding process; in Grounded Theory, for example, a search for 'negative cases' forms part of the coding process. Any conceptualisations or hypotheses that emerge from this process are expected to be as data-driven as possible. By contrast, more prescriptive, top-down approaches such as psychoanalytic case studies draw on pre-existing theoretical constructs in order to make sense of the data and, therefore, necessarily close down alternative readings at a much earlier stage in the research process. Openness to alternative interpretations will then need to be demonstrated as part of a critical reflection on the results of the study.

### *Clear communication and application of findings*

Williams and Morrow (2009: 580) remind us that clear communication and application of findings are essential if a study is to have an impact. To have what Williams and Morrow (2009) call 'social validity', a piece of research would need to be useful and relevant to society in some way, for example by improving clinical practice, by changing the way social problems are addressed and managed or by revealing limitations in existing approaches to a particular subject matter. According to such a pragmatist perspective, a study's value depends upon its usefulness to society (however this may be defined).

Applied to the evaluation of interpretations it means that here we are not so much concerned with an interpretation's validity but with its consequences. Having access to an interpretation can change the way in which people frame their experiences and position themselves in relation to them. They can become tools for action because they mediate people's relation to the world (see

Cornish and Gillespie, 2009: 802). The pragmatic value of an interpretation can be assessed by asking whether it serves the purpose for which it was conceived and whether it helps the researcher pursue their wider project. This indicates that an interpretation can only have pragmatic value, if there is such a project. However, most research questions in qualitative psychology seem to be informed by wider social or psychological concerns and many researchers are motivated by a desire to contribute to some improvements in people's quality of life.

In addition, an interpretation could be useful in ways that the researcher had not anticipated. A pragmatist perspective does not specify whose vision of 'social usefulness' a piece of research should speak to; it merely requires that it should be evaluated in terms of its usefulness. A pragmatist evaluation of an interpretation necessarily involves moral choices about whose interests ought, and which ought not, to be served by it.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The final section of this chapter is concerned with recent developments in qualitative psychology which offer new perspectives on interpretation. I shall focus on pluralism, binocularity and the use of metasynthesis as I believe that these offer opportunities for interpretation that transcend method-specific meaning-making. All three of these research strategies seek to integrate insights from two or more qualitative analyses. Pluralism and binocularity attempt to do this across methods whilst metasynthesis integrates results from several studies using the same (or very similar) method(s). Interpretation plays a significant role in this process of integration which is why these three methodologies provide qualitative psychologists with an opportunity to further explore the interpretative possibilities inherent in qualitative research. I anticipate significant further development in these areas in the near future.

### *Pluralism*

In recent years, qualitative psychologists have begun to welcome methodological pluralism as a way of opening up qualitative research. Pluralist research is based on the premise that there is never a single truth that can be discovered about a phenomenon and that different research methods can illuminate a phenomenon from different angles. Using more than one method allows the researcher

to generate a wider range of insights and therefore perhaps also a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. Frost (2009b), who has contributed significantly to promoting methodological pluralism (2009a, 2009b, 2011), points out that combining different qualitative approaches within the context of one study allows for a multi-layered understanding of the data. This then enables the reader to select those aspects which have meaning and value to them and which speak to their interests and concerns. A multi-layered reading of the data, therefore, has the potential to appeal to diverse interests.

A pluralist approach to qualitative research also allows researchers to examine epistemological tensions between different qualitative methods and to reflect on the implications of this for the kinds of insights generated by them. The Pluralism in Qualitative Research project (see Frost, 2009b) which compared different researchers' different interpretations of the same data set is a good illustration of this type of work, as is Lyons and Coyle's (2007) discussion of a range of readings of one and the same data set produced by different qualitative approaches.

Another way of practising pluralism in qualitative research is to analyse data repeatedly using different versions of the same approach. Frost (2009a) reports a study in which she applied a 'within-method pluralistic approach' in her analysis of an interview with a woman about the experience of the transition to second-time motherhood. Frost used different styles of narrative analysis, one after another, in order to produce several layers of analysis of the data. Each new layer added depth and texture to the interpretation. Approaching the interview through the perspective of Labov's (1972) model allowed Frost to identify the narrative structure of the account whilst viewing it through Gee's (1991) model helped her to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings contained within the elements of the story told in the interview and to explore the interviewee's beliefs and motivations. The use of reflexive awareness in a further reading of the text, this time with the aim of examining the effects of the interviewer's presence during the interview, allowed Frost to find alternative meanings in her interviewee's comments, and to adjust her understanding of the account in the light of these. Finally, a focus on the interviewee's use of metaphors and similes generated further insights into the emotional impact of second-time motherhood upon the interviewee.

A pluralistic approach to qualitative research seeks to amplify meaning in a way that reflects human experience which is itself complex, multi-layered and multi-faceted. Pluralism adopts a decidedly anti-reductionist stance and rejects the

idea that the meaning of a phenomenon can be pinned down once and for all. From an ethical perspective it could be argued that pluralist research avoids the pitfalls of mono-method interpretations which, especially if they adopt a 'suspicious' orientation, can impose meaning on the data and close down alternative readings. When a 'suspicious' interpretation forms part of a pluralistic reading and sits alongside other perspectives on the data, it loses some of its power in the presence of several interpretations. In this way it is less likely that any one of them will be imposed to the exclusion of all other possibilities. Switching between interpretative lenses to produce a multi-layered reading of the data helps the researcher to remain open to alternative readings so that even when they engage in theory-driven, more prescriptive styles of analysis to generate 'suspicious' interpretations, they do not close down the analysis.

The extent to which pluralistic research seeks to integrate its diverse readings of the data will depend upon the degree of compatibility between the epistemological bases underpinning the analytic methods used to produce the various readings. If their compatibility is high, it may be possible to produce a coherent story about the phenomenon under investigation which draws on the various readings that formed part of the pluralistic analysis. If compatibility is low, the various interpretations of the data are not integrated and sit alongside one another. The latter option does not make the research incomplete; rather, it speaks to the idea that, as Frosh (2007) has argued, searching for coherent stories to make sense of the data is perhaps not an appropriate goal in qualitative analysis in the first place. This is because the desire to 'make sense' may lead the researcher to disregard the presence of the tensions and contradictions that characterise human experience itself. Frosh (2007: 638; italics in original) reminds us that 'the human subject is *never* a whole, is always riven with partial drives, social discourses that frame available modes of experience, ways of being that are contradictory and reflect the shifting allegiances of power as they play across the body and the mind'. If this is so, qualitative interpretations that 'make sense' of human experience may not be able to capture the fragmentary and contradictory aspects of human experience.

Of course, the presentation of multiple and potentially conflicting readings contains its own ethical challenges. As narrative researchers have argued (e.g. Murray, 2003), and as has been demonstrated in research exploring the role of meaning-making in coping with difficult life-events (Frank, 1995), telling coherent and meaningful stories about experiences helps people to accept and to feel able to live with changed life circumstances. A 'polymorphism of marginal,

"disintegrated" qualitative research' (Frosh, 2007: 644) may interfere with this process of developing coherent narratives to give meaning to unsettling experiences and an analytic strategy that seeks to 'disrupt' and 'disorganise' (Frosh, 2007: 644) may, therefore, conflict with research participants' own aim to 'make sense' of their experiences.

### **Binocularity**

Binocularity is another expression of qualitative researchers' desire to produce a richer reading of their data than the adoption of a mono-method approach would allow. A binocular approach to qualitative analysis involves the examination of a data set through more than one lens during the course of data analysis (Frosh and Young, 2008). However, whilst a pluralist analysis allows different readings of the same data to sit alongside one another, leaving the reader to reflect on their relationship with one another, a binocular approach mobilises two analytic strategies that complement one another in order to produce a more complete reading of the data. Here, the two readings are intended to speak to one another and thus enable the researcher to combine the insights gained by each of them in order to produce a better understanding of the phenomenon.

For example, in their psychosocial analysis of narratives of brotherhood Frosh and Young (2008) produce an initial discursive reading of interviews in which they identify constructions of brotherhood and the discourses from which such constructions are drawn. This is followed by a second reading which deploys psychoanalytic interpretative strategies in order to 'thicken' the initial reading by focusing on emotionality which then allows the researchers to deepen their understanding of what motivates participants to talk about their brothers in the way that they do.

Similarly, Eatough and Smith (2008) work with two levels of interpretation, including an initial detailed phenomenological reading which produces a 'thick description', and a second reading based upon a more critical probing of the participant's sense making which informs an attempt to theorise the data, thus offering a deeper hermeneutic reading.

Another example of this type of work is Langdrige's (2007) critical narrative analysis (CNA) which seeks to offer a 'synthesis of a variety of analytical tools to better enable the analyst to work critically with the data and to shed light on the phenomenon being investigated' (Langdrige, 2007: 133). CNA works by combining aspects of phenomenological and narrative analysis.

Perhaps the most recent development in binocular research has been the attempt to combine Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). Colahan (2014; see also Colahan et al., 2012) developed a dual focus methodology in order to investigate the experience of 'satisfaction' in long-term heterosexual relationships. He combined IPA and FDA in a cycle of analysis which allowed him to examine the interplay between language, culture and experience with the aim of developing an understanding of how participants experienced 'relationship satisfaction' within a particular social and discursive context. This is a welcome development as such a dual focus methodology allows researchers to situate subjective experiences within their socio-cultural contexts and thus expand the usual remit of IPA studies. It addresses the concerns of those who have criticised IPA for focusing on the individual and their immediate context rather than the wider social context within which the individual's experience is produced (e.g. Todorova, 2011). Smith (2011, 2012) has endorsed this as a fruitful future direction for IPA. However, by expanding its focus on social context, IPA would need to shift its epistemological position towards social constructionism. An alternative to expanding IPA's focus would be the adoption of forms of binocularity such as Colahan's dual-focus methodology.

Combining FDA and IPA aims to integrate the insights gained from each of these methods in order to produce a more complete understanding of the experiential phenomenon under investigation. Research questions driving this type of research are concerned with how lived experience is mediated by language. This means that the dual methodology researcher needs to address the question of how to synthesise the findings. Answers to this question will depend upon the researcher's conceptualisation of the relationship between 'discourse' and 'experience'. Possible conceptualisations include:

- 1 language-dominant ones which proposes that discourse constructs experience;
- 2 phenomenological ones which propose that experience pre-exists discourse but that discourse constrains how experience can be talked about;
- 3 positions in between such as one that proposes that discourse shapes experience by providing a context for it.

Depending on the researcher's preferred conceptualisation, the interpretative story told could be a top-down story (of how discursive resources produce particular experiential realities), a bottom-up

story (of how experience is distorted, denied or silenced through discourses) or something in between (of how experience is transformed into accounts of experience through the use of available discursive resources).

Dual focus methodology is a very recent development and there are, as yet, not many published studies available for inspection. It will be interesting to see how researchers use this approach in future work.

### **Metasynthesis**

The aim of metasynthesis is to produce '... a new, integrated, and more complete interpretation of findings that offers greater understanding in depth and breadth than the findings from individual studies' (Bondas and Hall, 2007a: 115). Metasynthesis has also been described as 'a goldmine for evidence-based practice' (Beck, 2009, cited in Ludvigsen et al., 2015). Qualitative research often has little impact on evidence-based practice due to the small number of participants involved in any one study. It is only when considered in aggregate that conclusions can be drawn which can be generalised to a population. Metasynthesis is one way of systematically aggregating, integrating and interpreting findings from a sample of qualitative research reports (Ludvigsen et al., 2015).

The earliest example of a metasynthesis in the literature appears to be Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnography which sparked off an interest in qualitative research synthesis. Researchers in nursing and health care research in particular embraced metasynthesis as a way of rendering qualitative research relevant and useful and the first metasynthesis in this field was published in 1994 by Jensen and Allen (Jensen and Allen, 1994). Sandelowski, Docherty and Emden (1997) captured the mood at the time by arguing that '[t]he time also has come to recognise that calls for yet more research – to gain better understanding of events or to resolve patient and practice problems – do not necessarily entail the collection of yet more new data from already overburdened people' (p. 370).

With the exception of Conversation Analysis (see Chapter 5), qualitative psychology's interest in synthesising findings from different studies is more recent (see Shaw, 2012). This is surprising given that the use of qualitative research synthesis in order to help develop the evidence-base for psychological interventions is equally relevant in this field. It could be argued that qualitative studies in psychology have accumulated without much

attempt to produce a coherent body of knowledge just as had been the case in nursing and health care studies (Sandelowski et al., 1997: 365).

Qualitative researchers who want to embark upon metasynthesis research are well advised to first review the literature on how to conduct a metasynthesis, as there are a number of approaches to choose from. Although all approaches share the view that metasynthesis research is always interpretative and never simply aggregative, there are differences in the extent to which metasynthesists seek to develop new theories in addition to building cumulative bodies of knowledge. Some approaches seek to offer novel interpretations of existing findings whilst others are more concerned with bringing together existing findings in a way that makes them both accessible and useful practitioners and policymakers. Another difference between approaches concerns the extent to which metasynthesists try to stay true to the primary researchers' interpretations of their data. Whilst some authors encourage the reinterpretation of primary data (e.g. Ludvigsen et al., 2015), others (e.g. Weed, 2008) advise against this. There are also different views regarding the ideal number of studies to be included in a metasynthesis, with Kearney (2001) arguing that the larger the number of studies included, the more saturated and transferable the results; whilst Sandelowski, Docherty and Emden (1997) propose that using more than ten studies compromises the interpretative validity of the analysis. Finally, there are different views regarding the use of quality parameters to assess studies, whether or not to use standardised assessment tools and whether exclusion criteria in general should be predetermined or idiographic (see Weed, 2008).

Apart from these perhaps rather technical issues, metasynthesists need to concern themselves with the question of interpretation. Thorne (2015) draws attention to the difference between metasynthesis as a qualitative research method in its own right designed to uncover new layers of insight, and work that describes itself as metasynthesis which 'seem[s] to take advantage of the technical advice for finding and organising material, but do[es] not quite do anything truly synthetic with it' (p. 1347). She argues that for a metasynthesis to be considered 'a distinct piece of scholarly research and not merely an option for organising and displaying available literature in the field' (p. 1348), it needs to be interpretative rather than merely aggregative, it needs to interpret diversity within the body of studies, and it needs to place their findings within the socio-historical contexts within which they have been produced.

This means that metasynthesis is a method of interpretative analysis rather than a sophisticated type of literature review, and, as such, it needs to attend to

the complex conceptual and ethical issues outlined in this chapter. In fact, as Weed (2008) points out, the process of metasynthesis requires that the researcher engages in a triple hermeneutic whereby the interpretation of the metasynthesist is added to the interpretations of the original researchers and those of the research participants. The results of a metasynthesis, therefore, need to successfully integrate three levels of interpretation without losing significant aspects of meaning contained in each of them.

Metasynthesis is a challenging and time-consuming process but its benefits are worth the effort. I am currently experiencing this myself as I am in the process of co-authoring a metasynthesis of phenomenological studies of the experience of living with terminal cancer (Willig and Wirth, in preparation). Reading, reviewing, coding, interpreting and synthesising 23 sets of results felt overwhelming at times and yet there is something very powerful in paying close attention to the voices of so many research participants (over 300 across the 23 studies) describing their experience of their final life challenge. It was also rewarding to see how a complex and yet coherent picture of the dimensions of this life challenge emerged from the process of coding and integrating the emerging themes across the papers. We have created 19 theme clusters whose meaning and significance we reflected on for some time before grouping them under the four headings: 'holding on to life', 'living with cancer', 'liminality' and 'trauma'. It was at this stage that we felt the most aware of our own contribution to the meaning-making process. At the same time, we felt that conceptualising and thinking about aspects of participants' accounts in terms of theoretical notions such as 'trauma' and 'liminality' allowed us to see more of the meaning and significance of the impact of living with terminal cancer than we might have done had we stayed at a more descriptive level. A particular challenge to the metasynthesist is to find a balance between integrating findings across studies and preserving the unique features of each study's findings. This is, of course, a challenge posed by all qualitative research when it seeks to capture a range of individuals' experiences in the form of shared themes (see Willig, 2015).

It could be argued that without conducting metasyntheses, qualitative psychology would be unable to access a significant dimension of the insights it has accumulated over the years and which can only emerge when findings from a range of studies are examined in relation to one another. It is good to see that increasing numbers of metasyntheses are now being published by qualitative psychologists (e.g. Bennion et al., 2012; Shelgrove and Lioffi, 2013; Barker et al., 2014). Most (but by no means all) of these are in the field of health psychology and concern themselves with the

experience of ill health, perhaps reflecting meta-synthesis' historical association with nursing and health care studies.

## CONCLUSION

I hope I have been able to demonstrate that interpretation is an integral part of qualitative research. Any qualitative analysis of data constitutes an interpretation and it is, therefore, important that qualitative psychologists engage with the challenge of interpretation head-on. As I have argued in this chapter, decisions about how to approach interpretation, how to interpret ethically and how to evaluate an interpretation will need to be made as part of the process of designing and conducting a qualitative study. The more explicit we are about the approach we have taken, the more able the reader will be to appreciate and evaluate our research.

Recent work in qualitative psychology is taking the interpretative challenge further by exploring ways in which diverse interpretations and perspectives may be integrated in order to strengthen the impact of qualitative research. This is a welcome development which will advance qualitative psychology's methodological sophistication and its ability to address increasingly ambitious research questions.

## REFERENCES

- Alvesson, N. and Skoldberg, K. (2002) *Reflexive Methodology*. London: Sage.
- Barker, A.B., das Nair, R., Lincoln, N.B. and Hunt, N. (2014) Social identity in people with multiple sclerosis: a meta-synthesis of qualitative research, *Social Care and Neurodisability*, 5(4): 256–67.
- Beck, C.T. (2009) Metasynthesis: a goldmine for evidence-based practice, *AORN Journal*, 90(5): 701–10. doi: 10.1016/j.aorn.2009.06.025
- Bennion, A.E., Shaw, R.L. and Gibson, J.M. (2012) What do we know about the experience of age related macular degeneration?: a systematic review and meta-synthesis of qualitative research, *Social Science & Medicine*, 75(6): 976–85.
- Bondas, T. and Hall, E.O.C. (2007a) Challenges in approaching metasynthesis research, *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(1): 113–21.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Colahan, M. (2014) *Satisfaction in Long-term Heterosexual Relationships: An Exploration of Discourse and Lived Experience*. PhD thesis, University of East London, UK.
- Colahan, M., Tunariu, A.D. and Dell, P. (2012) Understanding lived experience and the structure of its discursive context, *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin*, 13(1): 48–57.
- Cornish, F. and Gillespie, A. (2009) A pragmatist approach to the problem of knowledge in health psychology, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 14(6): 800–9.
- Eatough, V. and Smith, J.A. (2008) Interpretative phenomenological analysis, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, pp. 179–94. London: Sage.
- Emerson, P. and Frosh, S. (2004) *Critical Narrative Analysis in Psychology*. London: Palgrave.
- Flowers, P. and Langdridge, D. (2007) Offending the other: deconstructing narratives of deviance and pathology, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(3): 679–90.
- Frank, A.W. (1995) *The Wounded Story Teller: Body, Illness and Ethics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Frosh, S. (2007) Disintegrating qualitative research, *Theory & Psychology*, 17(5): 635–53.
- Frosh, S. and Young, L.S. (2008) Psychoanalytic approaches to qualitative psychology, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, pp. 109–26. London: Sage.
- Frost, N. (2009a) 'Do you know what I mean?': the use of a pluralistic narrative approach in the interpretation of an interview, *Qualitative Research*, 9(1): 9–29.
- Frost, N. (2009b) Pluralism in Qualitative Research: a report on the work of the PQR project, *Social Psychological Review*, 11(1): 32–8.
- Frost, N. (2011) *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/Open University Press.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1991) *Truth and Method* (2nd revised edition, J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, trans.). New York: Crossroad.
- Gee, J.P. (1991) A linguistic approach to narrative, *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1(1): 15–39.
- Gergen, K.J. (1973) Social psychology as history, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26(2): 309–20.
- Glaser, B.G. (1992) *Emergence vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Griffin, C. and Bengry-Howell, A. (2008) Ethnography, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers, W. (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, pp. 15–31. London: Sage.
- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*. London: Sage.

- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2005) Panic and perjury: a psychosocial exploration of agency, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44(2): 147–63.
- Jensen, L.A. and Allen, M.N. (1994) A synthesis of qualitative research on wellness-illness, *Qualitative Health Research*, 4(4): 349–69.
- Kagan, C., Burton, M. and Siddiquee, A. (2008) Action research, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, pp. 32–53. London: Sage.
- Kearney, M.H. (2001) New directions in grounded formal theory, in R. Schreiber and P.N. Stern (eds) *Using Grounded Theory in Nursing*. New York: Springer.
- Kvale, S. (1996) *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage.
- Labov, W. (1972) The transformation of experience in narrative syntax, in W. Labov (ed.) *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Langdridge, D. (2007) *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Ludvigsen, M.S., Hall, E.O.C., Meyer, G., Fegran, L., Aagaard, H. and Uhrenfeldt, L. (2015) Using Sandelowski and Barroso's meta-synthesis method in advancing qualitative evidence, *Qualitative Health Research*, 1–10, doi: 10.1177/1049732315576493
- Lyons, E. and Coyle, A. (eds) (2007) *Analysing Qualitative Data in Psychology*. London: Sage.
- McLeod, J. (2001) *Qualitative Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. London: Sage.
- Murray, M. (2003) Narrative psychology, in J.A. Smith (ed.) *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research*, pp. 111–31. London: Sage.
- Noblit, G.W. and Hare, R.D. (1988) *Meta Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ricoeur, P. (1970) *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (D. Savage, trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1996) On interpretation, in R. Kearney and M. Rainwater (eds) *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, pp. 138–56. London: Routledge (original work published 1983)
- Sandelowski, M., Docherty, S. and Emden, C. (1997) Qualitative metasynthesis: issues and techniques, *Research in Nursing & Health*, 20(4): 365–71.
- Schmidt, L.K. (2006) *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen.
- Shaw, R.L. (2012) Identifying and synthesizing qualitative literature, in D. Harper and A.R. Thomson (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Shelgrove, S. and Lioffi, C. (2013) Living with chronic back pain: a metasynthesis of qualitative research, *Chronic Illness*, 9(4): 283–301.
- Smith, B. and Sparkes, A. (2006) Narrative inquiry in psychology: exploring the tensions within, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(3): 169–92.
- Smith, J.A. (2011) Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis: a reply to the commentaries and further development of criteria, *Health Psychology Review*, 5(1): 55–61.
- Smith, J.A. (2012) A conversation with Professor Jonathan Smith, in C. Willig (2012) *Qualitative Interpretation and Analysis in Psychology*, Appendix 3. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/ Open University Press.
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage.
- Sontag, S. (1994) Against interpretation, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, pp. 3–14. London: Vintage/Random House (original work published in 1966).
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990/1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. 1st and 2nd edition. London: Sage.
- Sullivan, P. (2008) Our emotional connection to truth: moving beyond a functional view of language in discourse analysis, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38(2): 193–207.
- Thorne, S.E. (2015) Qualitative metasynthesis: a technical exercise or a source of new knowledge?, *Psycho-Oncology*, 24(11): 1347–8.
- Todorova, I. (2011) Explorations with interpretative phenomenological analysis in different socio-cultural contexts, *Health Psychology Review*, 5(1): 34–8.
- Weed, M. (2008) A potential method for the interpretive synthesis of qualitative research: issues in the development of 'meta-interpretation', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(1): 13–28.
- Williams, E.N. and Morrow, S.L. (2009) Achieving trustworthiness in qualitative research: a pan-paradigmatic perspective, *Psychotherapy Research*, 19(4/5): 576–82.
- Willig, C. (2012) *Qualitative Interpretation and Analysis in Psychology*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/ Open University Press.
- Willig, C. (2015) 'My bus is here': a phenomenological exploration of 'living with dying', *Health Psychology*, 34(4): 417–25.
- Willig, C. and Wirth, L. (under review) A qualitative metasynthesis of phenomenological studies of the experience of living with terminal cancer.
- Willig, C. and Stainton Rogers, W. (eds) (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.