

## Abstract

Qualitative research is experiencing a resurgence within the field of psychology. This study aimed to explore the range of attitudes toward qualitative research in psychology held by students and academics, using the model of attitudes by Eagly and Chaiken (1993; 2007) as a framework. Twenty one psychology students and academics were interviewed about their attitudes toward qualitative research. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Whilst qualitative research was described as inherent to the psychology profession and useful for generating rich data, some participants felt this approach was not well respected or considered as legitimate as quantitative methods. Reflecting common misperceptions about qualitative research, participants also expressed concerns that qualitative research was too subjective and had limited generalisability. Furthermore, some participants felt they lacked the skills and confidence necessary to conduct qualitative research. Large investments in time and resources were identified as barriers to undertaking qualitative research. Identifying attitudes toward qualitative research provides a basis for future work in dispelling myths, promoting attitudinal change and increasing both the use and teaching of qualitative approaches in psychology.

Qualitative methods have been present in psychology since its founding in 1879 (Wertz, 2011), with seminal researchers such as William James and Sigmund Freud utilising qualitative approaches to form the basis of psychological knowledge (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Despite its early use, and the acceptance of dual qualitative and quantitative research cultures within social sciences in general (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012), qualitative research has since occupied a devalued and marginalised space within the field of psychology (Wertz, 2011). The rise of behaviourism in the early twentieth century dramatically reformulated psychology and introspection as a method was abandoned and experimental and survey research dominated (Danziger, 1990). Qualitative research was considered a direct assault on the positivist tradition of empirical science and an attack on reason and truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and to maintain the privilege and credibility of the field as a natural science, qualitative inquiry was suppressed (Harré, 2004; Lyons, 2011). Reflecting international trends, Australian psychology has a strong tradition of quantitative research conducted within a positivist framework (Breen & Darlaston-Jones, 2010), in contrast to many other social science disciplines within Australia, such as health sociology (Willis & Broom, 2004), political science (Sharman & Weller, 2009) and social work (Fook, 2003), that embrace qualitative research.

Initially associated with critical research approaches outside of mainstream psychology, over the past three decades, psychology has begun to broaden and revise its methods of inquiry to incorporate previously silenced and marginalised qualitative methods (Wertz, 2011), as evidenced by the increase in qualitative journal articles (Rennie, Watson, & Monteiro, 2002) and special issues of 'main-stream' psychology journals devoted to qualitative methods (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). The rise of qualitative research is also reflected in the increase in qualitative text books and training materials, scientific associations, conferences and workshops, university courses (Wertz, 2011) and the teaching

of qualitative methods (Harper, 2012), although quantitative research remains the ‘reigning epistemological ethos’ (Bhati, Joyt and Huffman, 2013), dominating publications, funding and teaching in psychology (Walsh-Bowers, 2002).

Qualitative research is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of theoretical approaches and methods. Drawing on language as a semiotic resource for understanding meaning-making (Much, 1992), qualitative research can contribute to psychology through providing in-depth contextualised understandings of human behaviour and accounts of personal experience and meaning that may not be possible with quantitative methods (Bhati, et al., 2013; Kidd, 2002). Further, qualitative research can be used to generate and elaborate theory within psychology (Kidd, 2002).

Attitudes impact judgements and behaviours (Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997) and to increase the use and teaching of qualitative research designs in psychology it is important to understand the current perceptions of qualitative research held by psychology students and academics. Understanding student attitudes has the potential to inform teaching strategies to support student’s feelings of control and mastery of research methods and reduce negative research orientations.

To date, few published studies have examined the attitudes of psychology academics and students toward qualitative research in psychology. While the qualitative - quantitative debate has been widely featured in the academic literature (see Kranz (1995) for an overview), this may reflect the views of individuals heavily invested in particular methodologies rather than the full range of attitudes held by psychology academics. Walsh-Bowers (2002) interviewed 21 psychology academics and 13 graduate students, noting the perceived legitimacy of qualitative research in psychology differed across programs and schools.

Studies examining attitudes held by psychology students report dichotomous attitudes toward qualitative and quantitative research methods (Murtonen, 2005), with quantitatively-oriented students expressing concerns that qualitative research is arbitrary, unscientific and particularly susceptible to researcher bias (Rabinowitz & Weseen, 1997).

The aim of this study is to explore the range of attitudes toward qualitative research in psychology held by psychology students and academics within one Australian university. Working within the multicomponent model of attitudes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, 2007), attitude is defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p.1). Attitudes have affective, behavioural and cognitive components which vary in their importance according to the entity evaluated (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). In this study, the affective, behavioural and cognitive components respectively refer to feelings and emotions unmediated by thinking; overt actions and intentions; and thoughts, knowledge and associations (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007) ascribed to qualitative research in psychology. Through identifying the range of attitudes held, it will be possible to a) begin to systematically address identified misperceptions about qualitative research evident in attitudes expressed; and b) develop measures of attitudes towards qualitative research to enable the tracking of changes in attitudes over time, resulting from efforts to dispel misperceptions and promote qualitative research.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study was a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with psychology students and academics and analysed using thematic analysis

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were 21 students and academics from a school of psychology in an Australian university. Traditionally, this school had a strong quantitative research focus, but is increasingly embracing the use of qualitative and mixed methods research. Participants in this study were purposively sampled to achieve a diverse range of research knowledge, experience and preferences. The ages of participants ranged from 19 years old to 64 years old ( $M= 33$  years,  $SD= 14$  years), of which 48% were male and 52% were female. Fourteen psychology students (three second year, two third year, two fourth year, one Masters and six PhD students) and seven academic staff members ( $M= 18$  years in academia,  $SD= 13$  years) participated in the study.

### **Interview Procedure**

Interviews with psychology students and academics were semi-structured and based on an interview schedule designed to elicit information from each component of the attitude model. Participants were asked about their feelings and emotional responses, their experience and intentions and their knowledge, thoughts and associations about qualitative and mixed methods research in psychology<sup>1</sup>. The questions relating to qualitative research are presented in Table 1 below. The duration of the interviews ranged from nine to 58 minutes ( $M= 24$  minutes,  $SD= 14$  minutes). Interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

<insert Table 1 about here>

### **Analysis**

The interview transcripts were imported into a qualitative data analysis program, QSR NVivo 10, for analysis. To guide the thematic analysis pre-existing nodes based on the attitude model by Eagly and Chaiken (2007) were created: ‘affect’ (with child nodes of feelings and emotional responses), ‘behaviour’ (with child nodes of experience and

---

<sup>1</sup> For findings pertaining to attitudes toward mixed methods research in psychology please see Author and Author (under review).

intentions) and ‘cognition’ (with child nodes of knowledge, thoughts and associations). Thematic analysis was then undertaken using the method described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Each interview transcript was read through a number of times and potential emergent codes were noted. Transcripts were then coded systematically, initial codes sorted into potential themes and sub-themes, and themes were then reworked (collapsed, deleted and refined) to ensure each theme had sufficient supporting data and data cohered meaningfully. A reflexive journal was maintained and the authors met regularly to discuss the research and analysis.

## **Findings**

A central theme emerging across interviews was that the design of the study should be guided by the research question, rather than being driven by methods or methodologies: “I guess for me it’s probably more about the research questions. Being driven by the research questions” (Academic #4). Participants acknowledged that qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches are suitable for different types of research questions, with each approach having its own value: “If it (the research approach) doesn’t suit the project then I wouldn’t be doing it. So there’s times when it suits mixed methods, and times when it’s just qualitative and times when quantitative is required” (Academic #3).

Within this overarching theme, nine major themes were identified in the data. These themes will be presented using the multicomponent model of attitudes framework (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). Two themes fall within the ‘Behaviour’ domain and seven within the ‘Cognition’ domain. A possible explanation for the dominance of the cognitive domain and the absence of attitudes corresponding to the affective domain is that ‘qualitative research in psychology’ is a cognitively based attitude object, with attitudes activated in a deliberate and

conscious manner, as opposed to affective attitudes that are unmediated by thinking (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Giner-Sorolla, 2004). Further, the interview process itself invites cognitive, rather than emotional responses, as participants are invited to share, and expand upon their views.

## **Behaviour**

The major themes identified in the domain 'Behaviour' were: 'Lack of Exposure and Confidence' and 'Time and Resource Intensive'.

### **Lack of Exposure and Confidence.**

Many of the participants stated that they had limited exposure to qualitative research methods throughout their study. Reflecting this, participants felt that there was a strong emphasis on quantitative research methods in undergraduate psychology degrees and that the teaching of qualitative research methods was tokenistic: "In my undergrad they would teach you about quantitative and then you'd get the token lecture about qualitative" (PhD student #6). Furthermore, some participants did not feel supported to undertake research using qualitative methods: "Lack of support. If there is no one else around you that has experience or expertise then... you are on your own" (PhD student #5). Reflecting limited exposure to this approach, participants described qualitative research as difficult to understand and confusing: "I read one book on qualitative research and all the different forms of analysis and unfortunately I found the amount of jargon used, it's not very accessible" (PhD student #7). Participants attributed the confusion surrounding qualitative research methods to a lack of exposure to the methodology in their psychology degree or work as an academic:

There's just a huge data base when you're conducting qualitative analyses and you've just got to try and make sense of it all... I really wouldn't know where to start... extracting themes and all of that kind of stuff... That would be completely alien to what I'm used to.

(Academic #7)

For some, a lack of experience and confidence with qualitative research methodologies was described as daunting:

It may be a little bit intimidating. I think it's just a function of not being exposed to it... I think there's a whole series of things I think can act as maybe little anxiety provokers... I don't think people feel equipped to be able to enter into it.

(Academic #5)

A lack of exposure to qualitative research methods and the distinct bias toward quantitative methods in the undergraduate psychology curriculum is a concern echoed in the academic literature (Forrester & Koutsopoulou, 2008; Hansen & Rapley, 2008). In undergraduate psychology degrees, experimental and quasi-experimental methods are privileged and statistical techniques for the analysis of quantitative data are taught extensively (Breen & Darlaston-Jones, 2009). There is a lack of appropriately trained faculty staff within psychology departments with an understanding of alternative epistemological and methodological approaches (Breen & Darlaston-Jones, 2009). As Ponterotto and Greiger (2007) note, even at postgraduate level, "developing competence in qualitative inquiry methods literally constitutes an extracurricular activity" (p. 405).

### **Time and Resource Intensive.**

Some participants described conducting qualitative research as time consuming and tiresome. The process of transcribing interviews was commonly identified as labour intensive, as one student explains: "It (qualitative research) just is a massive undertaking and the number of hours they have to take to do their interviews, and transcription and I think it's a much more time intensive type of research" (PhD student #4). The time and effort required to conduct qualitative research was often compared to that of quantitative research: "It's very tiring. I mean, it is time intensive, but then it's hard because you have to be on the ball all the



time and you can't just put down a sheet of paper with a list of questions in front of somebody" (PhD student #4). The time investment required of qualitative research was identified by some participants as a barrier preventing them from conducting this type of research: "It's really just the time and energy with qualitative that throws me off that" (PhD student #8).

The time required to properly conduct qualitative research is also acknowledged in the literature (for example, Willig, 2008). In addition to the time taken to collect qualitative data, transcribing audio recordings of in-depth individual and focus group interviews is a particularly time consuming process (Liamputtong, 2009). The additional time required for qualitative research is made problematic when decisions about promotion and tenure are based on the *quantity* of published outputs (Walsh-Boers, 2002), where mainstream journal requirements for structure and length, designed to suit the reporting of quantitative studies within a postpositivist framework, are often ill-suited to presenting qualitative research findings (Kidd, 2002; Ponterotto & Gireger, 2007), and reviewers may have limited exposure to qualitative methods (Ponterotto & Gireger, 2007).

To summarise the 'Behaviour' domain; many participants acknowledged the emphasis on quantitative research methods in undergraduate psychology degrees, with insufficient training and limited exposure contributing to perceptions of qualitative research as confusing and daunting. The large investments in both time and resources required were barriers to undertaking qualitative research.

### **Cognition**

The domain 'Cognition' had seven major themes: 'Inherent to Psychology', 'Capturing the Lived Experience', 'Power and the Participant-Researcher Relationship', 'Respect and Legitimacy', 'Subjectivity and Rigour', 'Limited Generalisability and Worth', 'Characteristics of Qualitative Researchers'.

### **Inherent to Psychology.**

Qualitative research was described as being inherent to the psychology profession. Participants drew parallels between conducting qualitative research and practicing as a psychologist, with both requiring close interpersonal relationships and, effective communication for the sensitive nature of the content discussed. For example:

Qualitative (research) really is important in terms of psychology. Hearing the stories, seeing how it plays out in their family life, in their work, in their social circles... I don't think you could get away with being a practicing psychologist without having an understanding of people and that means having all of those sorts of stories.

(Fourth year student #10)

Given the perceived similarities between conducting qualitative research and practicing as a psychology, some participants were curious as to why qualitative research was not as popular or widely accepted as quantitative research. As one academic explains:

I always found it interesting in psychology when so many people go into psychology because they want to be a psychologist who sits in an office and speaks to someone one-on-one about their experience, but anything that's experiential as a research project where we're asking people about their experience, we pooh-pooh... that doesn't make any sense to me at all, because if someone comes to your office you don't say 'shut up, just fill in this... standardised measure and we'll never talk' because that's not what happens (Academic #4).

The parallels between conducting qualitative research and practicing as a psychologist have also been explored in the academic literature. The goals and methodologies of qualitative approaches to psychological inquiry closely resemble clinical practice (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2006; Yardley, 2000). In a qualitative interview, the researcher seeks to gather a rich description of the participant's subjective experience, meaning, context and

culture (Yardley, 2000), a process similar to a clinical interview or a psychotherapy session where the psychologist focuses on the language and behaviour of the client in a joint search for meaning and understanding (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996; Silverstein, et al., 2006). Self-reflexivity is central to qualitative research and psychological practice. (Liamputtong, 2009; Yardley, 2000). Member checking by qualitative researchers is akin to a psychologist clarifying the accuracy of their understanding of a client's subjective internal experience in therapy (Silverstein, et al., 2006). Focusing on the similarities between psychological practice and qualitative research may provide an avenue for strengthening the perceived relevance of qualitative research in psychology.

### **Capturing the Lived Experience.**

Qualitative research was described by many participants as producing rich, in-depth data. Many participants felt that the ability to capture the lived experience of research participants was the major strength of qualitative approaches to psychological inquiry. As one academic explains:

You can make assumptions about things, you can make assumptions about people or about experiences and it's nice to just be able to ask people... get things in their own words. It's sometimes beautiful how people put words together in order to describe an experience (Academic #4).

Qualitative research methods were described as being able to access information that is typically inaccessible by other research approaches. The ability to reflect the 'true' experience of the research participants was also described as being unique to qualitative research: "It (qualitative research) really gives you a deeper understanding... because while I'm all for quantitative research, numbers can only do so much" (Fourth year student #11).

In addition, some participants acknowledged the limitations of quantitative research in the field of psychology: “A lot of psychological concepts really can’t be studied in terms of statistics or numbers and that ultimately interviews are going to be needed to understand what people are thinking” (Second year student #12).

The ability of qualitative research to capture the way in which a phenomenon is experienced within the broader social, cultural, political and historical context is consistently identified as a major strength of this approach (for example, Liamputtong, 2009). It has been argued that the ability of qualitative research to capture the lived experience of the social world is invaluable in understanding and interpreting the complexities of human behaviour within the discipline of psychology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Liamputtong, 2009), and this argument could be further promoted to strengthen the perceived relevance of qualitative research in psychology.

### **Power and the Participant-Researcher Relationship.**

Some participants felt that qualitative approaches to inquiry reduced the power differential that typically exists between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’ in traditional psychological research. If the research participant feels empowered to share their experiences honestly and openly, the potential for the researcher to influence the research findings is reduced. As one PhD student explains:

Ideally when you’ve got two people who are... entering into almost a joint exploratory of someone’s life or their experiences then there is no power differential and you can almost get to that point where you say to someone ‘Is it like this?’ and if there’s no power differential they’ll turn around and say ‘No, don’t be stupid! That’s not what I meant’ and that’s ideally where you want to get to... If they’re in that position of power with you then subjectivity is not an issue (PhD student #4).

Some participants also stated that they enjoyed the opportunity to talk to people about their lives and their experiences. They felt privileged that people would share their often very private experiences with them:

Learning about how people lead their lives and how they deal with problems they have and so on... it's really that position where being a researcher is such a... enjoyable one and you know, a privileged one... Because you put a white lab coat on you get people to tell you things that you would never normally be exposed to.

(Academic #2)

The unique relationship between researcher and participant in qualitative research has been discussed extensively in the literature (for example, Liamputtong, 2009). Qualitative research aims to democratise the research process by rebalancing power in the researcher-participant relationship (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). The privileged nature of the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative research identified by participants in this study is also echoed in the literature, with qualitative health researchers using the term 'privilege' when describing their experiences as qualitative researchers, speaking of the gratitude they feel at being able to access such private and intimate stories, and their responsibility to do something meaningful with those stories (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007).

### **Respect and Legitimacy.**

Many participants felt that in the field of psychology qualitative research was not as well respected as quantitative research. The lack of respect afforded to qualitative research was reflected in the number of qualitative articles published in peer-reviewed journals and funding for purely qualitative research projects: "It (qualitative research) doesn't get published as much. It's not quite as well respected, so that's a bit of a problem if you're a career researcher" (Masters student #9). Qualitative research was also perceived to be not as

important as quantitative research as it is not positioned within the positivistic paradigm which has traditionally dominated psychological research: “I guess most of the stuff you get taught in undergraduate is quantitative and you get told... scientific methods is the way to approach knowledge and anything else doesn’t really exist, or is not real, or really important” (PhD student #5). Many participants identified that in psychology, qualitative research is perceived not to be a legitimate approach to research. Qualitative research was described as “soft” and not scientific enough for psychology: “The perception of the method almost as being the ‘poor cousin’, for want of a better phrase, of quantitative methods and I think there’s a little bit of stigma or ‘othering’ about the method” (Academic #5). In addition, some participants identified that there is the perception that qualitative research is an “easy” or a “softer option”, that just involves asking people questions, without needing an understanding of epistemology or methodology.

Participants’ views on the lack of respect and legitimacy accorded to qualitative methods in psychology are consistent with the dominant positivist approach in psychology (see introduction). Attempting to understand qualitative research through the lens of positivism has led to considerable dissonance, and at times rejection, of this approach in psychology (Brustad, 2011). To challenge the persistent and depreciating view that qualitative research is ‘soft’ and not ‘real science’, Morrow (2005) urges qualitative researchers to be unapologetic for their unique frames of reference and standards of goodness.

### **Subjectivity and Rigour.**

Qualitative research was commonly described as personal opinion and as being susceptible to researcher bias:

I’ve also read really bad studies where you just think these people have an agenda and it’s obvious what that agenda was. Of course they’ve got the answers that they wanted

to get because the way they've approached this means that they're only going to attract certain participants and they're only really going to get the answers they're expecting to get.

(PhD student #8)

Furthermore, qualitative research was described by many participants as being not as rigorous, reliable and valid as quantitative research. Qualitative research was often described as being conducted in an unstructured and eclectic manner with little attention to methodology. As one academic explains: "I think that that's a perception that a lot of people are led to believe that quantitative research means it's controlled and there is not bias... People see it (qualitative research) because it doesn't have those standards around it people think that's it's just... airy-fairy" (Academic #4).

In contrast, some participants felt that qualitative research was more trustworthy and transparent than quantitative research. In particular, a number of participants expressed scepticism of the so-called objectivity of quantitative research approaches: "With qualitative there may be more room for subjective interpretation of the data but I think at least it's honest... with quantitative you can fool people with your stats" (PhD student #5). Qualitative methods were also described as capturing the experiences of research participants more completely and honestly:

I guess at least with qualitative research you can, if you feel that you've done it from a completely non-bias, open minded perspective, at least... you've got the properly represented opinion of one person (laughs) rather than the misrepresented view of millions.

(PhD student #7)

Concerns of the subjective nature of qualitative research and the rigour applied to this approach have also been raised in the academic literature. Cooper et al. (2012) reported that

some students perceived qualitative research methods to be less scientific, lacking rigour and validity and associated this approach with personal judgment and feelings. Cooper hypothesised that this attitude was a function of prior training in traditional, scientific models of research. Indeed, it has been argued in the literature that the dominance of quantitative research methods in psychology has resulted in the tendency for psychologists to judge qualitative research by the standards of quantitative research (for example, Yardley, 2008), resulting in 'rigour anxiety' (Walsh- Bowers, 2002).

### **Limited Generalisability and Worth.**

Some participants felt that purely qualitative research had little utility as the research findings cannot be generalised beyond the interviewees included in the study. As one academic explains:

If it's purely qualitative research, without any kind of inferential statistics backing it up, then there is no way of knowing if the results will generalize to other people and if you get a group of people in a focus group... generally you haven't random sampled or anything... Will those views generalise to other groups? And if you interviewed the same group again a week later, say for instance, would they come up with the same views?

(Academic #7)

None of the participants interviewed referred to the concept of transferability, with some participants (such as the participant quoted) using quantitative criteria to judge qualitative research.

Another participant argued that qualitative research may be considered futile as psychological constructs are not objectively measured: "I think some people frown upon a



purely qualitative design and I can see why they would have an issue with a purely qualitative design that doesn't measure any changes with a quantitative measure" (PhD student #6).

Perceptions of the 'worth' of qualitative research may vary according to the sub-discipline of psychology. The 'differentiation' or 'fragmentation' of psychology (Zittoun, Gillespie & Cornish, 2009) reflects the wide range of topics, methods and epistemologies encompassed under the umbrella of psychology. While qualitative methods have been welcomed in some areas of psychology (especially counselling psychology, Bhati, et al., 2013), they may be seen to be of limited value in areas of psychological research focussing on, for example, physiological responses.

Reflecting the criticisms of the participants in this study, concerns regarding the generalisability of qualitative research have also been raised in the academic literature (for example, Schofield, 2002). Kidd (2002) interviewed 10 chief editors of journals published and/or distributed by the American Psychological Association (APA). Generalisability was identified by many of the participants as a major limitation that impacted on the usefulness and applicability of qualitative research. This concern was so great that it made it unlikely that they would accept a qualitative submission for publication. It has been argued in the literature (for example, Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2011) that it is not appropriate to criticise qualitative research on the grounds of limited generalisability to the general population as this is not the purpose of the approach. Qualitative researchers aspire for theoretical or analytical generalisability and transferability of findings (Liamputtong, 2009). Qualitative findings are not expected to be exactly replicated, but it is anticipated that the insights gained may be transferable to other contexts (Yardley, 2008). The persistence of views on the limited generalisability and worth of qualitative findings is an area that needs to be addressed if qualitative research is to become more widely accepted.

### **Characteristics of Qualitative Researchers.**

Many participants associated being a qualitative researcher with being a “people person”. Participants felt that good interpersonal skills were an essential attribute to conduct qualitative research. Qualitative researchers were described as needing to be very social and comfortable being around and talking to other people, as one PhD student joked: “If you don’t like talking to people face to face you’re in trouble (laughs)” (PhD student #5). Not all of the characteristics of qualitative researchers reported by participants in this study were positive. Some participants identified that there was the perception that researchers who used qualitative approaches to inquiry have difficulties with statistics and learning quantitative methods:

There’s always this perception that people go into qualitative research because they can’t do stats, or can’t do numbers or whatever... I’ve heard a lot of researchers say that ‘Oh I’m doing this for my Master’s because I can’t do any stats’ or ‘I don’t like SPSS’ or... ‘I get confused by numbers and they scare me’ and I just want to slap people who say that cos I’m like ‘You’re making it hard for the rest of us!’

(Academic #4)

The notion of ‘being a qualitative researcher’ has been explored in the academic literature. Comparable to the attitudes expressed by the participants in this study, qualitative health researchers in a study conducted by Dickson-Smith et al. (2007) referred to the need to ‘be human’ to do qualitative research. Researchers in this study described themselves as caring, empathic, patient and compassionate. They also identified a number of behaviours they engage in when conducting qualitative interviews, including the reciprocal sharing of personal stories, showing emotion and offering support. In contrast, qualitatively-oriented doctoral students in a study by Rabinowitz and Weseen (1997) expressed concern that they were expected to do socially or personally meaningful work. These students felt that they

were often labelled 'feminists' and that their choices of topics or methods were viewed as too political or too personally revealing.

Similarly, the relationship between perceived difficulty of quantitative research methods and research orientation has been explored in the academic literature. Murtonen (2005) reported that students who experienced difficulties learning quantitative methods or did not feel confident in their ability to use quantitative methods were more positively oriented toward qualitative methods. To overcome the perception of qualitative research as an 'easy option', an increased focus on the rigour associated with qualitative research is required.

To summarise the cognitive domain; students and academics described qualitative research as being inherent to the psychology profession, capturing the lived experience of research participants and reducing the power differential between 'the researcher' and 'the researched'. Some participants conceded that qualitative research methods were not as well respected or considered as legitimate as quantitative research methods in psychology with concerns expressed that qualitative research was subjective, vulnerable to researcher bias, often conducted in an unstructured manner and had limited generalisability compared to quantitative research. These concerns reflect the dominant epistemological ethos in psychology that preferences quantitative over qualitative research and judges qualitative research using quantitative criteria. Qualitative researchers were identified as being person centred and finding statistics difficult.

### **Conclusions**

This study has identified the range of attitudes that exist toward qualitative research within one school of psychology at an Australian university. Findings indicate that whilst many participants were open to the use of qualitative methods, they lacked the confidence, skills and support necessary to undertake this type of research. It is also evident that there are

some enduring misperceptions about qualitative research, particularly with regard to rigour and generalisability, with a tendency for psychology students and academics to assume that the criteria used to judge the validity of quantitative research also applies to qualitative research. Given the continued dominance of quantitative methods in psychology in Australia, these results are not surprising. The current resurgence of qualitative research in psychology, if supported by increased teaching of qualitative methods and further acceptance of qualitative articles within main stream psychology journals, has the potential to increase the perceived worth and legitimacy of qualitative methods, and challenge attitudes about qualitative researchers and research that are based on misperceptions about qualitative research.

To advance the teaching and learning of qualitative research methods and methodologies and promote methodological pluralism within the field of psychology a number of significant changes to the undergraduate psychology curriculum are required. Drawing on the findings from this study in combination with previous research by Breen and Darlaston-Jones (2009), Cooper et al. (2012) and Walsh-Bowers (2002), the following recommendations are suggested. First, philosophies of science and comparisons of epistemologies and world views should be introduced early in the undergraduate psychology curriculum, supplemented by an introduction to linguistics and psycholinguistics. Second, students would benefit from an understanding of the history of psychology, particularly the privileging of positivism within the discipline. Third, undergraduate psychology students should be introduced early to a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and methods. Incorporating experiential learning techniques early in the process of teaching qualitative research methods will demystify the approach and reduce feelings of apprehension. The goal should be to provide students with an appreciation of the wide range of methodologies that may be usefully employed to develop psychological knowledge,

including the potential to mix approaches where appropriate. This approach, requiring the selection of text-books that embrace the full range of research methods, will strengthen the message that research questions should drive the selection of research methodologies. Finally, to ensure that staff members are adequately trained to teach and supervise both undergraduate and graduate students in qualitative research, team teaching, mentoring and collaboration both within psychology and across disciplines are recommended. The recommended changes to the teaching of psychology may result in generational changes in attitudes, but need to be supported in the interim through disciplinary legitimation and change to journal policies (Walsh-Bowers, 2002). This will require attention to the academic culture within and beyond psychology departments, including openness to employing teaching and research staff with qualitative backgrounds.

A limitation of this study is that the attitudes of psychology students and academic staff at only one Australian university were explored. It is recommended that future research examine the attitudes of psychology students and academic staff from a cross-section of universities, to determine if other attitudes are held. A future direction of our own research is the development of a brief measure of attitudes toward qualitative research in psychology (Author & Author, forthcoming) to enable comparisons of attitudes between universities and across time. This will also aid in the evaluation of the effectiveness of qualitative methods training in changing attitudes and dispelling misconceptions about qualitative research in psychology.

## References

- Bhati, K. S., Hoyt, W. T., & Huffman, K. L. (2013, online first). Integration or assimilation? Locating qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. doi:0.1080/14780887.2013.772684
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Breen, L. J., & Darlaston-Jones, D. (2009). Moving beyond the enduring dominance of positivism in psychological research: Implications for psychology in Australia. *Australian Psychologist*, 45, 67-76. doi: 10.1080/00050060903127481
- Brustad, R. J. (2011). Through their eyes: Quantitative researchers' perceptions of qualitative forms of study in sport and exercise psychology. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 3, 404-410. doi: 10.1080/2159676X.2011.609563
- Cooper, R., Chenail, R. J., & Fleming, S. (2012). A grounded theory of inductive qualitative research education: Results of a meta-data-analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 17, 1-26.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2007). Doing sensitive research: What challenges do qualitative researchers face? *Qualitative Research*, 7, 327-353. doi: 10.1177/1468794107078515
- Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (1993). *The psychology of attitudes*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

- Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (2007). The advantages of an inclusive definition of attitude. *Social Cognition, 25*, 582-602. doi: 10.1521/soco.2007.25.5.582
- Fook, J. (2003). Social work research in Australia. *Social Work Education: The International Journal, 22*, 45-57. doi:10.1080/0261547032000045047
- Forrester, M. A., & Koutsopoulou, G. Z. (2008). Providing resources for enhancing the teaching of qualitative methods at the undergraduate level: Current practices and the work of the HEA psychology network group. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 5*, 173-178. doi: 10.1080/14780880802314312
- Giner-Sorolla, R. (2004). Is affective material in attitudes more accessible than cognitive material? The moderating role of attitude basis. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 34*, 761-780. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.229
- Goertz, G., & Mahoney, J. (2012). *A tale of two cultures : Qualitative and quantitative research in the social sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hagger, M. S., & Chatzisarantis, N. L. D. (2011). Never the twain shall meet? Quantitative psychological researchers' perspectives on qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 3*, 266-277. doi: 10.1080/2159676x.2011.607185
- Hansen, S., & Rapley, M. (2008). Editorial: Special issue of qualitative research in psychology on 'teaching qualitative methods'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 5*, 171-172. doi: 10.1080/14780880802314296
- Harper, D. J. (2012). Surveying qualitative research teaching on British clinical psychology training programmes 1992–2006: A changing relationship? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 9*, 5-12. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2012.630626
- Harré, R. (2004). Staking our claim for qualitative psychology as science. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 1*, 3-14. doi: 10.1191/1478088704qp002oa

- Karnieli-Miller, O., Strier, R., & Pessach, L. (2009). Power relations in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research, 19*, 279-289. doi: 10.1177/1049732308329306
- Kidd, S. A. (2002). The role of qualitative research in psychological journals. *Psychological Methods, 7*, 126-138. doi: 10.1037/1082-989X.7.1.126
- Krantz, D. L. (1995). Sustaining vs. resolving the quantitative-qualitative debate. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 18*, 89-96. doi: 10.1016/0149-7189(94)00052-Y
- Liamputtong, P. (2009). *Qualitative research methods* (3rd ed.). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Lyons, A. C. (2011). Advancing and extending qualitative research in health psychology. *Health Psychology Review, 5*, 1-8. doi: 10.1080/17437199.2010.544638
- Merchant, N., & Dupuy, P. (1996). Multicultural counseling and qualitative research: Shared worldview and skills. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 74*, 537-541. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.1996.tb02289.x
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 250-260. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.250
- Much, N. C. (1992). The analysis of discourse as methodology for a semiotic psychology. *The American Behavioral Scientist, 36*, 52-72.
- Murtonen, M. (2005). University students' research orientations: Do negative attitudes exist toward quantitative methods? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 49*, 263-280. doi: 10.1080/00313830500109568
- Petty, R. E., Wegener, D. T., & Fabrigar, L. R. (1997). Attitudes and attitude change. *Annual Review of Psychology, 48*, 609-647. doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.48.1.609
- Ponterotto, J. G., & Greiger, I. (2007). Effectively communicating qualitative research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 35*, 404-430. doi: 10.1177/0011000006287443



- Rabinowitz, V. C., & Weseen, S. (1997). Elu(c)i(d)at)ing epistemological impasses: Re-viewing the qualitative/quantitative debates in psychology. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53, 605-630. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.1997.tb02451.x
- Rennie, D. L., Watson, K. D., & Monteiro, A. M. (2002). The rise of qualitative research in psychology. *Canadian Psychology*, 43, 179-189. doi: 10.1037/h0086914
- Schofield, J. W. (2002). Increasing the generalizability of qualitative research. In A. M. Huberman & M. B. Miles (Eds.), *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 171-204). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sharman, J. C., & Weller, P. (2009). Where is the quality? Political science scholarship in Australia. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 44, 597-612. doi: 10.1080/10361140903296537
- Silverstein, L. B., Auerbach, C. F., & Levant, R. F. (2006). Using qualitative research to strengthen clinical practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 37, 351-358. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.37.4.351
- Walsh-Bowers, R. (2002). Constructing qualitative knowledge in psychology: Students and faculty negotiate the social content of inquiry. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 43, 163-178. doi: [10.1037/h0086913](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086913)
- Wertz, F. J. (2011). The qualitative revolution and psychology: Science, politics, and ethics. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 39, 77-104. doi: 10.1080/08873267.2011.564531
- Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed.). Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Willig, C., & Stainton-Rogers, W. (2008). Introduction. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 1-12). London: Sage.

- Willis, E., & Broom, A. (2004). State of the art: A decade of health sociology in review. *Health Sociology Review, 13*, 122-144.
- Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology & Health, 15*, 215-228. doi: 10.1080/08870440008400302
- Yardley, L. (2008). Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (2nd ed., pp. 235-251). London: Sage.
- Zittoun, T., Gillespie, A., & Cornish, F. (2009). Fragmentation or differentiation: Questioning the crisis in psychology. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Science, 43*, 104-115. doi: 10.1007/s12124-008-9083-6

Table 1

*Qualitative Research Questions Included in the Interview Schedule*

---

Questions (*Prompts in italics*)

---

When you hear that someone has conducted qualitative research in psychology, what is your initial reaction?

*What makes you feel this way?*

Can you tell me about any qualitative research training you may have received?

*University: undergrad or postgrad? sought out or compulsory?*

*Formal or informal?*

*Do you feel you have the skills necessary to conduct qualitative research?*

Can you tell me about any qualitative research you may have conducted?

*Why qualitative research for this project?*

*Whose decision was it to use qualitative research for this project?*

*How did you feel about the use of qualitative research for this project?*

What role (if any) do you think qualitative research has in psychology?

*(If no role) why not?*

*What contribution can qualitative research make to psychology?*

*When is the use of qualitative research appropriate?*

*Under what circumstances would you consider conducting qualitative research?*

What type of research (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods) would you (or do you) prefer to conduct? Why?

*(If not qualitative)* What barriers do you see as stopping you from conducting qualitative research?

---