European Journal for
**Qualitative Research
in Psychotherapy**
www.EJQRP.org

European Association
for Integrative Psychotherapy

The Reflective Online Practitioner Survey: The value in harvesting both qualitative and quantitative data

Alistair McBeath

Metanoia Institute, London, UK.   *Email*: alistair.mcbeath@metanoia.ac.uk

Abstract: Two research projects are reported which describe how carefully designed online surveys can generate considerable quantities of both quantitative and qualitative data. There is a central focus on the value of embracing mixed methods research and how this can be enabled through the development of a standardised approach to online surveying called the Reflective Online Practitioner Survey (ROPS). The development of the Reflective Online Practitioner Survey confirms the central notion of mixed methods research that qualitative and quantitative data when collected and integrated in combination can offer a deeper understanding of phenomena than either type of data would offer alone.

Keywords: Reflective Online Practitioner Survey, Mixed methods research, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Pragmatism

The focus of this paper is a story of how two individual pieces of research using online surveys revealed the power of a mixed methods approach which was eventually developed into a formal model of research practice. Initially there was no conscious awareness or in-depth knowledge about the practice or rationale of a mixed methods approach to research within counselling and psychotherapy. On the contrary, there was perhaps a tacit assumption that there were two competing domains of research, namely, qualitative and quantitative, and that the researcher had to choose one or the other.

What happened was an unexpected discovery, namely that this polarised conception of research was not entirely accurate and, indeed, was contradicted by the material offered by research participants. At the same time, traditional notions of the relationship between the researcher and research participants seemed outdated and a far more fluid relationship seemed to be active. So, the traditional dichotomous view that research participants are viewed either as people in a qualitative context with their unique lived experience or just

as numbers in a quantitative context where individual experience is aggregated seemed to be an artificial and unhelpful distinction.

It is important to give some background to mixed methods research as it has a history of debate and some controversy amongst researchers. Mixed methods research emerged from a long period of academic debate, especially in the 1980s, where qualitative and quantitative research methods were seen as mutually incompatible and spawned the so-called *paradigm wars* (Tashakkori & Teddie, 1998). One of the principal arguments centred around what Howe (1988) termed the *incompatibility hypothesis* which emphasised that qualitative and quantitative research methods were based on conflicting philosophical assumptions or what Creswell and Piano Clarke (2007) have termed *worldviews.* In essence, this debate centred around claims that the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying quantitative and qualitative research methods - and consequently the relationship between the researcher and research participants - were so fundamentally different that there could be no meaningful combination of the two approaches. In practice,

for example. it would be possible to get contradictory results where a participant expressed one thing on a survey and another in an in-depth interview (Steward, 2007).

From an ontological perspective, quantitative methods have been associated with *realism* which contends that there is a single external reality that exists beyond our senses. In contrast, qualitative methods have been associated with *relativism* or *critical realism* where the core position is that reality is a subjective experience and that there can be multiple realities. At an epistemological level there are further fundamental differences with quantitative approaches being underpinned by *positivism* where the researcher and the researched are seen as independent of each other and the process of research is an objective scientific method. In contrast qualitative methods are associated with what can be called a *constructivist-interpretivist* position where realities can be constructed both cognitively and socially. Here the dynamic between the researcher and the researched would be seen as a process of co-creating knowledge.

Over the last two decades there has been a gradual acceptance of mixed methods research in promoting the integration of qualitative and quantitative data and it has been referred to as the "transformative paradigm" (Mertens, 2007; Williams, 2020) and the "third research paradigm" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* was launched in 2007 and there are now a few 'classic texts' about mixed methods research such as the *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) and *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Creswell & Piano Clark, 2007). From a philosophical stance mixed methods research has been aligned with the cornerstones of pragmatism which Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) referred to as "the philosophical partner for mixed methods research" (p. 16). The pragmatic researcher focuses on 'what works' to answer research questions rather than making a choice between the positivist/post-positivist and constructivist interpretivist epistemologies (Brierley, 2017). So, in this sense the pragmatic researcher is freer to make research-based decisions.

Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007) reviewed nineteen different definitions of mixed methods research from leading mixed methods researchers and synthesized the following:

> Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (2007, p. 123)

For those who favour using mixed methods research, the key advantage is seen as the opportunity to gain a deeper and enhanced understanding of phenomena. This point has been clearly articulated by Landrum and Garza (2015):

> We argue that together, quantitative and qualitative approaches are stronger and provide more knowledge and insights about a research topic than either approach alone. While both approaches shed unique light on a particular research topic, we suggest that methodologically pluralistic researchers would be able to approach their interests in such a way as to reveal new insights that neither method nor approach could reveal alone. (2015, p. 207)

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) make the important point that mixed methods research was not intended to replace quantitative and qualitative approaches but to capitalise on the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of both.

In this paper, two different pieces of research will be reported to help illustrate the author's research journey and the discovery of how embracing a mixed methods approach can significantly enhance the richness and depth of the research process. Together they have allowed a considerable body of knowledge to be created about practitioners and how they think about key areas of their profession. In addition, the research work fostered the initial development of a flexible and powerful online survey instrument which has been called the Reflective Online Practitioner Survey (ROPS). This research tool allowed new knowledge to be harvested from practitioners which could both illuminate the depth of individual experience and have the power to generalise findings to the wider practitioner body. This is the win/win from mixed methods research.

Research Study 1. Therapists' views on their motivations

The author's first piece of formal research was focused on the motivations of people who want to become psychotherapists. During various trainings it seemed that every student articulated a desire to help others or offered some other altruistic account, but something felt inauthentic. In reading through the literature one particular comment from Goldberg (1997) seemed especially important; he concluded that "psychotherapy is not a conscious and rational vocational choice" (1997, p. 49). The author's interest in researching the motivations of therapists deepened and raised the intriguing question posed by Storr (1990), namely, "are those who are attracted to the profession the best kind of people to become psychotherapists?" (1990, p. 168).

A paper-based survey was put together for a postgraduate piece of research (McBeath, 1999). The findings from 50 therapist trainees revealed that the motivations of would-be therapists may not be so admirable as might be assumed. For example, some respondents cited a "need for power" or "self-cure" as motivations to become a psychotherapist. A good many years later this research topic was revisited with a large-scale online survey that collected the views of 540 practicing psychotherapists (McBeath, 2019).

The survey was designed with an almost exclusive focus on collecting quantitative data from Likert-scale questions asking respondents to choose one response from a selection of responses. So, responses such as "very important", "important", "not important" and so on made up the key content of the survey. Within the survey and only because it seemed to follow survey etiquette there were a few "other" responses where survey respondents could offer a response of their own choosing. The survey ended with a free text opportunity for respondents which was, "please add any additional comments." But the survey was essentially conceived and designed as a quantitative instrument that would produce responses that could be aggregated and then analysed using statistics.

The survey did indeed produce a considerable amount of quantitative data but, contrary to any expectations, the survey produced a wealth of rich and diverse qualitative data. From the total number of 540 respondents there were 107 (19%) who added free text comments at the end of the survey. Overall there were 405 individual free text comments made throughout the survey with a total word count of 10,255. Just to give some sense of scale, the total word count of free text comments offered in the survey exceeds the total word count of this paper by more than 2,500 words. So, what was designed as a quantitative research instrument delivered a huge amount of qualitative data.
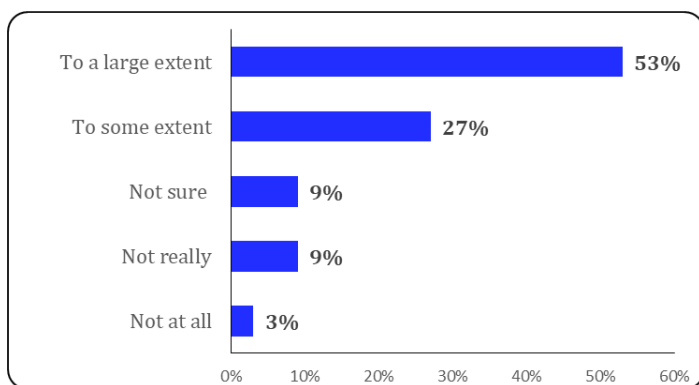
The individual 540 survey responses are shown distributed as percentages in the standard bar chart in Figure 1. This chart reflects the differing extent to which respondents considered unconscious motivations were involved in wanting to become a psychotherapist. The data are quite clear with 80% of respondents indicating that unconscious motivations were involved in wanting to become a therapist. This finding has significance in two respects: Firstly, it is a clear, unambiguous and new research finding which could have implications in such areas as therapy training and supervision. Secondly, the sample size is big enough to give statistical confidence that the findings can be generalised to all therapists.

The confidence to generalise findings from the survey to the wider practitioner body is based on two factors: the *statistical confidence* in the size of the survey sample and how representative the sample might be of the wider population of therapists. We can illustrate these two issues by reflecting on the membership of the professional organisation the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) which had 10,000 members when the survey was conducted. Using what's called a sample size calculator, we can determine how big a sample we would need to give statistical confidence that our sample values (e.g., percentages) would be representative of values in the population (i.e., all UKCP members). For a population size of 10,000 a sample size calculator would determine that we would need a minimum sample size of 370 at the 95% confidence level and with a margin of error of 5%.

The achieved sample of 540 considerably exceeds the required minimum sample size. In plain language we can say that we would be 95% confident that a percentage value from the survey sample will be plus or minus 5% of the true percentage value that would be returned from the UKCP membership as a whole. Applying this statistical logic to data shown in Figure 1 where 53% of survey respondents indicated that they thought that unconscious motivations were involved "to a large extent" in them wanting to become a psychotherapist we now know that with a sample size of 540 we can be 95% confident that the true population value would lie between 48% and 58% (i.e., +/- 5%). So data from the survey sample provides what seems to be accurate estimates of the population data.

A further question arises which asks how can we get a sense of how representative the survey might be of the wider population of therapists? One option is to compare a demographic breakdown between a sample and a known population. Again, we can use UKCP membership data to illustrate this point. In the UKCP 2016 membership survey the gender breakdown was 74% female, 24% male and 2% "preferred not to say." These data were very closely matched in the survey sample where the gender breakdown was 77.1% female, 22.8% male and 0.6% "other." So, in terms of gender breakdown we can have reasonable confidence that the

Figure 1: Extent that unconscious motivations were involved in wanting to be a therapist

survey data match that of the wider profession and are representative of the wider population (i.e., the UKCP membership).

In quantitative terms, then, it seems the survey was a successful quantitative research tool. But what of the qualitative data?

With a training in quantitative analytical approaches, the author initially felt quite overwhelmed by the qualitative data - not just the volume, but the many instances where a respondent had disclosed something quite personal and emotive. Here are three well remembered examples of respondents explaining why they might have been motivated to become a therapist:

- "My primary motivation was due to my relationship with my father who was abusive. I became interested in understanding peoples' motivations and from there to learn how to change relationships and improve them."

- "My father was a physician - when he was dying, he said I was made to heal the part he couldn't. Not so sure of the truth of that, but it shaped me".

- "My experience of bereavement in 2014 and 2015 revealed much of my unconscious motivation to be a therapist. Now my parents are gone, I no longer have to try and heal them. This has been a big adjustment".

These comments evoked an unmistakable embodied response in the researcher and there was a sense of anxiety and some bewilderment that people unknown to the researcher would offer up such personal and, often, painful details. Perhaps one reason that many respondents were prepared to disclose sensitive material is to do with what Braun et al. (2021, p. 644) have described as a "high level of *felt* anonymity" that can be associated with online surveys and which may allow more sensitive material to be offered than might be the case in face-to-face approaches such as interviews and focus groups.

Although the volume and diversity of the qualitative material that came from the online survey seemed overwhelming there was almost a magnetic attraction to reading and re-reading the material. Unwittingly, this was the process needed to enable a sense of meaning to emerge. Themes seemed to present themselves as having validity and importance. What was happening was an informal but nonetheless significant process of thematic analysis which was similar, in parts, to the formalised approach of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Learning from this experience, the more systematic and rigorous RTA approach was subsequently formally adopted in the second research project presented in this paper.

In reviewing both the quantitative and qualitative data from the survey, a distinct sense emerged that both types of data were valid and relevant but taken together they provided an enriched blend of knowledge that seemed especially powerful. It's almost as if each data set needed the other to realise its full potential. We can illustrate this synergy by looking at data about the possibility that therapists' motivations may change over time. Now, there was no pre-existing research data on this subject so there was a real opportunity to, once again, contribute to *knowledge about practitioners*. Figure 2 shows the quantitative data.
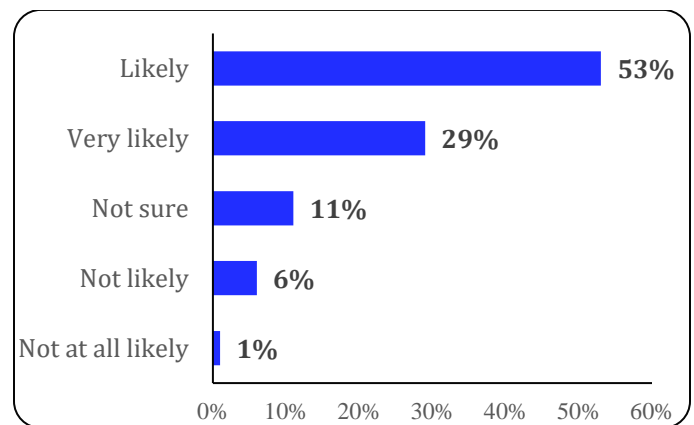

Figure 2: The likelihood that therapists' motivations will change over time

The data shown in Figure 2 present a picture suggesting that 82% of respondents indicate that it's "likely" or "very likely" that their motivations will change over time. This finding is perhaps reassuring given that practitioners are urged to engage in focused reflexivity. But again, the findings constitute new research-led knowledge about how practitioners think about key issues in their profession. So, here we have significant descriptive data. But how does the research focus come alive? Only with complementary qualitative data which can tell us in what ways therapists might experience and think about a change in their motivations. Here are two examples from the qualitative data.

- "I've been practising now for over 35 years. While not very admirable, my initial motives for training - self-cure and prestige - are probably still present to a degree and also inform my teaching and supervising. However, other motives are also present now - pleasure in seeing people change, intellectual satisfaction, being touched by people's stories".

- "I feel that my motivation for becoming a counsellor involved a mix of wanting to understand my Mum's mental health issues and to resolve them in some way,

whilst also ascending from my working-class upbringing and to be in a 'knowing' position which is evidently not quite the case in reality. My motivations have changed now and although I do recognise my own financial motivations in continuing, I also have a genuine interest in the philosophical underpinnings of counselling and psychotherapy".

These pieces of significant reflection offer a wonderful *lived experience* contrast to the quantitative data, and once again reinforces the value of using different types of data to illuminate different aspects of a research focus.

Although the survey generated a wealth of qualitative data it was important to consider how many survey respondents were contributing free text comments, the length of comments and the content of comments. For example, could it be that a few communicative people were producing the majority of free text comments? To examine this question the 103 free text comments made at the end of the survey were reviewed. The 103 comments made were clearly from a minority of the total number of survey respondents (19%) but generated a sizable word count of 3746 which was found to be distributed in terms of comment length as shown in Figure 3.
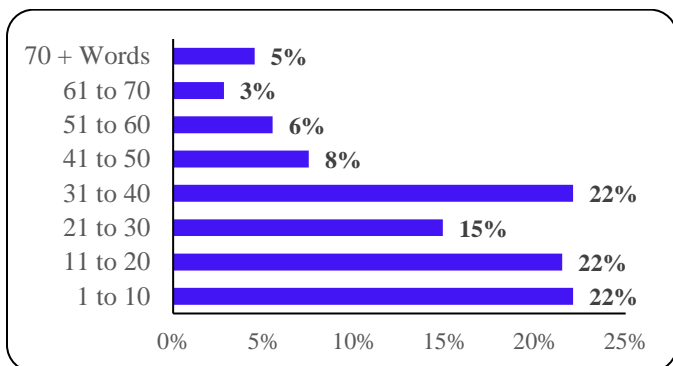

Figure 3: Distribution of end of survey comments by word count

Figure 3 shows an uneven distribution of free text comments by word count. For example, while 21% of comments contained more than 40 words a total of 79% contained 40 words or less. Further evidence of the skewed nature of the data came from the discovery that a single free text comment of 727 words accounted for 19% of all the free text comment word count. So, even a basic analysis suggests that while qualitative data can be enriching in contributing to the research process there has to be care taken to consider whose views are actually being articulated. Engaging voices could well be minority (and unrepresentative) voices.

Research Study 2. Therapists working remotely during the Covid pandemic

The second research study was a consolidation of learning that had been accrued in the earlier study and represented one of the most unique and time-critical research opportunities that has arisen within counselling and psychotherapy. At the height of the first 'lockdown' due to the Covid pandemic all therapeutic activity had to be delivered remotely or not at all. In collaboration with colleagues, the author seized the opportunity to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the challenges and opportunities for therapists who were working remotely (McBeath, du Plock & Bager-Charleson, 2020).

As in previous research, an online survey was used to capture data. A total of 506 therapists completed the survey, which is a sample size big enough, statistically, to allow confidence to generalise findings to the wider practitioner body. The survey generated a very high volume of qualitative data. There was a total of 373 free text comments with a total word count of 11,324. Nearly a third of all respondents (31%) chose to offer free text comments at the end of the survey. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to analysis the qualitative data. The quantitative data collected in the survey produced several findings of significance.
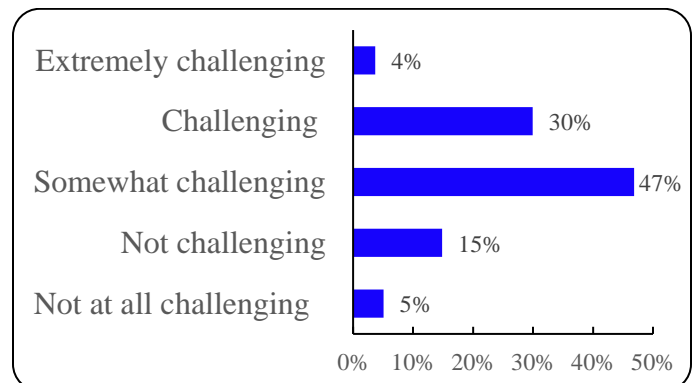

Figure 4: How challenging remote working has been for therapists

As can be seen from Figure 4, just over a third (34%) found remote working either challenging or extremely challenging. Only 20% of the therapists who completed the survey were not challenged by remote working. This data pattern has real importance given that two-thirds of respondents (66%) stated that remote working would become core client work. The data are shown in Figure 5.
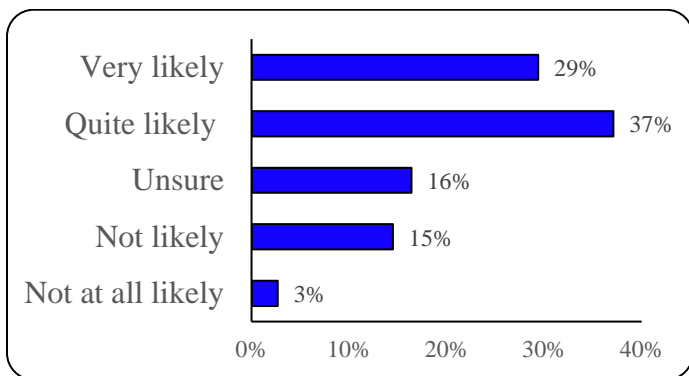
Figure 5: How likely that remote working becomes core client work

If many therapists have been challenged by remote working and many therapists have decided that remote working will become part of their core client work, then there have to be questions asked about the need and provision of training therapists in remote working. The survey produced powerful and unequivocal findings on this issue. The vast majority of therapists who completed the survey (87%) considered that it was important or very important that there is formal teaching of remote working skills. Figure 6 shows the data.
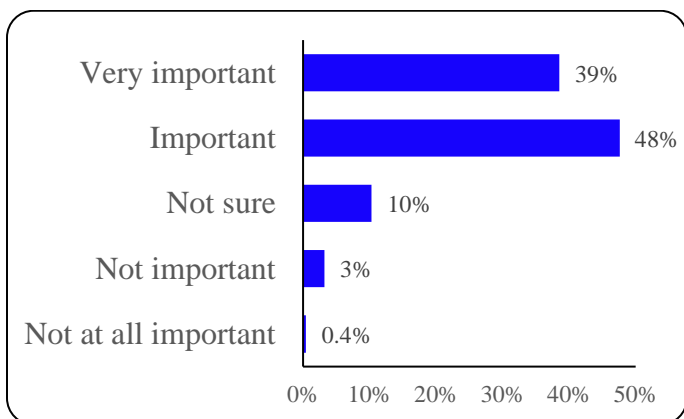

Figure 6: How important to teach remote working skills

The data that has been presented represent a good example of how powerful online survey quantitative data can be. The data were collected and published at the early first height of the pandemic and the sample size was large enough to probably generalise reasonably well to the wider practitioner body thus providing useful information for professional bodies considering potential changes to clinical guidelines and practice. This was new and powerful research-led *knowledge about practitioners* with some headline findings subsequently being reported in the UKCP (2021) publication, *The New Psychotherapist.* This is a good example of research about practitioners actually reaching practitioners.

What about the large volume of qualitative data? The analysis of the qualitative data followed the research method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019). This approach is useful in the creation of themes (and sub-themes) from within qualitative data sets. Reflexive Thematic Analysis is centred around the following 6-stage analysis process:

- Data immersion, which involves intimate familiarisation with the data.
- Preliminary coding, guided by a focus on ideas and issues that are then assigned a unique identity, for instance colour coding.
- Reading and re-reading to 'firm up' on the preliminary coding and challenge earlier meanings in context of new readings.
- Clustering and creation of themes from codes to a broader, higher order of meaning.
- Data saturation reached when no new codes or themes become apparent.
- Review of themes, individually and within the research team to confirm whether they remain meaningful and stable.
- Writing up the themes, as a final element in meaning-making.

Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016) have emphasised that the process of analysis is *active* and non-linear and, "usually involves a recursive, reflexive process of moving forwards (and sometimes backwards) through data familiarization, coding, theme development, revision, naming, and writing up." (2016, p. 196)

Following the six-phase process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, there were three themes created from the data which were:

- adaption issues
- opportunities
- challenges

To mitigate against any possible influence from knowledge of the quantitative data, the process of working with the qualitative data was done by a different member of the research team who had not worked on the analysis of the quantitative data.

There was a rich amount of qualitative data associated with the theme "*Adaption issues*" where therapists described coming to some sort of acceptance of remote working with clients. Here are some illustrative comments:

- "I was initially quite anxious/unsure about working online with my clients as I didn't have a lot of experience of this way of working. However, most of my clients have been

open to exploring their feelings about working online and I have been surprised at the territory that some of them have been able to move into once we have settled into working in this way".

- "I have found that although working online using Zoom was initially difficult, like most things, it has become more manageable over the six weeks of doing it, and I have worked out what is useful/not useful, how to manage my self-care".

In trying to adapt to remote working a large number of therapists commented on the need for self-care to manage some of the tension that was associated with this way of working. Here are two relevant comments:

- "I very seldom write poetry and have not done so for over a decade, but this last week wrote a reasonably good one about a patient. I suspect it has to do with my way of coping with stress arising from remote work".

- "Working online is very intense, or at least it has seemed to me. Exercise has been very important in order to discharge some of the anxiety - both my own and that of my clients".

It is material such as this that makes the lived experience of the research respondents come alive as they allow us an insight into their thinking and behaviour during what undoubtedly has been one of the most challenging periods of their personal and professional lives.

It was certainly refreshing and perhaps surprising that so many therapists who completed the survey talked of the *opportunities* that had been experienced with remote working. This was the second main thematic theme with comments such as:

- "I feel that clients often open up more quickly working this way as they're in the safety of their own home and feel less awkward about sharing details that may have taken a few sessions to elicit in a face to face clinic setting".

- "I moved from London to the countryside recently and had to stop working with most of my established clients since they wanted to work face-to-face. Most of them have got in contact again now face-to-face isn't an option, and I'm finding we are able to reconnect without much difficulty".

- "Online therapy makes clients less inhibited (clients seem less consciously aware of their body language, facial gestures) which has allowed more material to come into the sessions".

The qualitative data that has been considered so far are significant in a number of respects. Perhaps most important, is the fact that they show therapists adapting to and finding opportunities in remote working during a period of time when commentary both from therapy and counselling professional bodies and, indeed, from central government was not positive. Here is another example of the value of research-led *knowledge about practitioners.*

Of course, many therapist-respondents encountered "*Challenges*" when working remotely and this was the third main theme. Here is a selection of their pertinent comments:

- "I have really noticed how hard it is to move from therapist mode to parent-mode by merely walking through a door (as opposed to having a journey home in a car or public transport)!"

- "Some of my clients have felt unable to engage with anything more than a weekly check-in because they, too, have children at home, and they don't want to risk becoming upset in the home environment".

- "Some clients have no confidential space to talk in or indeed are living with the person who is the main problem or seems to be in their life and they find it difficult to talk knowing that person is nearby".

Reflections

From the two research studies presented perhaps the research about therapists working remotely during the Covid pandemic is the most powerful example of the benefits of combining both qualitative and quantitative data in research within counselling and psychotherapy. Each type of data revealed a different vantage point from which to view the experiences of therapists and both sets of data were powerful in their own right but for different reasons. The quantitative data came from surveys with large enough samples to allow confidence that significant findings would apply to the profession as a whole. So, this was knowledge about practitioners as whole. The qualitative data was powerful in allowing therapist-respondents a voice to convey their lived experience in an authentic and meaningful way. And, of course, the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis was key in both helping to find significant meanings across data but also as a means to promote the effective dissemination of findings.

The historical debate about qualitative versus quantitative data is really a sterile debate which seems divorced from what these data can bring to research and how researchers behave. Lund (2005) examined a total of thirteen distinctions between qualitative and quantitative and historical arguments as collated by Gall et al. (1996). Lund (2005) concluded that most of the distinctions were either incorrect or false. He makes a significant point in stating that, "A two-paradigm teaching will give the students a dogmatic and fictitious view on research" (2005, p. 130). Lund offers this conclusion,

> The overall conclusion is that the differences between the two traditions are often considerably exaggerated, that they do not represent two paradigms but one, and that they therefore should be combined correspondingly within a common frame in empirical research. (2005, p. 115)

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) have made the important point that traditional distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research approaches have become blurred through the use of both *quantitizing* and *qualitizing* where one form of data is converted into the other. A basic form of quantitizing is often used in the analysis of surveys where subjective qualitative responses from Likert scale questions (e.g. very painful, painful, not painful, etc) are assigned numeric codes to allow some form of statistical analysis. In contrast the process of qualitizing sees numerical data converted into distinct narrative categories. An example might a statistical analysis of data from clinical assessments leading to the creation of different narrative profiles of patients with subsequent further qualitative analysis (e.g., Fals-Stewart et al, 1994). Sandelowski (2000, p. 254) has made an important point in saying that, "researchers have long been using combinations of qualitative and quantitative techniques" but it just hasn't been publicised. In considering the differences between qualitative data and quantitative data, Sandelowski, Voils, & Knafl (2009) seem to be saying something important in suggesting that the research process involves, "the continuous cycling between assigning numbers to meaning and meaning to numbers" (2009, p. 213).

A useful alternative to the qualitative versus quantitative research debate comes from Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2004) who call for an appreciation of both types of research and the development of what they term *pragmatic researchers*. The key elements of pragmatism are:

- Pragmatism supports the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods in the same study and rejects the *incompatibility hypothesis*.

- Pragmatism considers the research question as being more important than underlying methods, epistemologies or paradigms.

- Pragmatism rejects the forced choice dichotomies around logic, epistemology and reasoning.

- Pragmatism promotes methodological decisions that are connected to the research question and stages of research.

- Pragmatism rejects *methodolatry* and the privileging of certain research methods. (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020)

These key beliefs make mixed methods research so different from traditional research approaches and their supporting research philosophies. The pragmatic researcher is not hamstrung by the dominance of theory or philosophy but instead has a freedom of choice to follow the best way to follow the research question. The need for pragmatism in research has been neatly articulated by Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 21), who state that "epistemological purity doesn't get research done."

Going Forward – Mixed Methods Research and The Reflective Online Practitioner Survey (ROPS)

Hopefully, the research presented has illustrated just how exciting and relevant both quantitative and qualitative data can be for research activity within counselling and psychotherapy. The research approach that has been outlined in the two research studies has been successfully utilised in other areas of importance for practitioners. For example, the ROPS survey design and approach has now been successfully applied to research about therapists' views on academic writing (McBeath, Bager-Charleson & Abarbanel, 2019), therapists' relationship with research and research activity (Bager-Charleson, du Plock & McBeath, 2018), the experience of psychotherapy doctoral supervision (Bager-Charleson & McBeath, 2021) and therapists' views about mixed methods research (McBeath & Bager-Charleson, 2022).

In all these pieces of research the basic 5-minute completion time of the ROPS survey was used as standard and has worked well in terms of recruiting good sized samples. So, there is confidence that a flexible and effective research tool has been established which can harvest both qualitative and quantitative data.

The flexibility of the ROPS approach is one of its strengths and recently it has been successfully incorporated the innovative research approach known as the *story completion method* (Moller, Clarke, Braun, Tischner, & Vossler, 2020). Here the primary focus is on offering survey respondents the start of a

story which is called the *story stem* and basically asking "What happens next?"? Survey respondents are offered the opportunity to complete a story based on a scenario or story beginning which has been created by the researcher.

While there only a few published studies using the story completion method (e.g., Shah-Beckley, Clarke and Thomas, 2018), it has been enticingly described as, "The best new method for qualitative data collection you've never even heard of" (Clarke, Braun, Frith, & Moller, 2019, p. 1). Some of the key advantages of the story completion method include its theoretical flexibility, being resource-light, and offering survey respondents an unusual opportunity to offer their own creativity.

The data and findings that have been presented in this paper are based on a research approach which is centred around a carefully constructed online survey that is sensitive to both qualitative and quantitative data and is adaptable to different areas of research. One of the key features of the ROPS is its very short average completion time of five minutes. No matter how immersed a researcher might be in wanting to collect data it's a fact that surveys with longer completion times are correlated with lower response rates (Liu & Wronski, 2017). It is essential to present potential respondents with a survey that they feel won't take too long to complete otherwise there is a risk of what is termed "*roll off*", i.e., when a respondent exits a survey before completing all the questions.

Surveys with longer completion times are also prone to what's termed "*satisficing*". This is when a respondent starts to use less cognitive effort in thinking about their response and, indeed, may start to speed up as they go through a survey. This is another reason why the ROPS always has a maximum completion time of five minutes. While some respondents may choose to spend much longer than five minutes in completing surveys when they offer lengthy qualitative statements, that is not a problem. The key factor is that the ROPS looks and feels to have a short completion time; this is key to its success and adaptability to different areas of research about practitioners in counselling and psychotherapy. Of course, it may well be that a short completion time actually encourages survey respondents to offer additional qualitative material.

The intention is to continue to use the ROPS in future research studies as the knowledge base about practitioners continues to grow and to share it within the counselling and psychotherapy professions. The commitment is to maximise the benefits of using both quantitative and qualitative data to allow both the breadth and depth of practitioners' thinking and experience to be revealed in a way that shows research to be both exciting and relevant to the wider body of practitioners.

Mixed methods research and ROPS: Some Challenges and Limitations

Although mixed methods research has the potential to offer an exciting and enhanced understanding of phenomena it can be challenging to conduct properly.

A good account of the challenges facing a researcher when contemplating and then conducting mixed methods research is offered by Steward (2007) in research about teleworking. Of particular interest was the fact that there was some contradiction between quantitative data collected from questionnaires and qualitative data collected from interviews. Mixed methods research is well able to cope with contradictory findings and, indeed, it is part of the process in raising and identifying new research questions (Hesse-Biber, 2010). But contradictory findings have a special significance. This point is highlighted by Steward (2007), who stated that if either a qualitative or quantitative research approach had been chosen on its own then a "unidimensional picture" of the area under study would have emerged. It was only when qualitative and quantitative data were compared that the true complexities of the research focus were revealed.

There are also potential problems which can arise as mixed methods research requires a demanding skills set with good knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative research methods being essential. Commonly, researchers versed in one approach tend not to have sufficient skills in the other. For example, traditional post-positivist mixed methods studies have resulted in relatively superficial qualitative analysis. This requirement suggests that mixed methods research may be more effectively progressed within a team of researchers rather than by a single researcher.

Another issue to consider is the fact that mixed methods research will usually take longer to complete than a single research approach. The longer timeline for mixed methods research is especially associated with research projects which involve separate or sequential phases of collecting qualitative and quantitative data. So, mixed methods research is quite a demanding and resource heavy research approach.

One key area to consider carefully when considering doing mixed methods research are the demands and need for rigour in the analysis of data and, importantly, confidence that the planned research conforms to recognised and established mixed methods research principles and designs. There are several recognised mixed methods research designs where there can be variations in the timing, sequencing and relative importance of how much qualitative and quantitative data is collected (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2010).

Within the literature there are occasional examples of research labelled as mixed methods research where the design does not conform to recognised design variants. So, it is important that mixed methods research conforms to mixed methods research definitions and is design compliant. In other words, it needs to retain methodological integrity.

Perhaps one of the most important issues in doing mixed methods research is around the analysis of data. Apart from the fact that it is resource intensive and demands a lot of researchers it is essential that qualitative and quantitative data are analysed properly and here the notion of *data integration* is paramount. Data integration "refers to processes which allow qualitative and quantitative data to 'come together', to be linked, connected or merged" (McBeath, 2022). There are several ways in which the different types of data can be integrated (O'Cathain, Murphy & Nicholl, 2010). One example of data integration is known as the *triangulation protocol* where comparisons are made between data sets to explore the coherence of findings. There are three possible outcomes from the triangulation protocol. These are when research findings from qualitative and quantitative data appear to be mutually confirming (convergence), offer additional information on an issue (complementarity) or appear to be contradictory (discrepancy or discordance).

Using the ROPS approach has proved successful in a number of practitioner relevant areas, delivering huge amounts of quantitative and qualitative data. However, every research method has its limitations. There will be subject areas or research questions where a mixed methods approach might not be appropriate or there might be a risk of distress to participants.

Final Reflections

Writing this paper has been a powerful and thought-provoking experience for me and certainly confirms the possibility that engaging in qualitative research can be an embodied experience with emotional repercussions. It is in this sense that doing qualitative research has been described as "emotional labour" (Hannah, 2019).

I initially approached the idea of writing this paper as a largely intellectual and academic exercise. I now feel some surprise and recognise a sense of naïveté. I now realise that I had failed to inwardly acknowledge my position as an insider researcher; I was studying the very population of which I was a member (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). It seems that I had become distanced from the voice of my research participants from the start of my writing and had forgotten the original impact of reading a wealth of personal and sensitive information. In reflecting upon these two issues, I recalled this reminder from Dickson-Swift et al (2009) about the need for qualitative researchers to consider what it is they set out to do and what might be involved:

> As qualitative researchers, our goal is to see the world through someone else's eyes, using ourselves as a research instrument; it thus follows that we must experience our research both intellectually and emotionally. (2009, p. 62)

As I began to write and reflect on the contributions made by research participants, I experienced a sense of recalibration whereby I found myself re-engaging with, and remembering, the original impact of some of the qualitative data. On several occasions I had to pause in my writing as I read and re-read certain sensitive statements from participants. It's four years since I did the research into therapists' motivations, and even now I can recall almost word for word certain passages from my participants. I think that the process of writing this paper undoubtedly prompted a process of revisiting the qualitative data both intellectually *and* emotionally.

Going back to the original data from the research has been a powerful experience and I feel grateful to my research participants for sharing and revealing often quite moving accounts of their own struggles and discoveries about their motivations to become a psychotherapist.

Having come to the end of writing this paper, I'm left with the unanswered question – why did I do the research in the first place and why do I continue to write about this subject? Perhaps I, too, struggle with the issue of the motivations of becoming a psychotherapist?

The development of the Reflective Online Practitioner Survey has been an exciting journey and one which, unexpectedly, brought me to embrace a mixed methods approach to research. Ultimately, the use of carefully designed online surveys has brought me into contact with more richness and depth of data than I could have imagined. It remains work in progress.

The research presented in this paper confirms the value of combining qualitative and quantitative research methods and illustrates the potential for added depth of meaning that can be revealed. Psychotherapy is a complex profession for both practitioners and clients and it seems appropriate that areas of living and distress are subject to research that can be sensitive to both the prevalence and depth of human experience. The Reflective Online Practitioner Survey (ROPS) has been offered as a tool for counsellors and psychotherapists to use to advance their practice-based research.

References

Bager-Charleson, S., & McBeath, A.G. (2021). Containment, Compassion and Clarity. Mixed Methods research into Supervision during Doctoral research for Psychotherapists and Counselling psychologist. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12498

Bager-Charleson, S., du Plock, S., & McBeath, A. G. (2018). "Therapists have a lot to add to the field of research, but many don't make it there": A narrative thematic inquiry into counsellors' and psychotherapists' embodied engagement with research. *Journal for Language and Psychoanalysis*, 7(1), 4-22. https://doi.org/10.7565/landp.v7i1.1580

Beutler, L. E., Williams, R. E., Wakefield, P. J., & Entwistle, S. R. (1995). Bridging scientist and practitioner perspectives in clinical psychology. *American Psychologist, 50*(12), 984-994. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.50.12.984

Boisvert, C. M., & Faust, D. (2006). Practicing psychologists' knowledge of general psychotherapy research findings: Implications for science–practice relations. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 37(6), 708-716. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0735-7028.37.6.70

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. http://doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 191-205). Routledge.

Braun, V, Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & McEvoy, C. (2021). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(6), 641-654. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550

Brierley, J. A. (2017). The role of a pragmatist paradigm when adopting mixed methods in behavioural accounting research. *International Journal of Behavioural Accounting and Finance, 6*(2), 140-154.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2018). Using thematic analysis in counselling and psychotherapy research: A critical reflection. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research, 18*(2), 107–110. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12165

Clarke, V., Braun, V., Frith, H., & Moller, N. (2019). Editorial introduction to the special issue: Using story completion methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 16*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1536378

Creswell, J., & Plano Clark, V. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2009). Researching sensitive topics: Qualitative research as emotion work. *Qualitative Research*, *9*, 61-79. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794108098031

Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*, 54-63. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105

Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. P. (1996). *Educational Research*. Longman Publishers.

Goldberg, C. (1997). *On being a psychotherapist*. Gardner Press.

Liu, M., & Wronski, L. (2017). Examining completion rates in web surveys via over 25,000 real-world surveys. *Social Science Computer Review*. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0894439317695581

Hanna, E. (2019). The emotional labour of researching sensitive topics online: Considerations and implications. *Qualitative Research*, *19*(5), 524-539. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1468794118781735

Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2010). *Mixed methods research: Merging theory with practice.* The Guilford Press.

Howe, K. R. (1988). Against the quantitative-qualitative incompatibility thesis or dogmas die hard. *Educational Researcher, 17*(8), 10-16. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1175845

Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*. *33*, 14-26. http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014

Johnson, R. B., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Turner, L. A. (2007). Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed methods research*, *1*, 112-133. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1558689806298224

Landrum, B., & Garza, G. (2015). Mending fences: Defining the domains and approaches of quantitative and qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology, 2*(2), 199–209. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000030

Liu, M., & Wronski, L. (2018). Examining completion rates in web surveys via over 25,000 real-world surveys. *Social Science Computer Review, 36*(1), 116-124. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0894439317695581

Lund, T. (2005). The qualitative-quantitative distinction: Some comments. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *49*(2), 115–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313830500048790

McBeath, A. G. (2022 – in press). *Mixed methods research: The case for the pragmatic researcher*. In S. Bager-Charleson & A.G. McBeath (Eds.), *Supporting research in counselling and psychotherapy: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research.* Palgrave: MacMillan

McBeath, A. G. (1999). *An investigation into the unconscious motivations and satisfactions that may influence the choice of psychotherapy as a profession*. Unpublished Master's thesis, Regent's University.

McBeath, A. G. (2019). The motivations of psychotherapists: An in-depth survey. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 19*(4), 377-387. https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12225

McBeath, A.G., Bager-Charleson, S., & Abarbanel. A. (2019). Therapists and academic writing: "Once upon a time psychotherapy practitioners and researchers were the same people". *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, *19*, 103-116.

McBeath, A. G., du Plock, S., & Bager-Charleson, S. (2020). The challenges and experiences of psychotherapists working remotely during the coronavirus pandemic. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *20*(3), 394-405.

McLeod, J. (2015). *Doing research in counselling and psychotherapy.* Sage.

Mertens, D. (2007). Transformative paradigm: Mixed methods and social justice. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research. 1*(3), 212-225

Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded source book*. Sage.

Moller, N., Clarke, V., Braun, V., Tischner, I., & Vossler, A. (2020). Qualitative story completion for counseling psychology research: A creative method to interrogate dominant discourses. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *68*(3), 286–298. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000538

Morrow-Bradley, C., & Elliott, R. (1986). Utilization of psychotherapy research by practicing psychotherapists. *American Psychologist, 41*(2), 188-197. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.2.188

O'Cathain, A., Murphy, E., & Nicholl, J. (2010). Three techniques for integrating data in mixed methods studies. *British Medical Journal*, *341*, c4587. https://www.bmj.com/ content/341/bmj.c4587

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Leech, N. L. (2005). On becoming a pragmatic researcher: The importance of combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 8*(5), 375-387. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570500402447

Safran, J. D., Abreu, I., Ogilvie, J., & DeMaria, A. (2011). Does psychotherapy research influence the clinical practice of researcher–clinicians? *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, *18*(4), 357-371. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2850.2011.01267.x

Sandelowski, M. (2000). Combining qualitative and quantitative sampling, data collection, and analysis techniques in mixed-method studies. *Research in Nursing & Health*, *23*, 246–255.

Sandelowski. M., Voils, C., & Knafl, G. (2009). On quantitizing. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 3*(3), 208-222.

Steward, B. (2007). Investigating invisible groups using mixed methodologies. In L. Finlay & C. Ballinger (Eds.), *Qualitative research for allied health professionals: Challenging choices* (pp.93-107). Wiley.

Shah-Beckley, I., Clarke, V., & Thomas, Z. (2018). Therapists' and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex: A qualitative story completion study. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, *19*(3), 189-206. https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12203

Storr, A. (1990). *The art of psychotherapy*. Butterworth-Heinemann.

Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (2003). *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*. Sage.

Teddlie, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2009). *Foundations of mixed methods research: Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in the social and behavioral sciences*. Sage

UKCP (Summer 2021). *The New Psychotherapist*, *77*, 6.

Williams, R. T. (2020). The paradigm wars: Is MMR really a solution? *American Journal of Trade and Policy*, *7*(3), 79-84. https://doi.org/10.18034/ajtp.v7i3.507

About the Author

Alistair McBeath is a BPS Chartered Psychologist and UKCP registered Psychotherapist. He is a Director of Studies at the Metanoia Institute (London) and Co-editor of the *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*. Alistair considers himself to be a researcher-practitioner and is keen to promote this identity within the psychotherapy profession. He has published widely. With his Metanoia colleague, Dr Sofie Bager-Charleson, Alistair has edited a book entitled *Enjoying Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, published in 2020 by Palgrave Macmillan.