The 'Research Pond': An introduction to research methodologies

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Introduction

Empirical research – whether qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods – is woven into the fabric of counselling and psychotherapy history with some of its main founders (e.g., Freud, Rogers and Aaron Beck) all carrying out research of some kind (Hanley, Lennie & West, 2013). Since the 1990's, there has been a greater emphasis on the need for evidence-based approaches to counselling and psychotherapy (Cook, Schwartz & Kalsow, 2017) alongside the ethical duty to consider what approaches work best for clients based on research (Blease, Lilienfield & Kelley, 2016). Clearly, it is important that therapists have a good grounding in research methodologies and how to critically evaluate empirical evidence, and training experiences are often the first introduction to research methods for many practitioners. However, for trainee therapists, the topic of research methods can be a challenging part of their learning. It can provoke anxiety and frustration (e.g., Moran, 2011), ambivalence (e.g., Gelso, Buamann, Chui & Savelle, 2013) or be perceived of as irrelevant or overly complex (Vossler & Moller, 2014). Also, given the philosophical, epistemological, methodological and practical differences between the various research methodologies, it is understandable that counselling students can find this part of their training hard going.

While there is no ultimate, fixed map of the research territory, having a framework by which to understand what an approach to research is (i.e., what components make up a research methodology) can potentially bring some clarity. Adapting Tim Bond's metaphor of the 'pond' (1995; cited in Horton, 1999), the 'Research Pond' is offered here as a way of understanding the various elements in a research approach with the hope that it will demystify the topic of research methodology. The pond metaphor highlights the need for coherence between the underlying assumptions and practical methods, thus seeking to engender quality in research (Tracy, 2010; Chenail, Duffy, St George & Wulff, 2011). The focus here will be primarily on qualitative approaches to research as they are more commonly the focus in my own field of counselling psychology, and it is followed by some tentative reflections on research from a Christian perspective.

The 'Research Pond'

A given research methodology (e.g., interpretative phenomenological analysis, IPA; Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009) is comparable to a model of counselling. Research methodologies and models of counselling are both based on their respective philosophical stances, having paradigmatic assumptions about ontology and epistemology, as well as theoretically driven guidance on practical issues and the more visible aspects of the research or counselling process. The familiarity with what a model of counselling is can be used to facilitate trainee counsellors' learning in research methodology, to which end the 'Research Pond' is posited (see Table 1).

As noted, the 'Research Pond' is an adaption of 'Bond's Pond'; Tim Bond uses the analogy of a pond to describe the elements that make up an approach to counselling (1995; cited in Horton, 1999). In the same way that there are unseen murky waters at the bottom of a pond, a model of

counselling has, at the bottom, underlying philosophical assumptions about reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how we know what we know (epistemology) that impact how psychological problems are understood, how healing or change takes place, and the role the counsellor plays in the therapeutic process. It is a helpful aid to enable trainee counsellors learn what constitutes a therapeutic model. Citing Bond (1995) and Niemeyer (1993), Horton similarly describes the four main components of an approach to therapy. Starting from the bottom of the metaphorical pond and working up to the surface, the four components are the 'personal belief system, formal theory, clinical theory and therapeutic operations' (1999; p317). The formal theory concerns the understanding of what it means to be human and how problems are understood. The clinical theory is focused on explicating mechanisms of change in therapy, and the top layer refers to the methods and strategies used in therapy that are most visible: in simple terms, what the therapist does.

In Horton and Bond's view, the underlying personal belief system or philosophy at the bottom provides the basis for, and pervades, the other elements. It is the assumptive ground upon which clinical theory and practice stand. Similarly, all research is based on a particular worldview that speaks to issues of ontology, impacts how knowledge and truth are understood, shapes the nature of the research questions, defines the researcher's relationship to the research process and how the research is practically carried out (Howell, 2013).

Although the 'levels' of the pond may not be easily separated, but rather each influences the other to some degree, the division of the components can be a useful heuristic for understanding what elements are implicated in a research methodology. As can be seen in Table 1, the bottom of the 'Research Pond' concerns the assumptions that underlie research and shape what happens at the upper, practical levels. The direction of influence is primarily from bottom to top as the underlying assumptions provide a lens through which reality and knowledge are construed, and from which research questions and specific methods are developed. Reflexivity is important in research, particularly in qualitative research, and is attended to at every stage of the research process, which is noted in all the elements of the 'Research Pond' and will be briefly discussed below.

Bond's Pond	The 'Research Pond'	Research Definition
Therapeutic operations/skills and strategies	Specific methods and tools <i>Reflexivity</i>	Specific tools and methods used, e.g., surveys, open-ended interviews
Clinical theory	Research design <i>Reflexivity</i>	Specific plan for how the methodology will be carried out in the researcher's context
Formal theory	Research methodology <i>Reflexivity</i>	General framework for research based on theoretical and philosophical assumptions
Underlying Assumptions	<i>Reflexivity</i> Epistemology Ontology	<i>How are the researcher's subjectivity and their social position impacting and interacting with each stage of the research process?</i> How do we know what we know? What is our relationship to knowledge? What is the nature of being? What is the nature of reality?

Table 1: The 'Research Pond' alongside Bond's pond (1995).

Research, by its very nature, is systematic. While there are debates on the defining characteristics of research, many agree on this. For example, Cooper (2008; p1) describes research as 'A systematic process of inquiry that leads to the development of new knowledge', and in a similar vein, McLeod defines research as 'a systematic process of critical inquiry leading to valid propositions and conclusions that are communicated to interested others' (2013; p2). It is systematic in that research is carried out according to an overall plan and within a given theoretical framework (Leedy and Ormond, 2013). Its systematicity also lies in the coherence between the underlying assumptions and the way the research is carried out, with the practicalities being anchored to those assumptions. The underlying assumptions guide the process of interpretation, which is central to qualitative research approaches (Willig, 2017). Moreover, issues of quality in research are best judged from within the particular paradigm of the research (Stenfors, Kajama and Bennett, 2020), thus it is helpful to clearly identify what is 'at the bottom of the pond' in

research, even when the waters are somewhat murky. The pond analogy can help alert learners to these and other issues and provide a visual checklist as to what to consider when learning a new methodology. The various aspects of the research pond will now be briefly considered.

Underlying assumptions – ontology and epistemology

Right at the bottom of the 'Research Pond' is ontology. Here basic questions concerning what the nature of reality is and whether truth exists are considered. Questions of epistemology – how we know what we know – quickly follow. Put simply, there are three main ontological positions, each with epistemological and methodological implications. These are a positivist/modernist view, a post-modernist/hermeneutic view and a critical realist perspective (Coghlan and Brannick, 2000). It is important to note that there are many debates and differences within each of the three positions. In fact, it can be helpful to think of the various paradigms as being on what Harper calls the 'realism-relativism continuum' (2012; p87), that is, on a continuum with regards to the degree to which the data are said to represent reality. On one end of the continuum, the positivist/modernist view argues that reality can be seen and discovered in the data, whereas a postmodern view argues against that, allowing for multiple readings of the same data that are potentially equally valid (Harper, 2012).

In a positivist/modernist view, truth exists independently of the researcher, and it can be discovered through objective means (e.g., Howell, 2013). Irrespective of the social or cultural context, as long as the research is carried out objectively (without the researcher's own subjectivity influencing the process and findings) generalisable truth can be found. What is true in a given research context can be more widely applied to the relevant general population. Epistemologically, knowledge can be known objectively (e.g., Flick, 2020). Thus, the role of the researcher is to limit the impact on the research of their own subjectivity and make sure that all confounding variables (factors outside the research that might have an unwanted or unknown effect) are controlled for and eliminated. Thus, in this paradigm, objectivity is important (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010).

In contrast, a post-modern/hermeneutic view argues against the idea of objective truth. In this perspective, 'truth' is situated and contextual, that is, it is created and impacted by context, discourse and social relations (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston, 2013). What is true is true in a particular context, and, in this paradigm, research develops what McLeod terms 'local knowledge' (2013; p50). Thus, it is fallacious to think in terms of truth that will apply in every context, but rather 'truths' that are perspectival; we see from a particular perspective and that perspective is partial. In this post-modern paradigm, reality is often thought of as socially constructed and does not exist independently and objectively of the context within which it was created (Howell, 2013). Research is not concerned with discovering 'the truth' but exploring social understandings and processes as well as giving voice to marginalised narratives (e.g., Hill, Thompson and Williams, 1997). This involves the process of interpretation, which is central to qualitative research (Willig, 2017). As the findings of a particular piece of research could differ from researcher to researcher (owing to their different subjectivities), it behoves the researcher to be reflexive and transparent about how they are contributing to and co-creating the research process. Instead of seeking to be objective, the researcher's subjectivity is recognised, and reflected upon, and becomes an integral part of the research (Finlay, 2017).

As Potter and Lopez write, critical realism is a 'broad church' (2001; p5); again, it is important to note that there are many different views within critical realism. Three ideas underpin this perspective. These are what Pilgrim calls, the 'holy trinity' of critical realism; ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationalism (Pilgrim, 2019; p3). In a critical realist position, reality is thought to exist independently of context or person (ontological realism), but it can only be known through the lens of human interaction and subjectivity (epistemological relativism). Research takes place within a particular social context, and knowledge is situated but 'knowledge cannot be reduced to its sociological determinants of production. Truth is relative to be sure but there is both truth and error' (Potter and Lopez, 2005; p6). Judgmental rationalism refers to the ability to discern what is true while recognising the imperfection of human judgment (Pilgrim, 2019). Critical realism is something of a 'both-and' approach, according to Danemark, Ekstromm and Karlsson (2019). That is, there is some agreement with the modernist view that reality exists objectively, but also agreement with a postmodernist perspective that knowledge is socially produced.

The position taken with regards to these questions of ontology and epistemology will determine how the research process is construed and carried out, so it is vital that the researcher is clear about their underlying assumptions to a good enough degree. It may be that a particular methodology is philosophically driven and has 'in-built' assumptions, as in the example of interpretative phenomenological analysis which draws on phenomenology, or that the researcher's own values are the starting place for choosing a methodology. In either case, it can be helpful for researchers to appreciate how the, sometimes unseen, underlying assumptions shape the research from beginning to end.

Reflection and reflexivity

Reflecting the centrality of reflexivity in qualitative research (e.g., Etherington, 2017) in Table 1, it is present in all the levels of the hypothetical pond. Reflexivity is a notoriously challenging concept to define and writers such as Gough (2003) have argued for thinking in terms of 'reflexivities' that recognises the wide range of understandings of the concept. It is usually distinguished from reflection as something that is more than simply thinking about something but closer to a dynamic, critical and continuous practice that is developed (Lumsden, 2019). May and Perry describe reflexivity as focusing on 'second order questions concerning thinking itself and not-taking-things-for-granted' rather than simply reflection (2017; p3). And Berger (2015) defines reflexivity as 'the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome' (p 220). It could be said that in reflection, we are looking at ourselves in the mirror, whereas in reflexivity, we are looking at ourselves looking at ourselves in the mirror! Reflexivity helps us consider questions such as: What is the interplay between the researcher and their research participants in the given context? What is being co-created by those involved in the social context? How is the research question shaped by the wider social milieu as well as the researcher's personal identity?

We could think of two avenues of consideration in the process of reflexivity: wider and deeper. Wider is concerned with understanding how the social and cultural milieux we are embedded in shape and constrain the research process. The questions we ask, for example, are framed by and within a particular social context and time. Looking back over time, it is possible to see how

research has explored issues that are pertinent to a particular zeitgeist, which may now seem old fashioned, or even unethical, today. Social changes can influence research, and indeed research can lead to social change (Rhodes and Zlotowitz, 2018). But the influence and values of a social context are not always obvious, particularly to those who inhabit it. It can be difficult to see how the implicit assumptions and practices of our social context bear upon the research, and vice versa. Developing reflexivity enables these unseen dynamics to be brought into awareness and critically reflected upon.

The reflexive process can also help us look deeper into how our personal identities shape research as these too can be influential. In qualitative research, the concept of positionality seeks to make this dynamic transparent and can be part of the reflexive process. Here, personal identities are seen as being multi-faceted, dynamic, and complex. A person perceives and acts from a number of different subjectivities (e.g., white, female, Western, academic). Qin (2016) defines positionality as 'the practice of a researcher delineating his or her own position in relation to the study, with the implication that this position may influence aspects of the study, such as the data collected or the way in which it is interpreted' (para. 1). Positionality is based on a post-modern (and feminist) assumption that does not view identity as something static or fixed, but rather fluid and affected by the wider social context. Therefore, it follows that in research, participants, as well as researchers, 'make meaning from various aspects of their identity' (Kezar (2002); cited in Bourke, 2014; p1).

'Deeper' also shifts the focus onto our own personal story and experience; how they impact who we are as people and professionals, and how they shape us as researchers. Counsellors will be familiar with the idea of the wounded healer, and, writing from a Jungian perspective, Ramashayan (2013) has argued for greater acknowledgement of how unconscious dynamics underpin research. There is, of course, a reciprocal relationship between our personal and social selves, but it can be helpful to recognise how our own woundedness or story may be present in our research endeavours.

Additionally, Finlay (2002) offers a helpful overview, saying there are five variants of reflexivity:

- 1) introspection
- 2) intersubjective reflection
- 3) mutual collaboration
- 4) social critique
- 5) discursive deconstruction.

It can be thought as a dimension with simple reflection at one end and in-depth reflexivity at the other. Reflexivity often concerns consideration of issues of power, deconstruction and critique, and, in that sense, is a political process, that is, concerned with power dynamics. But that is not to say that research without reflexivity is (politically) neutral; as Clough and Nutbrown argue, all research is political. He writes, 'All social research sets out with specific *purposes* from a particular *position* [his emphasis] and aims to *persuade* readers of the significance of its claims. These claims are always broadly *political*' (2012; p4,5).

The degree to which reflexivity is an acknowledged part of the research process will depend on the particular research methodology. Quantitative research usually does not pay attention to the multiplicity of perspectives but limits reflection to simply aid researcher objectivity, whereas qualitative research seeks to bring hidden biases and assumptions to light and appreciate how the

subjectivities of the researcher and participants arrived at their particular findings among many possible findings. In contrast to positivism's imperative to eliminate the effects of the researcher's subjectivity, the qualitative paradigm values subjectivity as a resource in research (Gough and Madill, 2012).

Research methodology and methods

As we have noted, the ontological and epistemological stances underpin the methodology and have ramifications for how research is carried out. As with reflexivity, methodology is a broad term that can be defined variously, but it is usually thought of as an overall theoretical framework that guides the research, which, as Schensul says, consists of the 'assumptions, postulates, rules, and methods' of the research approach (2008; p516). Thus, in this definition, it bridges and encompasses some of the underlying ideas or principles as well as the practical methods. However, along with other writers, Payne and Payne (2004), more clearly separate methods from methodology with the former being the practical tools or methods used, e.g., open-ended interview or survey, and methodology referring to the assumptions or philosophy that give rise to the research tools. Or as Mills and Birks argue, 'philosophy is what makes a set of methods a methodology' (2014; p24). Thus, it is more helpful to think of methods and methodology as distinct concepts as, confusingly, a single method can serve more than one methodology. For example, the method of using open-ended interviews can be used in a number of quite different methodologies. Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCulloch & Sikes (2005) sum it up helpfully by saying, 'Methods are the specific techniques for obtaining the data that will provide the evidence base for the construction of that knowledge. Thus, methodology is concerned with the theoretical and overall approach to a research project rather than with the characteristics and practical application of particular methods.' (2005; p97).

One of the main differences that bifurcates research is between quantitative and qualitative methodologies and these are underpinned by modernist/positivistic and post-modern/interpretative philosophies respectively. There are two additional methodologies to briefly mention, that of mixed methods methodology and action research. As the name suggests, mixed methods methodology involves using both qualitative and quantitative methods based on a systematic rationale (Todd, Nerlich, McKeown & Clarke, 2004). Mixed methodology research may rest upon, for example, the philosophy of pragmatism, adopt quantitative assumptions with qualitative methods further exploring the quantitative findings, or vice versa. Similarly, there are many approaches that come under the umbrella term of action research (e.g., Chandler and Torbet, 2003) and it also uses quantitative and/or qualitative methods. Action research values knowledge in action that contributes to immediate real-world change and human flourishing (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). It may be participatory, emancipatory, or transformative involving researching and exploring problems in situ (Reason and Bradbury, 2013).

Off the peg or tailor made?

Some research methodologies more closely adhere to one particular philosophy with a clearly defined set of methods, whereas other approaches to research have grown and developed in different philosophical and methodological directions like branches from a tree trunk. In the latter instance, for example, 'grounded theory' can be carried out from a range of perspectives that share the aim of developing theory but vary philosophically. Grounded theory, originally developed by

Glaser and Strauss (1967), was based on aspects of symbolic interactionism and positivism, earning itself the title of 'classic' grounded theory (Glaser, 2007). Researchers have since developed it guided by other underlying assumptions, most notably Charmez's constructivist grounded theory (1995; 2014), which moves firmly away from positivism. Undoubtedly, research methods and methodologies will continue to evolve.

In contrast, other methodologies are clearer about the issue of underlying assumptions and methods. For example, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) developed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and are explicit about how the philosophy of phenomenology has provided the foundation for their approach. Though not overly prescriptive, its methods and underlying assumptions are helpfully articulated for the novice researcher, leaving less room for variation on what constitutes IPA. It is firmly anchored to phenomenology (although, as with many approaches, IPA is not methodologically or theoretically static but is continuing to develop (e.g., Smith, 2019; Smith and Eatough, 2019)).

A note about Thematic Analysis (TA) is pertinent here that may help illuminate the issues. In its basic form, it denotes a method for analysing qualitative data into themes. As Joffe argues, it is 'a method in its own right' (2012; p210). However, it is not always discussed in methodological and philosophical terms, that is researchers use thematic analysis without explicating the underlying assumptions that have guided the analysis. Clarke and Bruan, who have written extensively about thematic analysis, bring out this point in their recent paper on poor practice in Thematic Tnalysis (2018). They agree that Thematic Analysis is methodologically flexible and caution against using TA without due consideration to theory. They write, 'researchers need to understand any differences in philosophy and procedure and explicitly discuss how different procedures have been reconciled, and actively negotiate any tensions in underlying philosophies' (2018; p108). Thus, Thematic Analysis can be part of a tailor-made approach to research, but the underlying assumptions and philosophical approach ought to be made clear. As the 'Research Pond' illustrates, there should be congruence between the various aspects of research, from underlying philosophy, through to methodology and methods, with a clear rationale for the choices taken.

Reflections from a Christian perspective

Given Christianity's part in the conversation on issues of ontology and epistemology, how might a Christian perspective underpin research? The question presupposes that a Christian approach to research matters and the reader is free to debate that point. However, in thinking about research, faith and research are both profoundly concerned with matters of reality, truth and knowledge. My aim here is not to provide a theological treatise on the questions but, drawing primarily from the work of James K. A. Smith (2006; 2012), I will briefly explore some tentative reflections on what could be at the bottom of a 'Research Pond' from a Christian perspective, writing from my own perspective as a psychologist, while welcoming further discussion on the question.

Ontology

An orthodox view of the Christian faith would affirm the notion that reality (e.g., God) exists independently of society and one's perspective. In this sense, truth is not socially constructed, but exists irrespective of context, and, moreover, is revealed through the Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ. The idea of multiple truths seems to not sit comfortably here. At first, the modernist

assumption of truth and objectivity might be appealing from a Christian perspective. However, as Smith (2006) elegantly argues in his book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, Christianity is not concerned with objectivity. We do not prove that God exists primarily through objective or scientific means, otherwise where would there be room for faith? The knowing in Christian faith is not the same as that of the natural sciences. Truth and objectivity are not the same thing. Thus, the choice between the three main ontological and epistemological stances in research from a Christian perspective (postmodern, modernist and critical realist) is not straightforward.

Within reason, research, which takes the biblical claims seriously, is free to engage creatively with a range of ontological positions, particularly if an ontological position relates to certain domains of knowledge. In my own work as a psychologist, the discipline of psychology is a broad discipline that encompasses a range of ontological positions from positivism, post positivism through to postmodern deconstructive schools of thought, social constructionism and pluralism, to name a few. Within my own practice as a counselling psychologist, much of the work here is not concerned with discovering a single truth. Relational dynamics, conceptions of diagnosis, understanding human problems, for example, how these are talked about and conceived of have all changed over time, shaped by wider social contexts. But, as they say, when in the dentist's chair with a raging toothache, no amount of social construction explains the pain away! There are realities that humans inhabit, not least embodiment.

Epistemology

The apostle Paul offers an important epistemological thought at the end of his treatise on love. 'Now I know in part', he says, or as the King James Version puts it, 'we see through a glass darkly' (1 Cor. 13:12, KJV). There are many other verses in Scripture that attest to the limits of our human knowledge in stark contrast to God's omniscience. Whatever our relationship to knowledge, a Christian perspective would include an epistemology of humility. Interestingly, Pilgrim talks about 'the need for epistemic humility' in his discussion of critical realism which acknowledges the fallibility of human knowing. (2014; p10).

Also, humans are created, situated and embodied, that is, humans live physically in one time and space. It follows that human knowledge is necessarily impacted to some degree by the particular contexts in which we live, historically, socially, relationally, politically and the like. Therefore, with few exceptions, a purely modernist stance in the social sciences seems untenable. We cannot know truly objectively in that our knowing is not independent of time and place. A post-positivist approach recognises this. Whether adopting a postmodern, critical realist or post-positivist stance, a Christian epistemology must wrestle with the limits of human embodiment.

Interpretation

Smith (2012) asks 'What is the interpretation of interpretation?' How is a Christian perspective to think of interpretation? Is interpretation something that came with the Fall of humankind and is therefore affected by sin? Is it in that sense (always?) sinful, or in fact part of what it means to be human? Interpretation is concerned with the ways in which knowledge is perceived. It mediates between the knower and that which is being investigated. Two individuals can experience the same thing and yet interpret it quite differently. This touches on thorny questions around whether we can know God directly, or whether we do so through the lens of our own interpretation. I

cannot hope to answer these questions of course, but I suggest that the prophetic books of the Bible have something to say on the issue. The major and minor prophetic books of the Bible offer a revelation of who God is. Yet, each book has its own particularities. Jeremiah is called the 'weeping prophet', Ezekiel's visions are fantastical and sometimes disturbing, whereas Haggai gives an intimate and challenging image of God's people as unfaithful. Each prophet, whether through his own personality or context, grasped something of who God is and what He was saying. There is a kind of dialect of difference and coherence among the different prophetic books as the complexity of God's nature is revealed. Even in the synoptic Gospels, there are differences of style and emphasis. It is not interpretation in the sense of imposing one's own agenda, but it is interpretation by which perceiving occurs through the lens of one's life, story and context. The differences of what each view reveals can be appreciated. Similarly, in qualitative research, if mindful of issues of quality, differences of engagement and interpretation can be equally valid and ought not to cause anxiety around the notion of 'truth'. I agree with Smith (2012) that interpretation is an aspect of 'creaturehood'. That is to say, interpretation is not a postlapsarian phenomenon in need of elimination but is good and part of what it means to be human, embodied and created. We can know to a good enough degree, and that knowing is profoundly impacted by all that it means to be human.

Concluding remarks

The 'Research Pond' offers a way of understanding the various elements of an approach to research. Being attentive to each of these elements and ensuring there is coherence between them will hopefully engender quality in the research endeavour. It is also hoped that the idea of the 'Research Pond' will contribute to alleviating students' anxieties when learning research methods and enable them to draw upon what they are familiar with. There are just two final points. The first is that there is the academic freedom to creatively explore different perspectives while holding the integrity of faith. The second is that it can be helpful to reflect on how our values and beliefs, from a Christian perspective, interact or otherwise with issues of research philosophy and methodology. This can enable us to more fully inhabit the research process with intentionality and authenticity. There is much that Christian theology and thought has to say on questions that underpin research, and further conversation about this is welcomed.

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