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The qualitative evidence-base of relationally-orientated therapy: A critical celebration

Linda Finlay

The Open University, UK; Integrative psychotherapist in private practice. *Email:* linda.finlay@open.ac.uk

Abstract: In this article, I celebrate and critique the evidence base for relationally-orientated therapy. The central role played by the therapeutic relationship in effective therapy is now supported by an impressive evidence base, but it is mostly quantitative evidence that is privileged. This article attempts a small corrective to widen the lens by presenting 5 categories of qualitative evidence: Qualitative meta-analyses of client experiences of therapy; case studies; qualitative studies of clients' experience; qualitative studies of therapists' experience; and discursive studies of interactions and language use. The richness, relevance, and resonance of qualitative methodology is demonstrated by exemplar studies which highlight a special role for exploring under researched areas. However, qualitative researchers face confounding epistemological and methodological challenges in trying to capture the impossible complexity, ambivalence, variability, and ambiguity of relational therapy experiences across different cultural contexts. No methodology (qualitative, quantitative or mixed) can hope to do justice to these questions on its own and both critical reflexivity and humility are needed.

Keywords: Qualitative research; relational psychotherapy; therapeutic relationship; evidence-based practice

The central role played by the therapeutic relationship in effective therapy is now supported by an impressive evidence base (Norcross & Lambert, 2019; Norcross & Wampold, 2019). The accumulated evidence attests to the key role played by *relational factors* and to the way in which the *working alliance* is often predictive of therapy outcomes (Norcross, 2011; Norcross & Karpiak, 2017; Cooper, 2008). In a nutshell, both client and therapist report that the better the alliance, the better the outcome (Flückiger, Del Re, Wampold, & Horvath, 2018). Elkins (2019) goes further, arguing that "The central finding ... is that common factors, particularly human and relational factors, are the most potent agents of change in psychotherapy, dwarfing the effects of theories and techniques" (2019, p. 25). It is findings like these which have contributed to the ongoing explosion of relationally-focused counselling and psychotherapy.

Much of this research base is quantitative in nature: the fruits of experiments, surveys, and systematic reviews. In contrast, there has been a tendency to ignore, or dismiss as "unscientific," the extensive published qualitative literature relating to this area. Qualitative research is rejected for dealing with small sample sizes which cannot be generalized and for not using valid and reliable measurement tools. The messages proclaimed by quantitative supporters are that only "empirically validated" treatments are effective while non-validated interventions are potentially damaging (David, Lynn, & Montgomery, 2018). This article attempts a small corrective by widening the lens on the available evidence and encompass the qualitative contribution.

I begin by considering the evidence base of relationally-orientated therapy as a whole considering the field beyond

what has been learned via quantitative outcome studies. I then move on to map the specific qualitative contribution spanning:

- i. qualitative meta-analyses of client experiences of therapy
- ii. case studies
- iii. qualitative studies of clients' experience
- iv. qualitative studies of therapists' experience
- v. discursive studies of interactions and language use

I critically discuss exemplar studies in each category identifying both significant large-scale qualitative works and as well as selectively highlighting a few more recent small-scale, homespun studies, in order to indicate the wider range of research studies out there. My aim with the discussion is to highlight key methodological and epistemological questions which continue to interest, challenge and confound qualitative researchers in this field.

I have drawn somewhat idiosyncratically on a few research studies that I am most familiar with and others that are hot off the 2022 press; my selection is not meant to be a "representative" sample – it is an illustrative one. I reflexively own the partiality of my selection as many of the smaller studies have been published in a journal of which I am the Editor. While I undoubtedly have an instrumental interest to publicize these small-scale, lesser-known pieces of work, my main reason for including the articles is that I have spent extra time critically thinking about the strengths, scope and limitations of these studies which enabled me to engage the debates more deeply.

Beyond quantitative outcome studies

The seminal outcomes research of Norcross and colleagues (Norcross & Lambert, 2019; Norcross & Wampold, 2019) on "therapy that works" (published over the previous 20 years) draws almost exclusively on quantitative meta-analyses and favours the so-called "gold standard" of randomized controlled trials (RCTs). Typically, these studies have shown the value of the therapeutic relationship by measuring behavioural characteristics (of both therapists and clients) and by studying outcomes that measure clients' behaviour change or symptom reduction (often self-reported).

Critics of such outcomes research have argued against the tendency of quantitative studies to focus on relatively accessible and observable elements which can result in superficial results. That the range of possible answers participants can give is limited to pre-prescribed ones in structured quantitative surveys is a significant weakness. Such

a focus seems ill-suited to, or out of step with, the holistic complexity of therapeutic relational dynamics. While quantitative results based on clients' subjective evaluations offer important insights, critics discern a certain irony that these are offered as "scientifically objective" research.

In the United Kingdom, evaluations of mental health treatments are based on guidelines produced by the *National Institute for Health and Care Excellence* (NICE). These rely on quantitative, medical-model data and undervalue qualitative case studies and stakeholder perspectives. NICE guidelines privilege those therapies validated by RCT evidence. Yet if a therapy lacks such validation, it just means it is under-researched rather than ineffective (Everett, 2023). There is much evidence available which shows all forms of psychotherapy researched appear equally effective when competently applied – the "dodo bird verdict" identified by Luborsky et al. (1975, p. 1003) almost half a century ago: "Everybody has won and all must have prizes". RCTs which set one established therapy against others is futile and, arguably, ethically questionable.

Speaking on behalf of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy, Everett (2023) summarizes these arguments well highlighting how more than 40 mental health organizations have formed a coalition to persuade NICE to expand its research evidence pool. While the use of randomized control trials to test medical interventions is appropriate, can outcomes of contingent client-therapist relationships be measured? To what extent can the ambivalence and ambiguity of human experience be quantified? Is it even possible to quantify or objectively measure the complex, ever-evolving, multi-layered nature of therapeutic relationships and the work therapists do?

In response to these critical debates, researchers involved with outcomes research are increasingly pushing beyond purely quantitative approaches towards qualitative methodologies and pluralistic or mixed methods (McBeath, 2022). This shift is taking place in tandem with the posing of key questions. For example, why is so much research effort invested in justifying the value of psychotherapy? Why not move beyond *outcomes* research to acknowledge the value of exploring experiential *process*? To answer these questions, it is relevant to recognize the wider economic and political policy context which sets up this playing field and the competition. Individual therapists/researchers have little sway here. However, the point that quantitative and qualitative research study *different* questions is significant and may help therapists sidestep some of the competition.

Qualitative explorations of experiential processes probe individuals' stories and social worlds as researchers try to make sense of inter-subjective and social meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Many qualitative researchers are "animated by

the desire to do justice to human existence” (Halling, 2002, p. 20). They seek to restore a poetic heart to academic writing by drawing on images, myths, and creative forms. Beyond mere idiosyncrasy, qualitative researchers can argue they are attempting to advance new conceptual understandings of how human action is patterned. Here, science and art intertwine in the effort to shed light on our human potential (Finlay, 2019). This article seeks to tap into this rich vein of qualitative exploration.

Psychotherapy researchers confront real dilemmas. Should they concentrate their efforts on outcomes, or processes, or a combination of the two? Should they focus on therapists’ perspectives, clients’ perspectives or on the dynamics between them? Further challenges arise in relation to the selection of methodologies and procedures: which appears best suited to the goals of the research? At stake is an overarching question: how to design therapy research studies which maintain fidelity to the therapy process yet are faithful to, and congruent with, the profession’s values (Levitt et al., 2016)?

Elsewhere (Finlay, 2011), I have argued that, as qualitative researchers, we do not need to compete with our quantitatively-inclined colleagues by asserting similar claims to scientific rigour and merit. Early versions of qualitative research (in particular using descriptive phenomenology or grounded theory) dominant in the 1960’s-1970’s was often of this ilk. But we have other possibilities now and can make different choices.

Firstly, we can “play the game” by opting for mixed method approaches and meta-analytic studies, all the while arguing for – justifying rather than giving lip service to - the inclusion of qualitative methods. The last decade has seen a huge expansion of this kind of research along with a critique against quantitative research as being insufficiently attentive to meanings and context (see McBeath, 2022). The challenge here is to ensure the qualitative component offers sufficient depth and legitimacy so that its inclusion adds value.

Or, secondly, we can play a *different* game: one that spurns the pitch already marked out for the evidence-based match whose referees and gatekeepers are already biased against qualitative contributions. For instance, we can explicitly focus on our expertise in researching “process” instead of outcome. We can shape a new game which unequivocally embraces artful, reflexive components and celebrates how meanings are embedded in specific social contexts (Finlay, 2011). The challenge here is to be sufficiently persuasive so that the traditional scientifically-inclined gatekeepers open to the fruits of qualitative creativity. If that seems a stretch too far, then perhaps these gatekeepers will accept that qualitative research may, at least, throw up questions that can be examined subsequently using traditional scientific means.

In this paper, I consider the possibilities for *both* these options highlighting - and evaluating - different forms of research. Throughout, I stress the point that research critiques can be offered from outside the perspective (e.g., quantitative researchers criticizing small sample sizes in qualitative research) or from within (e.g., a phenomenological critique of phenomenological research). What evaluation criteria is engaged *depends* on the perspective taken.

Qualitative meta-analyses of client experiences of therapy

While *quantitative* meta-analyses of what makes for effective therapy dominate the field, there are some significant exceptions and *qualitative* versions are gaining respect and credibility.

Levitt, Pomerville, and Surace (2016) performed a comprehensive qualitative meta-analysis of clients’ experiences of psychotherapy based on findings from 109 qualitative studies on individual therapy (1,414 clients). The sample included studies which focused on client experience while single cases were excluded. Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rennie, 2000) as their starting point, the researchers carried out repeated comparison of meaning units until saturation, following which a second content meta-analysis was engaged.

They structured their extensive and layered findings around five areas of client perceptions: (a) therapy as a process of change through structured curiosity and pattern identification; (b) the caring relationship that allows clients to benefit from therapy; (c) the therapist’s professional credentials as a building block of trust as well as a source of client doubt regarding therapist authenticity; (d) the importance of collaboration and recognition of differences in the relationship; and (e) the importance of the client’s agency and the need to accommodate therapy to fit the client’s needs.

The authors acknowledge that, as in quantitative meta-analyses, their review is limited by the trustworthiness of the original studies reviewed. They also acknowledge that their findings represent just one empirically-driven interpretation, and that other analysts might well arrive at different interpretations. At the same time, it can be argued that this research derives strength from the authors’ use of multiple, rigorous methods in their pursuit of methodological integrity; for example, they strove for researcher consensus and also insisted on auditing processes. In their review, the authors drew on clients who were confronting a variety of different issues within a broad range of psychotherapy orientations,

thereby enhancing the ethical integrity, transferability and relevance of their study. On the other hand, attempting such breadth may be a cost where specific insights of particular issues in particular fields can get lost.

Marren et al. (2022) offer a qualitative meta-analysis of clients' experiences of therapy, specifically, Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT). They focus on 11 studies which explored whether therapy was experienced as helpful, difficult or unhelpful. Marren et al. used the generic descriptive framework for qualitative meta-analysis recommended by Timulak and Creaner (2022). They first extracted data from studies fitting the relevant criteria and then divided this dataset into meaning units which were coded, compared, contrasted and then clustered.

Their findings show the importance of the therapeutic relationship, particularly concerning the therapists' emotional connection/support and validation/understanding. Clients experienced the experiential aspects of EFT - including chair work - as largely helpful and emotionally evocative. Their responses shed light on experiences which clients may view at the time as "too intense" or "difficult", but which may prove "helpful" in the long run. The authors, following Bohart and Tallman (2010), assert that the active participation of clients in therapy is one of the most important factors impacting outcomes.

As a focused study evaluating the utility of a particular approach (in this case, Emotion-Focused Therapy), this study has particular value and contributes to the growing evidence base of therapy in general as well as EFT specifically. This research also shows the complexity that lies behind apparently simple constructs used in quantitative research, for example, "helpful" versus "unhelpful" factors.

Criticism of this study has come from quantitative researchers who point to its comparatively small data set and resulting lack of statistical significance. Of the eleven studies covered by this research, as many as five relied on the experiences of a single participant, a limitation duly acknowledged by the authors, along with the fact that participants in the eleven studies were predominantly of White ethnicity and drawn from just seven countries.

The criticisms from qualitative researchers point to how the attempt to emulate quantitative meta-analyses and broaden the scope beyond individual case studies results in significant loss of context and qualitative meaning. Also, from a qualitative perspective, it needs to be acknowledged that the "triple hermeneutic" implicated involves costs as well as opportunities and this applies to both meta-analytic studies. When meta-analytic researchers attempt to understand the meanings of primary researchers who themselves were

attempting to understand participants' accounts, might not something get lost along the way?

Sandelowski (2006) picks up these issues in her discussion of what she calls the "crisis of representation." Questioning the degree to which any human inquiry can adequately represent its subject, she offers a scathing warning to all qualitative researchers:

Qualitative researchers have generally found comfort in the belief that qualitative methods permit more intimate, empathetic, and, therefore, more accurate portrayals of the lives of the participants in their studies than quantitative methods. But the crisis of representation has shown this belief to be naive, at best, and hubris, at worst. Instead of giving voice to the voiceless, qualitative researchers have too often engaged in "ventriloquy," controlling the voices of the voiceless and, thereby, maintaining their voicelessness. (2006, p. 2010)

The gap between lived and narrated experience – and between participants' and researchers' accounts of what has taken place – remains a constant challenge. Sandelowski asserts that the crisis of representation is exaggerated in qualitative metasynthesis projects and even constitutes "potential calamity" (2006, p. 11). She argues for the use of critical discursive readings to offset traditional empirical readings while acknowledging that clinicians need to be the ones to appraise the utility of research. "To offset the potential meta-jeopardy of the tale thrice-removed from the teller's lived life, reviewers can offer 'triple-told tale(s)' that serve as caveats to and foils for each other" (2006, p. 14).

Case studies

The therapy literature is replete with powerful and evocative clinical narratives which demonstrate effective relational therapy. Successful therapy textbooks, for example, tend to draw on the helpful illustrative functions of case studies. The form and scope of these case studies as a *specific form of research* vary considerably, however, including the fact that case studies can be engaged in both arts-based and scientific ways.

Taking an arts-based approach

Yalom's artful fictional writings over the years - including *Momma and the meaning of life* (Yalom 1999), *Creatures of a Day* (Yalom, 2015), and *Loves Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (Yalom, 1989) - have offered glimpses into the practice of a master existential therapist. Others, such as

Lapworth (2011) and Giré (2022), follow Yalom by adopting a quasi-fictional route, one in which details, while based in experiential truth, are changed to ensure clients' anonymity. Yalom (1991) has called this "symbolic equivalents." While evocative and revealing, these narratives are challenged as being literature, not research.

Other therapist authors provide detailed narratives or examples of dialogues based on specific, factual clinical cases. Orbach (2016) for instance offers a powerful psychodynamic account. Erskine's papers of real cases offer deep insight into the integrative psychotherapy process: see, for example, Erskine (2022) in Vol 12 of the *International Journal of Integrative Psychotherapy* which details in five parts his therapy with a client who had a profound schizoid process.

Case narratives are also a central tool and methodology for much qualitative research. They can take different forms: for instance, Peacock's (2020) innovative doctoral research novella offers fictional stories of work with children to explore the application of *Theraplay* with developmental and relational trauma. Her novella offers a glimpse - reminiscent of Axline's (1964) seminal *Dibs: In search of self* - into how a therapist might build relationships with traumatised children and their parents through playtherapy. Peacock also supplements her novella with a formal thesis which grapples (in a less accessible way) with the academic parts of her literature review and research methodology. While the author offers depth of discussion in her thesis, it is a different matter to reproduce this richness in published research articles.

Hayes (2022) offers a short (a few hundred words) autobiographical narrative of own experience of therapy embedding it in a scholarly reflexive account that constitutes arts-based methodology. Her story shows the profound importance of the therapeutic relationship and how the therapist enabled the client's growth by her gentle, warm listening presence and challenges.

My experience of psychotherapy has been that you go inward, safely watched over by another, not to get lost there, but to — eventually — peek out at the world again and find it seems a more bearable place. Not because anything out there has changed, but because you have changed. (Hayes, 2022, pp. 126)

A strength, and weakness, of this story is that readers are left with wanting more – more information, more context, more detail, more explanation... Nonetheless, stories like these remain the way most students learn about therapy (Dempsey, Forthcoming). They carry a vivid, resonant power and provide a model for practice. Such arts-based research carries methodological integrity demonstrated by both "fidelity" where researchers are able to connect with and express the

phenomenon being studied and "utility" where data that are useful, rich and insight-generating are engaged. However, space also needs to be given to interrogate the context of both the therapy and research to ensure these can be transferred to other contexts.

For Etherington (2020), who champions arts-based research, "Stories resonate and outlast their telling or reading.... They change us in ways we may not always anticipate because they can move us emotionally, change our attitudes and opinions, and sometimes influence our future behaviours" (2020, pp. 80-81). In this quotation, Etherington is alerting us to the possibilities and potential to use the arts to do research.

Art (artwork, drama, dance, poetry) can be utilized as *methods* (of data collection, analysis and reflexivity) or a piece of art can stand alone as *research*. In general, art-based research involves:

the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (McNiff, 2008, p. 29)

The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community (LIRIC) Journal, for instance, provides a forum for critical debate on the relationship between words and mental health/wellbeing and consists of numerous artful approaches to research relevant to practice even if they are not directly exploring the therapeutic relationship - see: <https://www.lapidus.org.uk/liric-journal-new-issue>.

The quantitative critique of such arts-based work tends to be dismissive, perceiving it as unsystematic, excessively idiographic, subjective creative writing or mere art rather than real research. While the stories might stand alone and offer interesting lessons, these critics would say, they lack the sustained analysis and systematic evaluation that defines the research agenda.

Arts-based researchers counter-claim that their freeing approach within creative projects has the potential to make readers see the world differently; their craftings have the capacity to surprise, challenge and shake up taken for granted assumptions. They would also argue their work is systematic and deeply reflective (and perhaps also explicitly scholarly). They assert their work deserves to be acknowledged for its contribution to understanding, as well as the way it spurs critical thinking, deep engagement and debate, and also inspires political/community activism. (See the special issue on arts-based research in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Chamberlain et al., 2018).

The common concerns of qualitative research and arts-based research to examine human experience suggests a significant potential role for such research in psychology/therapy fields. However, as Chamberlain et al. (2018) note, there is a significant difference between arts-based and qualitative research, given the place of interpretation. Arts-based research leaves interpretation to the reader/audience while qualitative research will often argue for and theorize their interpretations. Qualitative researchers have choices about the way and extent they should engage art to ensure the work remains in the research domain by retaining sufficient scholarly, systematic reflection to ensure it can be justified as “research”.

Other qualitative commentators point to limitations of many researchers’ abilities to exercise artistic craft. Good writing, for instance, is challenging and can be a source of considerable shame for most aspiring researchers which can act as a major block to writing. Describing the anguish many students feel about academic writing, belle hooks [the lack of capitals is deliberate], a noted cultural critic, writer and activist, highlights how negative past experiences can contribute to this sense of unworthiness:

Throughout my twenty years of teaching at a number of universities I have witnessed the terror and anguish many students feel about writing. Many acknowledge that their hatred and fear of writing surface in grade school...reaching a paralyzing peak in the college years. (hooks, 1999, p. 169)

Researchers who aspire to being more “writerly” may need to get extra help (for instance, using through writing mentors) to avoid writing in dull, dry, jargon-ridden ways (Finlay, 2020). The focus needs, at least in part, to be on engaging the audience/readers at both intellectual and personal level (Halling, 2002). Richardson (1994) advises linking academic writing with a process of inquiry. Arguing that writers’ self-knowledge and understanding of their topic develops through writing, she encourages individuals to “accept and nurture their own voices” (1994, p. 523).

The emotional and technical labour involved in finding one’s creative voice is undoubtedly demanding, and may be a step too far for hard-pressed practitioner-researchers who are already stepping gingerly (in their uncertainty, shame or resistance) into the academic arena. When their artful research products are continuously rejected by gatekeeping colleagues who are guarding so-called “professional” or “scientific” standards, it is hard to keep fighting for more creative possibilities. In more writerly speak, they can feel their wings clipped and more scientific approaches may offer security in structure.

Taking a science-based approach

Adopting a more conventionally “scientific” approach, Elliot (2002) offers his hermeneutic single case efficacy design (HSCED) method. His approach uses a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data to create a network of evidence related to outcome and possible explanations for apparent changes taking place within therapy. Using this design, MacLeod et al. (2012) present an in-depth mixed methods evaluation of a client’s (Carol’s) therapy for her social anxiety. The strong therapeutic relationship between Carol and her empathic therapist, plus the effective application of Focusing and Chair-work, were identified as the components of therapy which most contributed to Carol’s change. The external “judges” who evaluated the data concluded that the client changed substantially over the first 16 sessions of therapy and the Process-Experiential/Emotion-Focused Therapy was found to have contributed substantially to this change.

In their critical discussion of this version of outcomes research, MacLeod et al. (2012) highlight the elaborately detailed analytical approach taken:

The HSCED approach... is an important component of this research movement, in which appropriate generalization of causal claims is based on careful explication and weighing of different perspectives, external adjudication, and consideration of underlying causal processes, all aimed at forming a body of “case law” to inform future practice. (2012, p. 79)

This method has been used for other outcome studies. Across several systematic HSCED studies, Widdowson (2012) and colleagues have shown the effectiveness of transactional analysis. Widdowson (2018) makes the important point that clients who have had the best therapy outcomes have a decent understanding of the process, aided by their therapist.

Other researchers have used the method of qualitative case study metasynthesis. **Stephen et al. (2022)** synthesized eight studies in their effort to compare within-session processes that might help explain good versus poor therapeutic outcomes. The results were unsurprising and perhaps border on bland: patients who failed to benefit from therapy, or deteriorated further, appeared less ready to engage in therapeutic work at the beginning of therapy and found the process so difficult that they tended to disengage. Their therapists were also less able to respond to these difficulties in a responsive, empathic manner.

It is probably fair to say that most practitioners are not experienced researchers and they lack the research skills and team resources to engage in the deep evaluation required with

HSCED. However, the rigour and scientific stance characteristic of these various mixed methods studies might be sufficient to persuade at least some quantitative colleagues of the value and legitimacy of such qualitative approaches.

Other qualitative researchers might point to what is lost by the pursuit of “science.” That these studies lack the evocative resonance and power of their literary cousins is important. They would argue the need to extend the attention to qualitative methodology in order to do more to engage readers, to give voice to experience, and to be critically attentive to the interpretive, relational and social/discursive contexts of the research. This is the critique that is addressed in the wider fields of grounded theory, and of phenomenological- and discursively-orientated research discussed in the following sections.

Qualitative studies of clients’ experience

Most qualitative studies of client’s and therapist’s subjectively lived experiences of therapy and the therapeutic relationship would potentially provide “evidence” for the effectiveness (or not) of relational therapy. A multitude of methodologies - phenomenology, grounded theory, Narrative Inquiry, (auto-)ethnography, arts-based research, Intuitive Inquiry, and so on - have been used to this end. The value of these studies lies in the way they privilege and celebrate clients’ voices and in their in-depth engagement with processes and intersubjective dynamics.

Knox’s (2011) doctoral research, for example, explored 14 clients’ experiences of relational depth (predominately in person-centred therapy). Guided to focus on “moments of relational depth”, participants highlighted significant moments of feeling alive, real, and open in relationship and how such moments had enduring positive effects. Knox describes her hybrid methodology in the following way:

The research was phenomenological in nature ..., inevitably involving an aspect of hermeneutic enquiry ... with the intention of combining a “meditative indwelling” of the descriptions of the “thing itself” (McLeod, 2001, p. 56) with an interpretative analysis of the generated text. ...A person-centred approach was used to facilitate an exploration of the clients’ perceptions of the characteristics of a specific moment in therapy and a grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used for the analysis of the resulting data. (2011, p. 75)

From this description, Knox’s methodology can be seen as imprecise, even confused. On the other hand, the use of different theoretical and methodological approaches is embraced as “pluralistic qualitative research” (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020) which reflects a postmodern view where life is seen as contradictory and messy, where no one version of truth is privileged.

Beyond methodology, Knox’s findings are synthesized into a model of a shared journey between client and therapist. At every stage, the client is facilitated by the therapist, who offers different things as the therapy progresses from the initial invitation to openness, support, understanding, acceptance, affirmation and stepping back. The client, in turn, moves from feeling vulnerable to opening up, going deeper, connecting, and feeling validated. However, as the author concedes, attributing such enduring positive effects of therapy solely to moments of relational depth is to take a step too far. She points to the epistemological challenge of separating effects of moments of connection from the relationship as a whole, raising questions around conceptual clarity.

Finlay and Hewitt Evans (2022) also wade into this evolving and significant pool of relational depth research (e.g., see Knox et al., 2013). Their focus is on the broader philosophical concept of “relational home,” following Stolorow (2007, 2016, 2019). Stolorow’s and Atwood’s (1992) version of intersubjective phenomenological-contextual psychoanalytic theory sees the therapy relationship as an intersection of two subjectivities and therapist’s presence as a (potential) relational home for emotional pain and existential vulnerability.

Employing relational-centred methodology (Finlay & Evans, 2009), Finlay and Hewitt Evans (2022) engaged online dialogues with six psychotherapists concerning their experience of being a client and of finding a relational home. The researchers’ own experiences of being client, therapist and researcher were also reflexively explored. The use of purposively-chosen therapist-as-client participants is a useful strategy to overcome ethical dilemmas (informed consent is smoother) and to ensure participants are emotionally literate and articulate. However, were these therapists already predisposed to see certain elements which would not normally be in clients’ awareness? The knotty problem of choice of participants needs critical attention in all qualitative studies and this goes beyond issues around seeking so-called representative, generalizable samples.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) resulted in five emergent theme headings: “*Belonging*”, “*Safety*”, “*Holding*”, “*Affirmation*”, and “*Being-with*”. The findings show that all participants experienced a relational home where they felt welcomed into a safe-enough space, attuned to, held, and appreciated by their solidly present, there-for-them therapist.

In turn, this invited them to trust, let go and embrace more of themselves, and feel that they truly mattered. On the basis of their research, Finlay and Hewitt Evans argue the notion of relational home as offering greater conceptual clarity than specific moments of relational depth.

That these findings largely mirror the results from the more extensive programme of relational depth research, and are therefore not particularly original, can be seen as affirming such results and reinforcing their credibility and transferability. The authors see their emerging model as a point of departure for further exploration - including via quantitative means. The authors own that it is not yet clear whether most, or a minority, of therapists will aspire to providing a relational home. So, it is too early to evaluate the utility of the concept.

From a quantitative research perspective, the fact that Finlay and Hewitt Evans (2022) conducted their (inter-)subjective, interpretive analysis on the words of just six participants would be a major limitation. From a qualitative viewpoint, however, this can also be seen as the strength of the study. The iterative layers of embodied reflexive-reflection, where the researchers recognised the solace and sanctuary that resulted from their own intimate collaboration, is interesting and consistent with a thorough-going qualitative commitment:

(T)he fact that the two of us relationally dwelt with our participants' stories - and our own - offers an intriguing parallel process to the topic of our research. We were deeply moved by our participants' willingness to share their existential vulnerability with us, and we remained sensitive to the need for us, as co-researchers, to offer a safe place for the sharing and transformation of trauma and emotional pain. (2022, p. 45)

Qualitative studies of therapists' experience

Many scholarly books and papers provide autobiographical accounts of therapists' relational experiences with clients. The authors may take a theoretical (rather than explicitly empirical) approach but some of this work can still be considered "research" as their writings are often based on their self-observed reflexive experience of therapeutic work combined with appropriately scholarly references to the literature.

A paper by **Etherington (2000)** about supervising counsellors who work with survivors of childhood sexual abuse offers a reflexive practice-based inquiry on the back of empirical

research. Etherington discusses her experience of becoming vicariously traumatized by her research with men who had been sexually abused in their childhood. She then uses that experience to analyse relational ways supervisors might support supervisees who work with sexual abuse. Her rich, layered analysis informs readers about her research, the nature of trauma, challenges of therapy in this field, and about how to supervise this kind of therapeutic work. However, the journal's word space constraints do not allow sufficient exploration of this analysis as a piece of research in its own right and it reads more like an accumulation of professional assertions.

Papers like Etherington's offer a potent reminder of the value of "practice-based evidence" as a counterpoint to "evidence-based practice." This is research which informs theory/science and that arises out of, and focuses on, practice. The practice evidence drawn upon in these kinds of works are diverse including case studies, autobiographical accounts and observation. Similarly, the methodologies that might be employed span phenomenological-existential approaches, ethnography, arts-based research, narrative inquiry, and critical discursive accounts, and so on. The debate at stake is the extent such work using practice-based evidence is viewed as valued, legitimate research or if it is relegated to being a second-class citizen.

Five systematic empirical studies that effectively capture therapists' experience of the therapeutic relationship are those of Geller and Greenberg (2002; 2012), Moltu and Binder (2011), Barsness (2021), Luca and Andreou (2019) and Bainbridge (2022).

Geller and Greenberg (2002; 2012) developed an extended model of presence out of Geller's significant qualitative study of expert therapists' experience. This model is now well embedded in the therapeutic literature which suggests both respect and acceptance of this qualitative research. The researchers identify three emergent domains: (1) preparing the ground for presence (pre-session, and in life); (2) process of presence (inwardly attending, receptivity and extending/contact); (3) experience of presence (immersion, expansion, grounding and being with/for client). Their model highlights therapists' attuned responsiveness to clients made possible through combining a kinaesthetic and emotional sensing of the client's affect (receptivity) with an inward focus on how the client's experience resonates within the therapist's own body (inward attendance).

While spawning further research, the model has itself undergone change, evolving to the status of a reliable self-report measure (and research tool): the Therapeutic Presence Inventory (TPI). There are two versions: one for therapists' perspectives and the other for those of clients. These have

been used in other studies. One example is Geller et al., (2010), which found that therapist-rated therapeutic presence predicts clients' perceptions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional regard.

That Geller's original qualitative research has been the springboard for new theory and further research demonstrates the potential value and power of qualitative research. Further (quantitative and mixed methods) research is necessary to test how presence is – or is not – enacted in different contexts and modalities. Further qualitative research is also needed to highlight the contrasting ways therapists understand presence in practice. That further questions result, points to the importance of recognising therapeutic relational processes evolve over time, and in different cultural contexts, and that no study – quantitative, qualitative or mixed – can offer a definitive final word.

Moltu and Binder (2011) explored how therapists constructively handle difficult impasses with clients which result in good outcomes. 12 experienced clinicians with teaching experience (in different modalities) were interviewed about one extraordinarily difficult impasse in terms of how they experienced it and what they did towards finding a positive way through. The authors adopted a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach by identifying meaning units (i.e., attempting to be systematic) and presenting “thick description” (i.e., attempting to achieve depth).

Their findings – ably punctuated with writerly metaphors and both philosophical and evidencing quotations - encompass three themes: *The move*: from confusion and bodily tension to shared systems of meaning; *The witness*: to find a home for the stalemate scenario in another relationship; *The vital* clearing: an experiential space between self and impasse. In this analysis, the insights offered explicate the relational processes within the first two stages and the need to stay present to these. The research also highlights the importance of “fellow travellers” to restore vitality and make the work possible.

The authors acknowledge two limitations that the participants were all familiar with articulating processes (and may not represent less experienced therapists) and that the focus was only on positive outcomes. They reflexively acknowledge that their “bias” towards relational process and mindfulness may have prompted their participants to find those storylines. I wonder if it is more that these were the analytical lenses used and that other researchers would have spotted other themes.

All of these limitations point to the need to do further research. It seems unfair to criticize research for what it doesn't set out to do in the first place – and that applies to all research. More meaningful critique, I argue, comes when we evaluate a study from *within* its own perspective/aims. In this case, some hermeneutic-phenomenologists might point to the

somewhat head-level analysis which could have done more to evoke and resonate. But perhaps the “heady” solutions found by the participants resulted in a “heady” analysis? Or perhaps this was a function of the data collection process? These are questions that needed to be explored more deeply had the journal's word constraints allowed it.

Barsness (2021) offers an in-depth account of what a relational psychoanalyst does. 16 experienced, senior relational psychoanalytic therapists were interviewed to identify commonalities in practices. The resulting data were coded and systematized (by the researcher and two unnamed research assistants) into representative categories using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The study resulted in 7 core categories which were seen to be common to the practice of a relational psychoanalysis: therapeutic intent; therapeutic stance; deep listening; attending to the there-and-then/here-and-now; patterning/linking; repetition/working through; and courageous speech/disciplined spontaneity. Each of these interlinking categories is described and key properties within each are itemized.

Barsness notes the paucity of empirical research specific to the practice of relational psychoanalysis which highlights the utility of this research. Care was taken to ensure a systematic, rigorous, extended data-driven analytic approach (as suited to their grounded theory) until consensus between the three researchers was achieved.

While the results seem to offer a comprehensive account, the category and list approach loses some of the “feel” of the therapists' experience, a feel that perhaps might be provided by hearing the voices of the therapists and more about their actual work, or even about the author (via greater reflexivity). To provide such contextualizing detail requires word space, beyond the remit of most journals, forcing authors to be selective in what they choose to highlight. Here the focus was on offering the theoretical categories as suited the particular grounded theory methodology used. Had a more constructivist version (Charmaz, 2009) been employed, then more contextual comment would be expected.

Interestingly, Barsness notes the key concept of “love” was a dominant presence in the data, and seen as descriptive of the analytic work, but they were unable to directly incorporate it into the set categories which highlights again the challenge of research that aims to organize findings into neat boxes. Love was recognized in statements such as: “Psychoanalysis is a deep immersion into the affective lives of the other,” “a willingness to resist the urge for self-protection,” and “surrender certainty and engage in the inevitable conflicts, misrecognitions, and ruptures” (Barsness, 2021, p. 28). In noting this love dimension, the author implicitly acknowledges the messiness of human experience which defies categorical classification. The recognition of inchoate aspects like love

point to the significance of the more and reminds all researchers to retain some humility about the scope of their research.

Luca and Andreou (2019) usefully map the literature concerning the importance of the therapeutic relationship, noting there is a shortage of research on how integrative psychotherapists experience emotional connections with clients. They interviewed four integrative psychotherapists about their experience of emotional connection in relationship. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), they found that the relational qualities which stood out coalesced under three main themes: *embodied, emotional openness; empathy; and striving towards a therapeutic relationship*.

The key contribution of this small-scale research is to extend the findings of previous research regarding the ways in which emotional arousal in clients brings about change. Luca and Andreou point to the active relational arousal of both therapist and client – a reminder to quantitative colleagues to study the broader relational context and not just engage in measurement of individual clients' functioning.

Beyond the quantitative critique of sample size, a qualitative critique is the authors' reliance on participants' descriptions, presented in the form of quotations from interviews. While the quotations are valued as offering evidence and making the analysis transparent, simply hearing what participants say doesn't necessarily get at what they *mean*. Further, phenomenological explication and hermeneutic interpretation is meant to be explicitly engaged when using IPA (a methodology considered accessible and so often employed by therapists new to qualitative research). This raises questions around methodological integrity (Brooks & Wearden, 2006; Levitt, 2017). As Smith (2004) states, IPA needs to move beyond the text towards more psychological and metaphorical interpretation (without importing external theory such as psychoanalytic interpretations).

Further reflexive-interpretive work might have enabled the accounts to be more evocative resonant and helped bring the phenomenon more to life. More reflexive acknowledgement of the researchers' thinking and assumptions would also increase transparency and it could enhance the rhetorical power of the research. Yet such an approach raises another challenging epistemological choice beyond the constraints of journal word count: How far can/should qualitative researchers push reflexivity, subjective interpretation and/or artistic flourish if they are to retain "scientific" credibility? Some would argue against the use of researcher interpretation – preferring instead to privilege hearing the participants' voice.

Finally, **Bainbridge (2022)** offers her autoethnographic study exploring the use of self-disclosure as a survivor-therapist with

clients who are also survivors of sexual violence. Drawing on her personal reflective journal material, she takes a three-phased approach to her data collection and analysis which spans her journey from being a client, to being a trainee, and then being a qualified therapist. Themes of "post-traumatic growth," "sisterhood" and "self-disclosure" are explored.

Her explicitly idiographic and subjective research points to the value of sisterhood between female survivors of sexual violence and how the therapeutic relationship can be deepened when therapist self-disclosure is used judiciously in service of the client. She recommends encouraging survivor dialogue in professional trainings to cultivate "an environment of solidarity within our training institutions" so as to help trainees/therapists feel empowered in their decisions about whether to disclose their personal experiences.

Bainbridge is explicit about the impact of her "feminist positionality" and I appreciate her ongoing reflexivity. However, she talks about her "bias" and this raises interesting questions if we understand the meaning of bias as some kind of prejudice or deviation. While positivists are anxious to minimize bias in their search for "truth," qualitative researchers see the opportunity offered by reflexive subjectivity when we mine the meanings of how data/findings are a co-created product of the researcher, the researched and the context. The use of the word "bias" seems to cede anti-subjectivity territory to positivists. Instead, perhaps qualitative researchers need to celebrate (reflexively) multiple meanings and how their (inter-)subjectivity can, itself, be considered an essential truth – or at least a version of truth – concerning the social world.

Discursive studies of interactions and language use

Language use and discourse can be interrogated using a wide range of qualitative and mixed methods approaches. **Bassett (2022)**, for instance, shows some courage in tackling the politically contentious and personally sensitive topic of therapists' understandings of the social construct of "whiteness." Her mixed-methods survey purposively sampled fifty therapists in the United Kingdom. Utilizing statistical analysis and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), her findings recognizes how "white culture" reflects a dominant, yet often invisible, force that is present within practice relationships. She systematically argues there is a pressing need to have discussions about whiteness, privilege and racial identity, a move which could enhance anti-racism in psychotherapy. She also recognises the concern that racially-minoritized members of training groups can be retraumatized

by such discussion and how much care needs to be taken when facilitating such discussions in training.

Research like Bassett's reminds therapists to interrogate their language use and its meanings. It recognises that language-in-practice is not neutral and is laden with taken-for-granted meanings, tied up with power and ideology. Our use of language is imbued with *relational ethics* (Finlay, 2019): "(T)he bringing together of ourselves and our clients through dialogue, is an inherently moral endeavor; imbued in the dynamics of ethics and power," acknowledges Bassett (2022, p. 58).

The results of Bassett's research remain tentative and need both *quantitative* follow-up across representative samples to ensure generalizable results, and further *qualitative* follow-up to explore different social contexts and the relational impact of the discourse. She notes that the participants in her study were probably already biased towards anti-racist practice/education; therapists opposed to such a focus would have been unwilling to take the survey. This issue of questionable representativeness confounds all survey research which aims to be "generalizable." While qualitative research does not strive for generalizability, a mixed methods study needs, at least, to problematize the participant sample and to grapple with the wider applicability of the findings.

A further limitation of this research is that the focus was "attitudes" – therapists' beliefs about racial/cultural identity – rather than examining specific talk-in-action within therapy relationships. For this kind of deeper enquiry into discursive dynamics, we need to look towards studies which explicitly engage discourse analysis. Arguably, single qualitative methods (such as discourse analysis) have the potential to go deeper. Qualitatively-driven pluralistic and mixed methods researchers would perhaps disagree.

Discursive studies span a spectrum from conversational analysis to Foucauldian discourse analysis. While they are used less often in therapy research (due to lack of exposure and familiarity), they have greater purchase in the wider psychology and sociology fields. Their value is in offering a useful glimpse into how discourses in society are taken up and used by people to construct ideas about themselves and others (Wetherell et al., 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Everyday taken-for-granted language is questioned and shown to be potentially loaded with social meanings. There is a recognition that language is a site of ideological struggle and conflict while it also serves to obscure the power structures of society (Burr, 2015).

Post-structural versions reject the idea that any literary text or discourse has a single purpose or reality. Instead, multiple meanings and perspectives are prized and contested – posing a direct challenge to the hegemony of positivist research.

Gough (2022), for instance, offers a critical review that interrogates and "recuperates" masculinities in therapeutic practice discussing how therapists might unwittingly reconstruct traditional toxic masculinities in their practice while being ideally positioned to deconstruct those masculinities which arise in their clients' suffering.

Van Der Merwe (2019) conducted follow-up interviews and focus groups with 11 psychologists regarding their emotional practices and emotional labour. In particular she examined participants' experiences of unwanted (so-called "non-professional") emotions, and the ability of such emotions to challenge their self-concept as "contained professionals."

In the following passage, Van Der Merwe (2019) draws on Wetherell's (2012) concept of *affective-discursive practice* – where embodied subjectivity is seen to develop in social relationship. She describes the emotions that the psychologists in her study find "troubling" and at times even "threatening":

Among detailed descriptions about the affective dance psychologists 'should' be practising ..., there was concurrent talk about this not always being easy. ...[P]articipants spoke about feeling useless, hopeless, anxious, frustrated and bored. Some emotions were constructed as particularly hard to contain, for example a participant spoke about "frustration that kind of leaks out" (Sal, FG3). Some participants spoke about having to resist the urge to say what they were thinking, for example telling the client that they are being a "shit", or saying things like "buck yourself up" (Pete, I) or "look you just have to get on with things" (Frances, I). ...They 'confessed' to having these 'unprofessional' feelings, but hedged them with the professional or formal discourse, such as putting on the "professional hat" and performing empathy or sorting it out in supervision. (2019, pp. 39)

Van Der Merwe's critical social account opens up discussion about the tensions around what therapists' emotions "should" be and the potential silencing of certain emotions leading therapists to feel unprofessional failures. Importantly, she acknowledges that further research is needed to compare the emotion work of therapists in different therapeutic communities - *and countries* – again, a task better suited for quantitative comparisons.

Her research demonstrates methodological rigour and integrity in discursive terms while theoretical constructs (such as affective-discursive practice) are transparently foregrounded. While not immediately relevant to relational therapy, the probing of psychologists' identity and discourse is relevant for relational practice and raises questions about therapist's assumptions and cultural values, and how these play out in the therapeutic context. These are areas that merit

further investigation, especially when it comes to evaluating the research base of therapy in its entirety. However, most therapists are not well versed in sophisticated discursive theory and methodology, which makes it less accessible for both research consumers and producers.

More directly relevant to relational therapy is **Jessop's (2017)** doctoral study, which explores how therapists construct ruptures in the therapeutic alliance and what the term accomplishes for those using it. Jessop maps the contemporary discursive terrain through an analysis of expert texts and via semi-structured interviews with four counselling psychologists, and also with a focus group made up of five trainees. Analysis was conducted on the basis of a synthesis of Foucauldian, discursive, and critical discursive analytic approaches.

Analysis of expert texts indicates a binary, one which draws on medical and relational discourses to position participants as either "diagnostician" or "relational being" (ideal). When talking, however, individual psychologists evaded fixed positions by drawing on repertoires of rupture as interpersonal and as intrapersonal "crisis". These allowed them, as practitioners, to adopt different positions: for example, that of "practitioner as emotional being", or "practitioner as dutiful soldier." This helped them manage issues of accountability. Jessop noted that such discourses could lead to fractured, and potentially marginalising, professional subjectivities.

Evaluating her research, Jessop notes that attempting to combine analytic procedures was ambitious, and that it was challenging to shift from micro to macro perspectives. Her choice then was to go for breadth. Would greater depth and theoretical coherence have been achieved if she had committed to a single approach? Qualitatively-driven mixed methods and pluralistic qualitative researchers would argue that theoretical coherence is achieved by prioritizing the research question over methods (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020). The value of Jessop's mixed research approach is that it precisely engages the contradictory tensions and complexities of practice.

For Jessop, a strength of her study lies in its consideration of interactional and wider socio-cultural constitution of practitioners' subjectivities as a process and institution. She also argues that her recognition of participants' talk in the context of their wider material existence reinforced the ethical basis of the research. She also reflexively acknowledges how her reference to the constraining material world allows her to avoid having "to stray too far from the path of hegemonic discourse of which I appear to be a product": one which legitimises her "difficulties in consistently occupying positions alternative to it." (pp. 150-151).

Concluding reflections

In this article I have sought to shed light on the diversity and richness of what qualitative research has to offer when it comes to strengthening the evidence base for relationally-orientated therapy. I see much to be celebrated here, along with ongoing epistemological and methodological challenges that merit ongoing critical discussion. While I am aware that I have probably shown some partiality for reflexive, relational arts based qualitative approaches, I have also striven to combine enthusiasm for the breadth of other types of qualitative and mixed methods research with critical awareness of all their limitations and problematic areas. That qualitative methodologies are also contested within the field of qualitative research is perhaps self-evident but the respective critiques need acknowledging. The debate, then, is not just one that polarizes quantitative versus qualitative.

The authors whose work has been presented here display their *methodological integrity* (Levitt et al. 2017) through the way in which their research designs and procedures support their research questions/goals, are consistent with their epistemological assumptions, and are tailored to the fundamental characteristics of the subject matter. Their interest in, and commitment to, other people's experiential truths, and the way meanings are collaboratively, socially and reflexively co-created, is testimony to the ethical nature of their inquiry.

The (highly selective, even idiosyncratic) exemplars of qualitative research examined here also reveal the richness, relevance, and resonance of this methodology. As I see it, qualitative research has a special role to play in under-researched areas – ones which need preliminary exploration that can be followed up in other, perhaps quantitative, ways. I agree with Levitt et al. (2016) when they argue that routinely consulting qualitative research allows therapists to better access client experiences and that we should robustly challenge the hegemonic assumption that only quantitative evidence is needed. Epistemological and methodological biases should not blind us to the value of advancing and integrating the breadth and depth of findings that results from qualitative research.

What is also apparent is the sheer complexity of the research task that faces therapists. Do we engage outcomes or process research? To whose voices should we listen with particular attention? Those of therapists or clients, the marginalized, or stakeholders? Even as we address these questions, the challenges multiply when it comes to trying to capture the impossible ambivalence, variability, and ambiguity of therapy experiences across different cultural contexts. Then we face

the knotty problem of how much we should relinquish a creative agenda versus stay within the bounds of scientific tradition. My argument is that we need to open to the wider range of possibilities as no methodology can hope to do justice to all these questions on its own.

The earnest effort by qualitative researchers to be reflexive about the meanings and contexts of their research, and to evaluate its strengths and limitations, is certainly a matter for celebration even as we recognize the word count constraints journals enforce to the detriment of qualitative research. To retain methodological integrity, we need to ensure a continuing, critically reflexive, self-conscious stance and be self-aware meta-analysis about the research process (Finlay, 2002). I agree with Sandelowski (2006) on the importance of fostering *critical humility* – and avoiding hubristic tendencies – regarding our own qualitative research.

In the spirit of reciprocity, perhaps quantitative researchers could be persuaded to follow suit by being more reflexive, humble and owning their scientific-ideological interests and agendas(?). Can they be nudged to open their scientific gates to wilder fields beyond their own neatly furrowed ones? We are joined as investigators of human experience in its infinite richness and complexity, and we have much to learn from one another.

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About the Author

Dr Linda Finlay is an existentially-orientated, relational Integrative Psychotherapist currently in private practice in the United Kingdom (UK). She also teaches psychology, counselling and research methodology at the Open University, UK. She has published widely. Her two most recent books are published by Sage: *Practical ethics in counselling and psychotherapy: A relational approach* and *The therapeutic use of self in counselling and psychotherapy*. Among her books relevant to research are two published by Wiley: *Phenomenology for therapists: Researching the lived world* and *Relational-centred research for psychotherapists* (written with Ken Evans). Her particular research interests include exploring relational dynamics and applying relational-reflexive approaches to investigate lived experience and trauma.