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Beyond the comfort zone: a guide to supervising qualitative undergraduate psychology dissertations for quantitative researchers

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Abstract:

The Teaching Qualitative Psychology Group (TQP) is a group of experienced academics supporting the sharing of best practice in the teaching and supervision of qualitative research methods in psychology. In this paper the group share their knowledge and practice suggestions with a specific focus on supporting academics who do not come from a qualitative research background, but who are supervising qualitative dissertations. This paper will explore why quantitative researchers may want to supervise qualitative dissertations and suggest ways in which this methodological shift might be managed well in the context of the undergraduate project as well as some practical advice for a valuable supervision experience.

Introduction:

This paper is primarily aimed at those psychology academics whose predominant expertise is in quantitative approaches but who are interested in supervising qualitative undergraduate projects. However, it is also hoped that it will be of some use to existing qualitative supervisors, new academics who are about to embark on their supervisory career and those who are supervising at an MSc level. The aim of this paper is to collate our experience of supervising qualitative projects with the intention of sharing ideas, resources and best practice.

Who are we?

The authors of this paper are current members of the Teaching Qualitative Psychology (TQP) Group; whose aim is to promote and develop excellent practice in the teaching of qualitative psychology. The TQP Group was formed in 2005 within the Higher Education Academy [HEA] (now AdvanceHE) as a special interest group. Under the remit of the HEA the group provided training events and published several pieces of work in order to enhance provision of qualitative research methods teaching (e.g. Forrester & Koutsopoulou, 2008; Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012). During this time the group also collected and organised a range of qualitative data which was made publicly available

for teaching purposes (now available at https://study.sagepub.com/forresterandsullivan2e) and used to produce an undergraduate textbook to support qualitative analyses (first edition Forrester & Sullivan, 2010; second edition Sullivan & Forrester, 2019). In 2015 the HEA was, due to funding restrictions, unable to maintain its support for the group and the group moved its academic home to the Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMiP) section of the British Psychological Society (BPS). Since working with QMiP, the group has continued to grow and support the teaching of qualitative methods through workshops and publications (e.g. Etheridge, McDermott, Sullivan & Riley, 2017; Forrester & Sullivan, 2019; Wiggins, Gordon-Finlayson, Becker & Sullivan, 2016).

What are the BPS requirements for the undergraduate dissertation?

The undergraduate dissertation is often seen as the "jewel in the crown" of a degree programme, offering students a chance to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have developed over the course of their studies. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Benchmark Subject Statement for Psychology states the following:

“A graduate of psychology will have successfully completed a series of practical reports throughout their course, culminating in an empirical project reporting on a substantial piece of research (or a piece of work which delivers the same learning outcomes of equal quality). The project typically involves the collection of original empirical data from participants, or equivalent alternatives such as computational modelling of empirical data or secondary data analysis, such as a meta-analysis." (QAA, 2019, p. 9)

However, specific guidance for the undergraduate dissertation is not produced by the BPS and standards are maintained through the sharing of practices (such as through the process of external examining). In terms of the above guidance from the QAA, the majority of undergraduate students do collect original data and, in our experience, student requests to complete qualitative projects are increasing. One of the results of this is that there are a rising number of colleagues who are supervising qualitative projects.

Why might a quantitative researcher want to supervise a qualitative project?

Since 2003, the BPS has required the teaching of qualitative methods be included as part of accredited psychology

undergraduate programmes in the United Kingdom. This relatively recent requirement may mean that that many established academics will not have been introduced to qualitative methods during their own undergraduate degrees, and given the dominance of quantitative and experimental approaches in psychology it is possible, perhaps even likely, that most academics have no experience of conducting qualitative research. However, if engaged in teaching then they will be contributing towards undergraduate programmes which are increasingly aware of the importance of qualitative approaches in the discipline. They are also likely to be contributing towards the supervision of dissertations on these programmes and may find themselves in a position where they are asked to or would like to supervise an undergraduate qualitative research project.

If an academic with only quantitative research experience embarks on supervising qualitative research projects, then a good place to start is for them to be aware of their motivations:

Are they supervising qualitative undergraduate projects because they feel obligated? In this instance this may be a workload issue, rather than an issue of skill development, and it is important to keep in mind that there is no requirement by the BPS that a certain proportion of undergraduate

dissertations adopt a qualitative approach. Whilst qualitative research is often popular with undergraduate students, ultimately a supervisor needs to be comfortable taking on any such supervision requests. If an academic feels "forced" into supervising a particular research method or topic outside of their expertise then this is ultimately a disservice to both staff and students as it is unlikely to provide a valuable learning experience.

Are they supervising qualitative undergraduate projects because they want to learn about qualitative methods? Development of staff skills is essential to creating a strong teaching team. The rise of qualitative methods in Psychology in recent years is well documented (Riley, Brooks, Goodman, Cahill, Branney, Treharne & Sullivan, 2019) and it is not surprising that some quantitative researchers would like to expand their knowledge. As qualitative researchers, the authors very much welcome this enthusiasm for qualitative approaches. There are also likely to be areas of knowledge and experience that a supervisor can rely upon if they are considering expanding their supervision practice into qualitative research projects (such as project management, rationale development or topic expertise). If a quantitative researcher would like to find out more about qualitative methods then there are other

avenues they should consider exploring before taking on a supervisory role: engage in reading about qualitative approaches, attend a qualitative methods conference and/or training course, speak to a colleague about their qualitative research or spend time looking at qualitative journals. Roberts and Seaman (2018) found that one of the aspects of good dissertation supervision was the ability of the supervisor to provide clear and direct advice to the student which can only be possible when the supervisor has relevant knowledge to offer.

Are they supervising qualitative undergraduate projects because they have explored qualitative methods and want to learn more? Supervising a qualitative project in this scenario would be an appropriate way to push the boundaries of a methodological comfort zone. If the supervisor feels that they are able to respond to basic questions about methodological choice (why a student should choose Thematic Analysis [TA] versus Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] for example) then this is a good starting point. It would be worth having a conversation with colleagues who do supervise qualitative projects within the department to seek guidance and also to ask if any questions can be clarified with them in the future; such mentorship could even be formalised to provide professional development opportunities for all involved or a

project could be co-supervised (see example give later on). Supervising qualitative projects can be insight-provoking and empowering, but it is important to understand the nuances involved (such as additional ethical considerations or researcher reflexivity) and to reach out for support from colleagues when appropriate. Brydon and Flynn (2014, p. 379) point to good supervisors balancing their roles as an *"expert and companion"* when supervising undergraduate projects and while an academic new to qualitative methods may not be an expert, they should be in a position to instil confidence in their student.

What should quantitative supervisors be aware of when supervising qualitative projects?

The following points are some tips that may be worth keeping in mind when supervisors are considering stepping out of their methodological boundaries and supervising a qualitative project:

Know what your students have done

Quantitative supervisors need to be aware of what qualitative teaching the students have engaged with so far on their programme. The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement (2019) specifies that students should be engaging with qualitative

research methods as part of their undergraduate degree, but does not stipulate how this should be achieved and so the teaching and assessments associated with qualitative methods will therefore vary between HEIs. Therefore, it is important that supervisors know what skills their students have been developing on their specific programme: Do they have experience of carrying out interviews? Have they transcribed data before? Have they experience of collecting data online? Have they designed an interview schedule? Have they formulated aims and research questions suitable for qualitative investigation? Have they carried out any qualitative analysis? These kind of questions are key to knowing both what competencies students already have and the skills they have not yet acquired. A supervisor might also want to look at assignments completed by their assigned students; this will not only increase familiarity with their past experiences of qualitative research, but also give an understanding of that individual student and their engagement with and understanding of qualitative approaches.

Keep to a familiar topic area

Learning new skills is an important part of developing as an academic, however in order to provide the expert support a student should have as part of a good supervisory relationship the supervisor should offer some degree of expert knowledge

(Brydon & Flynn, 2014; Roberts & Seaman, 2018). Therefore, supervising a project within their existing field of expertise, but with a new methodological approach can be seen to be balancing the developmental needs of both the student and the supervisor. However, we acknowledge that this may not be possible as a student may want to conduct a qualitative project outside of the topic expertise of the supervisor.

Framing a feasible project

As with all research projects, the research question should set the parameters for how best to conduct the study from the data to be collected through to the mode of analysis (though note the point below about acknowledging limits). As students typically receive more training in quantitative methods aimed at finding generalisable causal explanations, they may struggle to frame their aim and research question/s along the more exploratory lines more appropriate to qualitative investigation. Key things to consider are whether the research question is appropriate, not too ambitious or complicated, such that they can explore a particular cohort of people or phenomena – helping to tighten the focus of research questions is an important and very common role for the qualitative supervisor. The key is to ask students to produce an academic rationale for their study to enable them to think through issues and to develop a practical idea. To give an idea of what might be

appropriate topics, members of TQP have supervised projects with the following research aims: exploring the experiences of young women who have decided to remain childfree. At this stage it is also important to consider the epistemological position early on in the design process (e.g. will a critical realist position be adopted?); quite often this may be dictated by the selected method (e.g. IPA will mean that a phenomenological approach is taken throughout the project), but it is important to clarify this with the student early on in the design process.

Understand differences in project design

When shifting from supervising a quantitative project to a qualitative one it is important to understand some of the key differences between the methodological approaches. The timeline, for example, involved in a qualitative dissertation will be different as students will need to devote time in the planning phase to writing their interview schedule and will spend longer in the analytic phase which means that data collection may need to be brought forward. Some methodologies (e.g. Grounded Theory [GT]) delay the literature review until during or after data analysis, so project planning (and perhaps local deadlines) will need to take this into account. The ethics process may also need a little more consideration as there are differences around confidentiality and anonymity (e.g. that confidentially in focus groups will never be under the

researchers absolute control due to other participants being involved in the data collection or that a participant might always be able to recognise their own data and so true anonymity is not possible), especially if the topic area could be considered as sensitive. The BPS Ethics Guidelines (2018) are a useful starting point, but colleagues should also refer to the ethics guidance that is specific to their institution. Given that qualitative research is likely to consider sensitive topics (such as issues around sexuality or identity) it is also possible that students may be exposed to a risk of distress so it might be worth considering use of a distress protocol and ensuring that appropriate support is made available (such as advising students and participants of where they can seek support from). Qualitative researchers are also more likely to be collecting data in the field, and risks to student researchers as lone workers need to be considered and managed.

Supporting reflexivity

In a sense, the 'tool' that does the analysis in qualitative research is the researcher themselves, and like all the 'tools' we use to collect and analyse data in qualitative or quantitative research, we need to understand what we're working with and how it impacts on the data we collect and the analysis we produce. It is important to encourage the student to engage in a reflective process throughout the project (which may

obviously be closely linked to their emotional response to the topic area). While this is something that should be familiar to students, as being able to reflect on work is a graduate skill specified in the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement (2019), students will need encouragement and support to, for instance, maintain a reflexive journal throughout the research process. Such reflexive work enables them to gain insight into how *who they are* influences the research and analysis process, and how they can manage this in order to allow the voices of their participants come through rather than merely finding confirmation of the presuppositions and assumptions they might carry into the project. Further, reflection during the analysis process is an important part of how qualitative interpretations are arrived at; it is not possible to complete a mature analysis of qualitative data without having some way of capturing and carefully considering our insights along the way. The reflexive section usually appears at the end of the discussion and is the space in which the research accounts for their influence on their analysis, as well as their insights; it is important to encourage students to consider this as part of the analytic process rather than merely a concluding paragraph. By engaging with students in conversations about their position as researcher throughout the supervision process and encouraging them to keep a note of their insights the supervisor

can frame reflection as an integral part of the dissertation from very early on in the project.

Know your limits

If an academic is considering supervising a qualitative project for the first time, then it is anticipated that some background reading will have been engaged with. However, it is impossible to learn the details of every qualitative approach and it is important for colleagues to understand where the limits of their knowledge lie. Most qualitative researchers will specialise in a particular approach and it is reasonable to expect new qualitative researchers to do the same. If, for instance, most of the background research has been done about a particular approach to TA then this is the method that students should be encouraged to focus on. While there may be pressure from the student to adopt a method that a supervisor is unfamiliar with and perhaps even a desire within the academic to develop their own skills, it is important to develop a realistic understanding of what the first steps into qualitative methodologies may look like.

Know your strengths

It may be that supervising a qualitative project can seem quite daunting at times, however it is important to keep in mind that there is plenty of common ground between qualitative and quantitative projects. Supervisors may not be experienced

qualitative researchers, but they will be able to ensure that students have an appropriate writing style, can create consistent arguments throughout the dissertation, are able to plan and manage a research project, and are informed about ethical processes and appropriate data management. These are the skills that will underpin a good dissertation which are skills that both qualitative and quantitative researchers share.

Consider Group Supervision or Mentorship

One method of group supervision that one of the authors is involved in piloting is the idea of 'cluster projects/dissertations'. Two members of staff are paired together to supervise a group of students (in addition to one-to-one supervision). The principle behind this is to provide better teaching and learning for dissertation students that operate around one of more of the following: (a) a single topic, (b) a specific research question, (c) a specific method or set of methods, (d) a specific approach to data analysis. The teaching and learning strategy for the cluster group is that it is provisioned by one member of staff who has expertise in the particular focus of the group and is paired with a less experienced member of staff, or two members of staff who are equally expert in compatible approaches. The result is that the students are well supported and the members of staff both benefit from the other's expertise and learn something. This may not be feasible at other

institutions, but having an agreed member of staff to mentor in qualitative supervision would work equally well.

Be honest with the student

Students do expect supervisors to be an expert, however, if an academic is venturing into a new method (or even a new topic area) then it is reasonable to share this information with the student. While some colleagues may be uncomfortable doing this for fear of damaging the expectation of expert knowledge, it is important for students to understand that academia is not static and that academics will venture into new methods and new topic areas. Supervisors new to qualitative methods will need to seek guidance at times and it will be necessary for them to own their own learning journey; rather than perceiving this as a negative it should be perceived as an indicator of engagement in professional development and a desire to learn new skills. This can actually be a really good way to create a positive role model, demonstrating to students that the learning journey is never complete and that supervisors are indeed fallible.

What information will students seek?

Students are likely (given our experience) to seek guidance on the three following areas; What do they need to get done and

when? How many participants they need? Which method should they use?

The dissertation is the largest piece of work that students will complete during their undergraduate programme and it is normal for a student to feel daunted at times. As previously mentioned, the time line for a qualitative project is likely to be different to a quantitative one as more time needs to be spent on the analytic stage, especially if there is data transcription involved. Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 70) provide a useful example of a timeline for a small qualitative project which would suit most undergraduate programmes; one of the authors of this paper has amended this timeline to suit the timings and deadlines of the undergraduate programme at their institution and has distributed this to students which has been well received. This is a quick task for supervisors to complete, and provides some structure for students to use when they are working independently.

With regards to the number of participants there is guidance in existing texts that should be used so that the students can provide an academic rationale for their decisions. One chief determinant is the specific methodology adopted: IPA studies tend to have samples (4-6), while in principle, GT studies

continue to sample incrementally until the point of 'theoretical saturation' has been reached, while a Discourse Analysis [DA] could be conducted very well with media data or just a single interview (depending on the research question). Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend that for small research projects utilising TA (such as an undergraduate project), 6-10 interviews or 2-4 focus groups would be appropriate, depending on the method of analysis. However, there is an increasingly diverse range of ways that undergraduate students can collect data for their dissertations, such as media data or story completion, and specific guidelines for these methods should be sought by the researchers.

There are a couple of points that can help supervisors who are new to working with qualitative methods. Firstly, it makes sense to employ a method that is familiar to the students, or at least similar to methods they have been taught, which is why it is important to understand what skills and knowledge they already have. The coding procedures of TA are often taught as foundational (Braun & Clarke 2013), and other methods such as IPA and GT have much in common with TA in this respect. It is possible for a student to utilise a methodology that is new to them in their dissertation, but this will require a lot of extra work and reading on their part which can be impractical.

Secondly, it is also sensible to adopt a method that is familiar to the supervisor (see earlier comments about reading around and exploring a specific method). These considerations are factors that should be taken into account when designing a feasible project (e.g. if the student and supervisor are both familiar with TA or IPA, then asking a research question about the functionality of language is not appropriate). Ultimately the best research method is one that best suits the research question, but understanding the methods will allow students and supervisors to work together to create a research question that can be answered well.

What resources would be useful to look at?

The following books are ones that the authors have used repeatedly, both in their own practice and in their recommended reading for students. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but will hopefully provide a useful starting point:

- 'Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology' by Sullivan and Forrester (2019) is a recent update to the 2012 (Forrester & Sullivan) edition that has been written by past and present TQP members. The book features chapters which analyse the same data set using different approaches (e.g. one chapter uses TA and

another IPA) which allows readers to better understand differences between qualitative methods.

- Sullivan, Gibson and Riley ('Doing Your Qualitative Psychology Project': 2012) is the only text that provides undergraduate dissertation students with a step by step guide to producing their own qualitative research project.
- 'Successful Qualitative Research' by Braun and Clarke (2013) is a detailed text that will support any student (of undergraduate level or beyond) when doing their research project, particularly if the student is utilising Braun and Clarke's inductive TA approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

All these resources offer a broad overview of qualitative methods for undergraduate purposes, as well as providing direction for further resources (e.g. readings related to a particular method).

Joining the Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMiP) Section is also a great way to find out more about qualitative methods; the bi-annual conference is a friendly and supportive space while the QMiP Bulletin regularly features work around and examples of undergraduate dissertations. Every year there is a QMiP prize for undergraduate dissertations which are featured

in the QMiP Bulletin and this is a wonderful source of inspiration that colleagues may wish to explore. More details about QMiP can be found here: https://www.bps.org.uk/member-microsites/qualitative-methods-psychology-section

Summary

In summary we would like colleagues who are venturing into supervising of qualitative methods to keep in mind three key points:

- *Do read around the research method.* If a research method is new then spend some time engaging with the literature where guidance and inspiration can be found.
- *Speak to colleagues.* It is really important to find out what students are being taught about qualitative methods and to find out what (if any) departmental guidance there may be specifically on qualitative research methods and whether any special ethics committee constraints may apply.
- *Enjoy the process.* Learning a new skill takes time, but hopefully supervising qualitative research projects will open up a new world of research and inspire future qualitative work.

Supervising undergraduate dissertations can be one of the best aspects of teaching and we hope that the above guidance and resources will make the process a little easier for those colleagues who are new to supervising qualitative projects.

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