Qualitative enlightenment following a journey to the dark side: Reflections on supervising a qualitative dissertation

Hilary McDermott, Abigail Liasi & Roger Newport

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PSYCHOLOGY as a discipline has been beset with debate between the opposing research paradigms; the quantitative paradigm based on positivism and the qualitative paradigm based on interpretivism and constructivism. The assumptions underpinning each of these paradigms lead to several differences beyond those which are based on philosophical and methodological debates (Sale et al., 2002). The two paradigms are associated with different journals, different language, different funding sources and different methods of investigation (ibid). Whilst the positivist paradigm can still be argued as being the dominant frame of reference in many disciplines (Sale et al., 2002), quantitative methods are not always the best method to use when studying some of the phenomena studied by social scientists, and it is on this basis that the prevalence of qualitative research within social sciences has grown significantly over the last few decades.

Developing student's confidence with qualitative research methods presents a challenge to many educators (Etheridge et al., 2017) and is even more of a challenge when the 'educator' themselves are unfamiliar with such methods. This paper offers a three-way reflective account of bringing one such colleague 'into the fold'; their journey to the 'dark side'. It documents the supervision journey of an established academic (RN) engaged in supporting a final year student (AL) in conducting a mixed methods dissertation research project. Both were subsequently supported by an experienced qualitative researcher (HM). This successful and collaborative exercise has led to the submission of the dissertation for publication and this paper offers a humorous, yet honest account of what we now regard as 'best practice'. Written reflections were solicited from RN and AL by HM. HM then read the reflections and verbatim quotes from the reflections have been used as the basis of this paper.

Despite the rise in popularity of qualitative methods in the discipline of psychology, there are a large number of researchers and teaching-focused academics who are unfamiliar with or have misconceptions about qualitative approaches (Labuschagne, 2003). RN exemplifies this in his narrative; *'I have always dismissed qualitative methods with a contemptuous wave of the hand; a wave of the hand designed to convey a mixture of pointlessness, worthlessness and (this is not a word) wishy-washiness'* (RN). How many qualitative researchers have come across similar attitudes from colleagues? Whilst the quality of qualitative teaching may have grown in recent years, this has not always been the case. Indeed, perhaps a lack of confidence in utilising the experiential approach among some colleagues lies in poor teaching in previous years. RN reflects on his own undergraduate learning experience; *'This has always been my view [about qualitative methods], from the moment poor Dr X tried to teach us qualitative methods back in 1992, when my friend and I looked at each other and said the 1990's equivalent of WTF?'* (RN).

Dominated by the positivist paradigm, qualitative methods were easily dismissed

and aspiring academics such as RN '*measured real things'* which (apparently) *'told us everything that we needed to know'*. An academic apprenticeship on such a basis left RN staunchly against qualitative methods '*So, that was my background in Quals. Didn't understand it, didn't rate it, didn't like it, didn't want anything to do with it.'* It left him with an impression that '*Thematic Analysis was no more than putting Quality Street wrappers into piles or sticking post-it notes on a table'* (RN).

Contemporary teaching of research methods includes both quantitative and qualitative methods and lecturers need to be able to support students' acquisition of qualitative research skills even if they do not themselves use these methods (Forrester & Koutsopoulou, 2008). This extends to the undergraduate dissertation which is a valued part of the undergraduate experience where supervision is an essential feature (Todd et al., 2004).

When RN was approached by a student (AL) wishing to undertake a mixed methods dissertation, this presented a challenge as RN reflects: '*Mixed methods? Quantitative and qualitative? Well, at least I half knew what was going on. I was still terrified by the mention of qualitative research* (RN)'. RN admits however that he *'was prepared to be more open about a qualitative approach. My new approach was partly because this student appeared to be a very good student and I was reasonably confident that she would be able to lead the way'* (RN). His opening gambit was an honest admission to his student, a little too honest maybe: '*I said that I had written down everything I knew about qualitative methods ("Oh great!" she said) and then I showed her a blank piece of paper; blank on both sides. I still feel a bit guilty about that'* (RN).

Having confidence in the dissertation supervisor is a major factor contributing to student satisfaction whilst undertaking the dissertation (Calvert & Casey, 2004; Todd et al., 2006) and is dependent on the expertise of the supervisor in the chosen research area and methodology (Wiggins et al., 2016). The dissertation student (AL) supervised by RN reflects on her additional concerns which resulted from RN's lack of experience;

> *'Our topic lent itself to a mixed methods design, which was a daunting proposition due to the workload of carrying out both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The added pressure of my supervisor not having a strong background in using qualitative methods, and so being unable to give me much guidance or feedback on this aspect, added to my concern'* (AL).

And so, RN embarked on supervising AL in a mixed methods study which examined the subjective experience of hand illusions. Whilst he had experience and knowledge of the topic area, qualitative methods were new to him and he was honest with the student about this lack of expertise from the start. AL was aware of RN's lack of experience with qualitative methods and despite her initial concerns she was confident that this could be managed: '*Despite this, I felt that I could undertake this qualitative research by myself as I had previous practical experience working with Thematic Analysis'* (AL).

Wiggins et al. (2016) argue that a mixed methods design demands even more of both student and supervisor, requiring competence in two methodological approaches. RN might not have had the experience in qualitative methods, but he did realise that qualitative methods might answer a long-standing question concerning his research *'Why do people laugh (at these illusions)?* Qualitative research answers very different questions from those addressed by quantitative research (Barbour, 2008) and RN explained that to date, he had not been able to address this question:

> *'It is worth pointing out at this stage that another driver for going ahead with the qualitative element was that I came to realise that it could answer a question that had been posed to me in front of a large audience 6 years previously. My research involves creating body illusions which often make people laugh, although*

> *this is not the intention of the research. As part of a public talk at the British Science Festival I showed several videos of my illusions. The first question I received from the audience was not about my research or its clinical application, but this: "Why did she laugh?" (this, in reference to one of the participants after having her hand disappeared). After showing a participant laughing and laughing at one particular illusion. I had to admit, in front of everyone, that I really did not know. As a result, 6 years later, I was suddenly very excited because the student wanted to run a mixed methods project to answer that very question'* (RN). He goes on to explain *'While quantitative methods might have been able to measure many aspects of laughter, such as duration, magnitude or even explosiveness it cannot measure the WHY. People laugh for many reasons, and not always because something is funny. Even resorting to Likert scales and statements interrogating the reason behind the laughter could not have hoped, a priori, to have captured the range and complexity of reasons'.*

Wiggins et al. (2016) identified that supervisors who lack experience in qualitative methods may not approach peers for support for fear of looking 'like an idiot' (p.11) and RN was acutely aware of his own academic ego:

> *'Asking for help is a big deal for someone with an ego the size of an academic. There was (is) a time when I would get very grumpy if a project student went to ask for help from a colleague, but on this occasion I could freely admit that I did not know enough – not something that comes naturally to your average psychologist. This is where the qualitative expert came in, metaphorically speaking; she worked on the floor below. Suddenly, I felt confident'* (RN).

RN's admission that seeking help was not easy for him raises important questions about how long-standing academics acquire new skills, but these are beyond the scope of the current paper. It may be that the academic 'ego' acts as a barrier to explicitly asking for help, RN didn't freely admit he needed help… instead, he sent his student!

To me, HM, who worked on the floor below. Following a meeting with AL, I was able to offer some reassurance that her research questions warranted a mixed methods approach and that Thematic Analysis was an appropriate analytic tool to employ to analyse her data in line with her research questions. AL utilised qualitative methods and quantitative methods to address her research aim. Qualitative methods allowed AL to understand the human experience whereas quantitative measures provided a way of measuring this experience. By distinguishing 'lived experience' from 'measure' allowed us to reconcile the phenomenon of study to its respective method and paradigm (Sale et al., 2002).

Proficient in a range of qualitative research methods, I was able to offer advice at the commencement of her dissertation, unaware of the importance of the 'journey' we would all take as a result of this work. Looking back, I realise that AL sought support for her dissertation from two established academics, yet neither of us could be considered an 'expert' in the area of her dissertation. RN knew about illusions but was new to qualitative methodology whereas I knew as much about 'illusion research' as RN knew about qualitative methods!

Undertaking a mixed methods dissertation therefore offered AL an opportunity to develop her independent research skills in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The situation highlighted that there was no single expert to support her work within the school. How did this unique situation of a student encountering two 'non-experts' facilitate (or not) her studies? AL was a motivated and able student; she reflects and remembers; '*I had to become an independent researcher and have more self-confidence and self-assurance'.*

To be honest, AL required very little initial guidance with her qualitative methods – this may be the result of her positive attitude to her own learning and development

as an independent researcher but it may also be due to a sound programme of research methods training offered within our school (qualitative and quantitative). AL was suitably equipped and prepared for autonomous learning. I didn't hear from her again that term.

AL however did find aspects of her dissertation challenging. Silén (2003) refers to these challenges as the periods of 'chaos' and 'cosmos' when students experience frustration whilst at the same time being stimulated by the learning situation which they find themselves in. AL recalls the major challenges she faced and how these challenges were met:

> *'During challenges within the qualitative parts of my dissertation I relied on peers that were using a similar method. This was very helpful as it not only supported and reassured me, but we also learned from each other, and were encouraged to look from different perspectives which ultimately made us better researchers'* (AL).

This emphasises the importance of incidental learning and the value of peer support in enhancing education and learning (Boud et al., 1999).

In supervision meetings, the 'expert' role was subsequently shared between RN and AL. RN provided guidance and expertise to AL in the area of illusions whilst AL provided guidance and justification to RN in qualitative analysis; *'I had to take on the roles of both teacher and student, which meant a lot more reading, and some trial and error. Pushing through this challenge benefitted me in becoming a more independent researcher and also improved my self-confidence and assurance by showing myself that I was competent enough to undertake a study at this level of complexity'* (AL). In many ways therefore, RN's lack of expertise in qualitative research enhanced AL's academic journey. From a constructionist's perspective (Carnell, 2007), this was an ideal leaning and teaching environment, and this should offer encouragement to many colleagues who are reluctant to supervise methods which are outside of their own research comfort zone. We recognise that not all students will be as engaged as AL and where this may be the case, colleagues may suggest additional strategies to the student which support the development of self-regulation.

Our main motivation for writing this paper is to encourage quantitative colleagues engaged in supervising dissertations to consider the 'dark side' and engage in a journey to enlightenment. RN's journey with AL was successful and his 'non-expert' supervision allowed her to develop as an independent researcher. AL submitted her dissertation in May 2019.

Convinced of the utility power of qualitative methods, RN wanted more, and this was where his 'turn to the dark side' finally gathered momentum;

> *'I wanted to write this project up for publication, so I used the student's report as an initial framework and set to work writing the quantitative part of the paper. It was not until I came to the qualitative aspects however, that I realised that I had to finally take the plunge. I had reanalysed the quantitative project data as would be expected for a journal publication so the situation sort of demanded that I do the same for the qualitative data. I had spoken to the expert, who said words, but I needed to understand it for myself if I was going to try to publish this'* (RN).

The 'expert' consulted was HM, who provided a framework for the qualitative aspects of the study. This led to RN further constructing his own knowledge in relation to qualitative methods and he reflects:

> *'I found Bengtsson (2016) and Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017) particularly helpful as starting points so that I could begin to understand the processes and terminology involved. I painstakingly taught myself (sorry Dr X) and worked through the analysis. Every now and then I sense checked with the expert – especially whether I was using the right words to*

> *describe what I had done. Bit by bit, it all came together. What really surprised me, was that it was AMAZING!'* (RN).

A three way 'expert, almost-expert' authorship triad commenced between HM, RN and AL which offered further opportunity for development for AL:

> *'Authoring the final paper was a novel experience and it took time for me to get used to reviewing and critiquing my supervisor's work. During the dissertation process there is a power imbalance, and despite being co-authors, I always felt this remained, as it was hard for me to get out of the student-supervisor mindset'* (AL).

RN's own experience of chaos and cosmos (Silén, 2003) resulted in a full turn to the dark side. HM takes full credit for the creation of another convert to the power of qualitative research. RN openly states:

> *'The data [can I call it data?] answered the question (Why do people laugh?) in a way that I could never have achieved through quantitative methods. It worked beautifully. The analyses revealed why people laugh in a way that made sense, connected with reality and fitted with existing theories about laughter. The paper has been submitted and, I think, is a powerful, innovative and thought-provoking piece which has moved my understanding of my own research on immeasurably. I have to admit that I am hooked and have persuaded two of my current crop of project students to employ mixed methods. ME! Encouraging others to collect qualitative data. I would never have thought it possible. Perhaps, one day, I will be able to say: some of my best friends are qualitative psychologists. I am looking forward to that day'* (RN).

We hope to have demonstrated that there are tangible benefits to science and education when researchers (people) put aside their preconceived ideas and egos and accept each other for the strengths that they bring in the pursuance of making something better. Look out for our paper, '"That's Really Weird!" The Funny Thing About Body Illusions: A Mixed Methods Investigation of Subjective Experience Across Different Realities', it really was a labour of love from what was initially a marriage of convenience!

We hope this paper encourages others to follow our example and in that, we offer the following advice. Ask yourself: what would you do if you didn't have an ego? Make the effort to learn; do not expect someone else to do it for you. You should embrace change, be a butterfly, not a caterpillar. Better still, to borrow and potentially misuse a quote from S.P. Marshall: 'Adding wings to caterpillars does not create butterflies – it creates awkward and dysfunctional caterpillars. Butterflies are created through transformation.' (Marshall, 1996, p.5). You can't stick qualitative research on a quantitative researcher; you need to become a qualitative researcher, even if only for the lifespan of a butterfly. But, like a butterfly, you can always lay some eggs for next year's project students.

Authors

Hilary McDermott (PhD)
School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University

Abigail Liasi (BSc)
School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University
Department of Psychology, School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences, University of Edinburgh

Roger Newport (PhD)
School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough

Correspondence
H.J.McDermott@lboro.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0002-2809-9888

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