# Imagining a vibrant [post]Qualitative Psychology via 'Experimentation'

## Brendan Gough

*Leeds School of Social Sciences, Leeds Beckett University, UK*

ABSTRACT

In this article I reflect on – and celebrate - the increasing eclecticism and creativity within Qualitative Psychology. Diverse forms of hybrid qualitative research, knowledge production and dissemination are referenced, including performative, fictional and digital iterations, and the potential for participant-centred, co-produced, democratic practices is promoted. The challenges posed by 'post-qualitative' thinkers are also touched on, reinforcing the importance of 'conceptual experimentation' as well as researcher humility. My reflections are realised via an imagined research project involving my father, where multiple methods and possibilities are conveyed while experimenting with textual and reflexive interjections. The final section positions Qualitative Psychology as responsive to social issues, including the Covid-19 pandemic and male mental health, and points to inter-sectionality, interdisciplinarity and impact as key drivers for change in qualitative research and, potentially, the discipline of Psychology.

In the last few years I have been toying with the notion of interviewing my dad. My research is generally concerned with masculinities and men's health, and I think he would make an interesting 'case study'. Also: he's getting older and there is a lot I don't know about his life, especially the early years. It would be a way of connecting with him – our interactions to date have been limited as we live in different countries and don't see each other very often. We are also separated by social class – while he has remained in the working class neighbourhood of Belfast he has lived in since the early 1970s, I moved to Yorkshire nearly 30 years ago and live a more middle-class life.

But, informative and rewarding though qualitative interviewing can be, I want to do more than a standard interview. In fact, I want to go beyond a conventional interview approach to consider various methods of data collection and dissemination, to take advantage of creative, participatory and digital research practices now at the disposal of qualitative researchers; in short, to 'experiment'. I use 'experimentation' in two ways: firstly, for me this is a novel, 'experimental' way of writing about qualitative research in the spirit of post-qualitative inquiry (of which more later) and, secondly, I present an imagined 'experimental' research project which plays with some method conventions. I engage with recent developments within and beyond Qualitative Psychology (QP) and consider these in light of 'the dad project'. In so doing, I hope to intimate the possibilities for doing more interesting and engaged

qualitative research which does not (necessarily) adhere to established boundaries and conventions. In my mind it is addressed to the qualitative research community in Psychology and sister disciplines. I start with a very conventional interview-based case study proposal before incorporating a mix of methods and concepts, a collage of diverse elements to extend and enrich data collection, analysis, representation – and deconstruction.

### Interview scenarios

Interviews with dad would capture something tangible – voice recordings/transcripts that the family could access and enjoy for years. I also think he would be a good storyteller – entertaining, candid and possibly controversial. Although – he might be wary of being interviewed, perhaps wondering (with some justification) if this proposal was prompted by intimations of his mortality. An interview study such as this may well deliver a rich portrait capturing key tones and textures of my dad's life – and there are many excellent published interview-based case studies - but it is hardly experimental. Since there are now many options for conducting qualitative interviews, it would seem churlish not to consider alternative interview arrangements. Starting with the location of the interview, it need not be at home, and I suspect my dad would prefer his local pub if asked. He would certainly be comfortable there,

and the pints of Guinness would undoubtedly relax him and calm any anxieties about being interviewed by his son. This scenario would, in turn, cause me to wonder if I should join him in drinking pints – it might well be considered rude not to (especially in an Irish setting?) – at the very least I would buy the drinks. But: do I keep up with him, pint-for-pint (his capacity is notorious)? Might I risk a lack of professionalism by drinking too much? If it came down to it, I think I would compromise with a few pints for myself, supped slowly, while he carries on at his own pace. Other possibilities open for interviewing dad would not be suitable. For example, mobile interviews, such as walking with him in the local area, would not work as his mobility is restricted by various health conditions. In theory I could interview him anytime via technology, but digital video interviews are precluded because he doesn't use a cell phone or laptop. A telephone interview could be accomplished but he doesn't like talking on the phone.

Back to the pub. I could use items such as photographs to facilitate the interview, as many qualitative researchers do these days, for example using photovoice with older participants (e.g. Phoenix, 2010). Or, even better perhaps, use the salient pint of Guinness as an aide memoire to encourage his reflections on young adulthood when he first started drinking with friends, and then exploring other life phases and significant events via the prism of drinking e.g. in relation to his (short) period of employment, married life, parenting, unemployment, marital breakdown, living alone, grandfatherhood and deteriorating health. It might work as a way of deflecting from any nervousness on his part about me 'prying' into his personal world, a way of facilitating disclosure while appearing not to? Using significant 'artefacts' to stimulate interview encounters in this way has been recommended by others (Sheridan and Chamberlain, 2011). Bringing photographs with us to the pub might also help with providing a structure and focus instead of 'just talking', which many men seem to eschew (see Seidler et al., 2016). Photographs could be selected by dad in advance perhaps, or we could have one interview session based in his flat going through photo albums deploying a 'photovoice' approach.

A series of interviews then, some in the pub, some at home? These are the two settings which matter – he doesn't go anywhere else. It would be interesting to contrast the 'data' emanating from public and private spaces. In the pub there are of course other drinkers, mostly men in this case, and there are risks of being overheard, interrupted, distracted and so on; at home, just the two of us, but perhaps a little intimidating for that and requiring props to help us along (photos, tea, biscuits, maybe more Guinness?) – he has always been most comfortable in the pub, as are many men from his class, age band and social location (including his friends). But if I am to understand my father more fully, perhaps I need to interview the significant others in his life: friends, children (my siblings), siblings (my uncles) etc. Each would contribute valuable insights I'm sure into different life phases and contexts, complementing his own account and helping me crystallise some narrative threads and key turning points. These interviewees could also be engaged in different locations of their choosing, drawing on pertinent items (photos etc.) where preferred, with the option of (Covid-safe) online video interviews offered via Skype or Zoom for example (see Archibald et al., 2019), or more text-based options like email interviews (e.g. Gibson, 2017). Or, some participants might prefer to offer written accounts, responding to set (open) questions – something my dad and many of his friends would never consider.

Beyond interviews, there are many options for gathering rich data. I could, with permission, record conversations between dad and his friends as they drink their pints at the bar while observing the interactions and making notes about interpersonal dynamics and salient environmental cues. I could join in as a 'participant observer' and compare notes with those from my more detached observations. It would be interesting to note how joint activities (darts; pool; watching televised sport) are enacted in real time, how 'banter' is performed and policed, and how different actors are positioned (bar staff, women, younger drinkers…). All still very conventional in methodological terms.

## Getting creative

Based on the transcribed conversations and interview data, I might perform different or hybrid forms of analysis. In recent years there has been a trend towards mixing qualitative methods – a departure from mixed method designs using quantitative and qualitative approaches (wherein the qualitative aspect is often secondary). This move towards 'pluralistic' approaches reaching across traditions and procedures signals a relaxing of taut boundaries between established methodologies. There are now many examples of applying diverse modes of analysis to [the same] qualitative research texts in order to generate analyses which are more nuanced, multi-layered and insightful than would be attained by deploying only one approach. Pluralism in qualitative research has been pioneered by Frost and colleagues in the UK (e.g. Frost, 2013; Shaw and Frost, 2015). In fact, over the years different researchers have sought to incorporate experiential and discursive elements using different combinations; for example in the 1990s and early 2000s some social psychologists in the UK experimented with mixing discourse analytic and psychoanalytic modes (see e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 2010 [plus commentaries]; Gough, 2004; Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Frosh, 1999). This kind of 'dual focus' project (see Willig et al., 2017) can be fraught – blending two diverse and possibly incommensurable methodologies may well displease both camps, something I have experienced with reviews of 'psycho-discursive' articles. Perhaps a safe position is to construe different modes as offering complementary levels or domains of analysis. Notwithstanding possible tensions between distinct approaches, qualitative researchers today seem less precious about adhering to one methodology and more curious to engage with different approaches in order to generate more 'holistic' interpretations which incorporate multiple dimensions (stories, discourses, experiences etc.). This openness to explore diverse methods aligns with a creative turn within the QP community, a willingness to engage with alternative ways of conducting and representing research, often facilitated by the affordances of digital media (Chamberlain et al., 2018).

So, I might construct a poem which attempts to distil various elements of ageing class-bound masculinities, or [re]produce a playscript depicting different, even conflicting, masculine voices – or both. If I had the funding, I might go further and ask an artist to transform the data into a painting, or photograph, or even a comic strip. Family and friends might be asked to contribute anecdotes and photographs, comment on draft versions of analysis, whether rendered as poems, drama scripts or artwork, and suggest avenues of dissemination beyond academia. In such a scenario, questions about methodological identity and rigour fade into the background and the key challenge for the researcher is to tell (or perform) a story which is faithful to the 'data' in whatever form/s are deemed to be most suitable, evocative and engaging.

There is growing momentum for more creative, arts-based methods which move beyond conventions of data collection, analysis and reporting, for example drawing on poetic, dramatic and visual genres. A guest-edited double issue of the journal Qualitative Research in Psychology (Chamberlain et al., 2018) showcased a range of contributions, drawing on fictional, poetic, photographic, musical and theatrical genres (see also special issue of Qualitative Methods in Psychology bulletin, British Psychological Society, autumn 2020). For example, Douglas and Carless (2018) reflect on how writing and performing music (guitar; voice), inspired by research encounters and immersion in data, can bring to life a person's story – often to the delight and approval of the research

participant[s] in question. They present one such response from 'Sonja' to a research-informed song:

> 'An ache erupted, an unexpected shockwave, a surge of raw emotion no longer contained. Except it wasn't electricity in the heavens it was Sonja banging both hands on the table, unable to hold back a guttural sob. "That's exactly what it's like!" She collected herself, waited for her tears to subside, to finish what she was determined to say: "That is exactly what it's like and no-one understands'."

I wonder if my dad would enjoy having his life story performed? Obviously, I would need to check in advance, but I do doubt it. I sense he would prefer some kind of pre-recorded DVD featuring significant photographs and stories presented by friend and family members, perhaps set to a soundtrack including Billy Joel and Frank Sinatra, which he could view at his leisure in his own home. Beyond research participant responses, Carless and Douglas (2011) note that research-based (musical) performances can also impact others, for example at academic conferences, or while viewing performances which have been uploaded online, where many report an emotional engagement with the piece (see Carless and Douglas, 2011). I think friends and family members would appreciate my father's life story captured on DVD, whether watching en masse or in private.

Many contributors to the Chamberlain et al. (2018) special issue extol this virtue of arts-based dissemination – a capacity to arrest the senses, to provoke an embodied empathetic state normally beyond the purview of traditional academically rendered research presentation. The editors of the special issue make the point that, with a few notable exceptions, arts-inspired methods are conspicuous by their absence in Psychology, and express a hope that the special issue moves more qualitative researchers to explore the possibilities of this terrain. Beyond Psychology, however, established qualitative research practices have been dismantled long ago to enable creative, playful and sometimes anarchic engagements with the world. Perhaps this 'experimental' approach is best embodied by the interdisciplinary Qualitative Inquiry community, as evidenced by contributions to the established journal Qualitative Inquiry (QI) and the longstanding (2005-) annual conference hosted by Norman Denzin and colleagues at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois: the International Qualitative Inquiry conference (ICQI) - https://icqi.org/- although now there are international offshoots e.g. in Europe. A brief look through the QI journal archive reveals a number of special issues which illustrate the centrality of arts-informed research to this community e.g. 'The Art of Life History: Novel Approaches, Future Directions' (Lanfordet al., 2019); 'Work/Think/Play in Qualitative and Post-Qualitative Inquiry (Hughes et al., 2018); 'Terrorism and Hate in Orlando, America: Poetic and Performative Responses' (Alexander and Weems, 2017). This performative turn presents a postmodern but also humanistic orientation to knowledge creation and dissemination, showcasing multiple, shifting and contradictory meanings but also generating affective investments and identifications from others. It also resonates with current expectations among research funders and research assessment panels for impactful research and user engagement, and arguably psychologists are well placed to undertake participant-centred research designed to illuminate and improve the wellbeing of diverse communities.

### Going 'post-qualitative'?

As well as methods experimentation, there is conceptual experimentation as promoted by post-qualitative scholars mainly situated outside Psychology. In mainstream qualitative research, the standard analytic approach is inductive, with 'theory' coming later, if at all. Key thinkers have been wondering whether striving for meaning or engagement is fundamentally fraught or misguided. The 'post-qualitative' turn (see St. Pierre, 2011; Lather, 2016), predicated on the wider 'post-humanist' (or 'new materialist') movement which critiques aspirations towards generating knowledge or gaining access to 'experience', effectively dismisses the pretensions of established (qualitative) methods and human endeavour aimed at distilling meaning. From this standpoint, mainstream qualitative research practices such as coding are construed as pointless and unethical – pointless because meaning is multi-valent (perhaps elusive) and cannot be captured by one analyst, and unethical because interpretations are imposed on others (research participants) in ways that could be designated imperialist. Instead, there is a philosophical engagement with the world, a call to conceptualise the operation of material sites and assemblages into which human agency disappears. As such, post-qualitative thinking goes beyond social constructionism to foreground the material rather than the discursive, to insist that the semiotic and the 'real' are bound together.

How might I apply this stance to the 'dad project'? Which concepts spring to mind when contemplating my relationship with my dad within and beyond this imagined research? In the past I have dabbled with deploying psychoanalytic concepts to qualitative data, including a father-son relationship (Gough, 2003a, b), and for some reason the psychoanalytic is inserting itself at this juncture. A hermeneutics of suspicion looms large, conjuring several questions:

o Am I trying (unconsciously) to defend against my anxiety about his (future) demise, capturing his life while I still can and storing it in/as data, preserving him ad infinitum?

o Am I secretly trying to repair a broken relationship through the medium of qualitative research/engagement? (We haven't ever really been close or done many father-son activities, a source of regret for me [and possibly him?] and something I feel should be rectified if at all possible). The three boys (me and my two brothers) wanted to take him to New York for his 60th but although we could see he was interested, he doesn't like to travel (don't think he's ever been on a plane): a wasted opportunity.

o Am I trying to show off, unwittingly managing our relationship from an expert position and desiring his approval? (I suspect he is proud of my achievements but might want confirmation via this process).

Perhaps these 'motivation questions' are best asked of me by another? Certainly, these types of questions provoke further anxiety – this paper is now delving into more personal waters, straying from the safety of participant-focused data, risking exposure, vulnerability, uncertainty. Do I want my colleagues, my family, the wider world to know about this personal stuff? And, if I ever complete the dad project, will I elaborate and publicise these types of reflections? I remain unsure, this is fairly new territory for me. I have written about reflexivity before, and written reflexively (e.g. Gough, 2003a, b), but have always been wary of potential charges of excess, narcissism, tedium. And, in a way, a post-qualitative 'analysis' might well wander off topic, showcasing flights of fancy and wordplay far removed from, or recognisable as, approximations of participant experiences. Oh wait, some dad fragments are escaping:

## The black stuff

Guinness: A real [mans?] pint. Swallowed en masse by Irishmen for decades, in the pub away from the women and kids. 'A pint of plain is your only man'. Enjoying the craic. Talking politics, sport; talking shite. Coming home drunk, telling stupid jokes to the kids (some were quite funny to be fair). Desperate to go out again the next day 'for a cure'. Displaced at home/ at home in the local, despite the occasional scuffles, arguments, tensions with the boys. Dropping by the pub to see him a while ago, sitting at the bar like Norm from Cheers, with his mates around him, he looked content.

## 'Bear'

Nobody calls him Brendan. He is simply 'Bear'. Apparently, he looked like a teddy bear when he was a kid with curly ginger hair. But he's a bear you wouldn't want to mess with. His (drunken) stories of scraps and scrapes in the 'wild west' were no doubt exaggerated (breaking a pool cue over some guy's head saying 'get this man an ambulance'... 'or a priest' [for the last rites]), but we sensed the truth wasn't too far away. Not a tall man but stocky, with a 'street' attitude and hardman pose. But a softer, albeit gruff bear with the grandkids.

## Home alone

The day mum kicked him out it was snowing, like some dramatic scene from a movie. We had all had enough. After some dodgy stays in a squalid halfway house ('a nailbomb would have cleaned it up'), he ended up with a flat up the hill from our house. Initially he looked after himself a bit, went on walks etc. but living alone with TV sport and old movies (mostly westerns and war films) soon jarred. He can't really cook either. So, to the pub each morning, get a few pints in early, bar food, maybe a game of pool, then back to the flat late afternoon after about 15 pints or so. Sleep. Repeat next day – until his body tells him to take a break. Go off it for a few months, recover home alone – until the boredom-induced thirst returns and the pub beckons again.

These 'fragments' were not planned (honest). I'm trying to be experimental, inserting some hopefully illuminating extra/other elements into the text, marked by a different font. Or: the fragments are writing themselves via my body, my memories, my unconscious identifications ('I' am not in charge, merely a vessel for words and meanings outwith my conscious intentions). Is this what 'Reviewer 2' wanted when requesting that I flesh out this creative, post-qual stuff, ha! But I'm learning that this approach to writing – a mix of free association, patience, and permission (from Reviewer 2, the editor, and other [post] qual peers) – can be liberating and can (possibly) be enlightening. It requires time, slowness - it is clearly more rewarding to research and write more slowly, allowing ideas and methods to develop over time, rather than adhere rigidly to narrow parameters for quick results – an argument that has gained traction in recent years with publications like 'The Slow Professor' (Berg and Seeber, 2016).

Back to the fragments: scenes of drinking, fighting, 'boys being boys' – but also perhaps a hint of vulnerability here and there, a sense of homelessness barely expressed? Moving between different modes of masculinity, traditional and modern, with (indirect) peer support from drinking pals ('We'll always look after him, don't worry', one said to me when I visited the pub once). Last time I got the barman to take a photo of us on my iPad – should I include that here??? If so, do I ask his permission? I don't think he would care about the photo being included, he might actually be quite chuffed, interpreting this as a sign of affection. As

I get older maybe there is a softening, an openness to revisit the father-son relationship, to bridge or at least recognise the gaps, if only in writing if not in actuality. And: I am imagining my own relationship with my son into the future, hoping (anticipating) that we will remain close (although we have had our own ups and downs)?

Before now, the notion of texts writing themselves rather than being carefully crafted by the author I construed as an interesting postmodern thesis ('death of the author' etc.), if not something I had ever fully *experienced*. Of course, manuscripts go through different versions and are [co-]created, and this can be a time-consuming, tricky and even fraught enterprise. Now I am actually experiencing and experimenting with a 'post-human' approach to writing, trying to dispense with authorial control and letting the text emerge through me, I can grasp the power of that view of writing (or being written). However, I think it would be wrong to allow 'wild' writing to run riot without imposing some structure or map for the reader (and oneself); otherwise the text could become impenetrable, vague, even puerile. Boring, I know, but balance is importance: openness to experimentation but closing things down after a certain point, forgoing convention but imposing some kind of recognisable format, a both/and approach.

I do not pretend to grasp the intricacies of post-qualitative theory, but it seems to embed human activity, including (qualitative) research activity, within networks, structures and configurations which exceed and disrupt human intentions, practices and projects. It is the nonhuman

which is afforded agency, while humans are reduced to sites of embodied affect within unfathomable, dynamic systems. All rather dispiriting for enthusiastic and passionate qualitative researchers determined to make a difference or at least generate insights into a phenomenon of interest! On the other hand, perhaps a timely and sobering injunction for qualitative researchers to rein in any pretensions concerning researcher 'expertise', to take care in offering knowledge claims, and to incorporate into their analyses corporeal (material) dimensions as far as possible. I guess it may mean moving beyond conventional notions of reflexivity to encompass a more conceptual version, embracing theoretical ideas which challenge and undermine univocal expert interpretations.

Post-qualitative provocations continue to be debated and challenged, including (recently) within QP; there is a neat critical overview provided by Brinkmann (2017), for example, while Monforte and Smith (2020) offer a 'creative nonfiction' to articulate post-qualitative complexities and contradictions. The post-qualitative stance[s] is certainly an intervention which obliges qualitative researchers to critically reflect on widespread conventional assumptions and practices, and although it may encourage some to dispense with methods altogether in favour of conceptual gymnastics, this is by no means a necessary or productive pathway. In fact, a thoroughgoing post-qualitative theoretical approach to the world could become an elitist endeavour, proving inaccessible to many through obscure terminology and shifting textual formats. It is interesting that this dismissal of traditional qualitative research is offered at the juncture when it is more accepted, published and mature as a field and when manifold methods, designs and intersections are promoted. Rather than belittle and disregard 'mainstream' qualitative methods, surely we must advocate a re-imagined qualitative research programme informed but not cowed by post-qualitative agitators, embracing a pragmatic, ethical vision which revivifies the human and affirms the qualitative orientation towards meaningful engagement with the world (see Brinkmann, 2017). For a contemporary QP, a both/and stance can be advocated whereby traditional practices can be retained, but where possible and appropriate reconfigured, enlivened and stretched by new ideas which challenge premature, narcissistic or naïve formulations.

**Making an impact**

As (qualitative) researchers, we are increasingly compelled to produce work which makes a difference to communities, whether improving wellbeing, social justice, access to resources etc. Working in these new creative ways will often mean collaborating with colleagues from other disciplines; again, pressing psychological and social issues of our time require multi-disciplinary co-operation and interdisciplinary thinking.

Thinking about the dad project, there are a few contemporary issues that spring to mind. The obvious one is the one that has affected everyone: Covid-19. My dad is a vulnerable older person (aged 76), with numerous underlying conditions, and so is susceptible to contracting the virus. He has actually just had his first jab in the first wave of vaccinations in the UK (February 2021). Also, lockdowns have meant pub closures and hence being stuck at home, without the company of drinking friends, depriving him of an important source of support and potentially impacting his mental health (more of which later).

Recent high profile journal articles from psychologists and mental health professionals make a plea for a joined up approach involving diverse scholars, stakeholders and patient groups – with qualitative research methods invoked as central for capturing patient experiences, for example in the British Journal of Psychology:

*Psychologists are well positioned to collect valuable qualitative data concerning people's relevant experiences, perspectives and practices associated with COVID-19, which could inform psychology-based interventions to improve wellbeing and social cohesion. Multiple participant-centred qualitative research methods can be rapidly deployed to elicit first hand accounts from members of different communities, including (online)*

*interviews, focus groups and qualitative questionnaires, focusing on the psychological and social impact* (O'Connor et al., 2020).

Initially the call is for 'rapid' research, given the urgent and ongoing impact of the pandemic, but more creative methods are also being applied to this unprecedented situation, beyond interviews and (qualitative) questionnaires (see also Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). For example, Mike Ward, a UK sociologist, has initiated a 'CoronaDiaries' project, soliciting contributions in myriad forms:

*In these changing and challenging times, I am looking for participants to document and keep a record of life experiences over the coming months. This project is based in part on the mass observations studies that were conducted before, during and after World War Two.* http://www.massobs.org.uk/*Your own CoronaDiary may take whatever form of expression you like, but could include: Handwritten notebooks Word processed diaries Video diaries and digital recordings Reflective pieces Scholarly papers Blogs/Wikis/Vlogs Social media posts/photos/videos [Instagram/Facebook/Twitter/Snapchat/Tik Tok/Whatsapp/YouTube] Artwork, poems, songs or other creative expressions, Postcards And everything and anything else in between which documents the ongoing daily life at a time of great change.*

https://es.britsoc.co.uk/bsaCommentary/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CoronaDiaries_call.pdf.

Also, members of the public are documenting their pandemic experiences in myriad ways, ripe for psychologists to gather together and interpret. Another new project involves experiences of what has become known as 'long Covid', where patients endure myriad symptoms over time affecting major organs, energy levels and concentration - members of the public have been invited to share their stories via a dedicated website. Launched in July 2020 by nurse-researcher Jane Ireson, the site has attracted over 70 stories to date, mostly UK-based and featuring images as well as text: https://covid19-recovery.org/stories-category/stories/ The data provide rich narratives documenting individual struggles with diverse symptoms and will shed light on key Covid-19-related physical and psychological issues.

But for those unwilling or unable to engage with the digital world – like my dad – more conventional projects are required, involving talking rather than posting or vlogging. Again, it is important to state that in advocating for more experimentation in QP I am not suggesting that conventional qualitative interview approaches are necessarily problematic or should be discarded. And as noted above, any interview-type research would work best if conducted with sensitivity to local environments and participant preferences. On our brief Christmas catch-up over the telephone he jokingly characterised Covid-19 as heralding 'the end of the world'. With the pub closed indefinitely and being confined to barracks, was he referring to the end of *his* world? He didn't appear fearful of the virus, but maybe this was bravado? Perhaps these naturally occurring phone calls with his kids would be worth recording, transcribing and analysing, attending especially to moments of ostensible vulnerability. Certainly when he is cooped up in the flat with little contact from friends and the occasional short visit from one of the kids who live locally, there is a family concern with his wellbeing – we prefer it when he is in the pub, where he is happiest.

Male mental health is another pertinent issue to bear in mind, especially during the pandemic. It is well known that the suicide rate for men is three-four times higher than that for women (e.g. Oliffe et al., 2011), that traditional notions of masculinity may constrain many men in coping with psychological problems and seeking help (e.g. Gough and Novikova, 2020), and that men from disadvantaged communities are more at risk (e.g. Griffith et al., 2019). My dad ticks a lot of boxes here: living in an economically deprived neighbourhood which has witnessed sectarian conflict, unemployed for most of his working life, enduring various medical complaints, socialised to be a 'hard man' and to eschew vulnerability, and so on. He would never consider seeing a 'shrink' – it is

difficult enough to get him to visit the physician. He has always been uncomfortable around 'feelings', preferring to talk about sport, politics etc. He opens up a bit when drunk, sometimes declaring his love for his family and lamenting the home he once inhabited. And, perhaps like many 'traditional' men, he is more affectionate and soft with his grandkids than he was with his kids. He reminds me a bit of 'Jay' from the US series 'Modern Family' – conventionally masculine, giving family and friends a hard time generally, but experiencing moments of vulnerability and emotional expression.

So, how might we intervene to support him with his wellbeing? We know from recent qualitative intervention projects that mental health promotion programmes that are co-designed with community members, avoid medical terminology, prioritise camaraderie and shared interests can be effective in addressing poor mental health in men. A good example is the Mens' Sheds initiative (e.g. https://menssheds.org.uk/) which brings older, isolated men together in order to improve their well-being. Broadly, they are a form of community-based mental health provision (although not presented as such) that taps into masculinity norms concerning pragmatism, work, homosociality (i.e. social interactions between men) and humour. Such initiatives characterize a shoulder-to-shoulder rather than face-to-face approach, where men share their emotions indirectly in the context of performing an activity (e.g. carpentry) (see Ballinger et al., 2009). Could my dad's drinking community be perceived in this salutogenic light, with the pub being the 'shed' where male friendships are forged and a form of comfort provided? Certainly, some interview research with older male drinkers confirms the pub as a source of homosocial support, something to be balanced against the health risks associated with (excess) consumption of alcohol (Emslie et al., 2013). We have tried before to advise moderation, but he is only ever 'on' or 'off' – drinking copiously or abstaining altogether. We are resigned to this situation, it is too late to change this pattern, so although his physical health may well be compromised by the huge number of alcohol units taken in, his mental health is well served in the company of his peers.

## Final remarks

The deployment of qualitative research methods, whether established or creative, analogue or digital, or some combination thereof, to understand and intervene in prominent social and health issues, as in the examples cited above, highlights the (potential) power of QP. The wealth of options for qualitative researchers is vast, from 'post-qualitative' sensibilities toward material-semiotic assemblages and decentred affect sites, to semi-structured interviews and transcript coding – and all manner of performative, digital and visual methods in between – is to be cherished. In my own career I have moved from standard qualitative interviews and focus groups to analysing online forum data, vlogs and social media content (carried along by students and colleagues), and have been involved in projects where research participants have been central to co-designing the research and any ensuing interventions. I think QP has reached a mature position where methodological differences and squabbles are less important than working across boundaries (methodological, conceptual, disciplinary) to pursue research questions and to engage with contemporary issues, whether raising awareness of marginalised voices or impacting social policy and practice in key areas such as inequalities and climate change. A turn towards eclecticism implies a freedom from rigid styles or positions, an attitude of openness and experimentation which can only enrich research practices and offer analyses which are multi-textured and resonant. This also implies a move away from prescriptive quality criteria so enable appropriate, context-bound judgements to be made (see Parker, 2004; Smith and McGannon, 2018).

The contemporary scene of pluralism, pragmatism and performativity chimes with wider calls from research councils, government departments, NGOs and charities for research which is user-centred and impactful – helping to improve lives and communities, foster debate and change perspectives. There is now scope if not encouragement for research design and dissemination to be democratic and inclusive, engaging and pertinent by, for example, being co-designed or co-produced. Of course, creative and participant-centred research projects often require huge amounts of resource, and many researchers may not have access to (much) funding and may not have the time or energy to commit to such demanding projects. There is no easy solution here, but perhaps experimental qualitative research can start small, as in the case study imagined in this paper, and be fostered over time, managed alongside other commitments and deadlines, and supported by the wider community of qualitative researchers with conferences, workshops and informal networks. Although QP remains a minority sport within a discipline enchanted by neuroscience and brain scans, the community is growing in confidence with support from professional body associations and from colleagues across the social sciences and humanities, and increased demand for qualitatively-driven participant-centred research and knowledge production, including research co-designed and co-produced from within marginalised communities and cultures (see Connell et al., 2017). In sum, the global QP community radiates optimism, creativity and commitment to inclusive, ethical, participatory practices and offers opportunities for professional fulfilment and social engagement. It may even help to transform the discipline of Psychology into a more democratic, humane and reflexive enterprise.

But the final words should probably be reserved for the dad project. Obviously for other (imagined) qualitative research projects the 'sample' would not be so circumscribed and researchers would be largely interviewing unknown others. Unlike the dad project, the researcher might be entering new worlds, with no shared history or familiarity between parties. If other researchers were to interview my dad, would they feel comfortable in his pub environment? Would they understand his accent, appreciate all his references and idioms? Might they be able to elicit material that I might not because they are more removed (don't people often prefer to tell their personal stories to strangers, or therapists?); some of the 'baggage' between me and my dad might get in the way after all (different politics, memories, attributions etc.). These are open questions, and perhaps an interesting extension of the dad project would involve another researcher collecting data in parallel, in ethical ways agreed by all involved, which would then offer complementary and challenging interpretations and directions. Although perhaps this option would detract from the personal nature of the imagined project, the psychodynamic dimensions at play and the hope for an enriched father-son relationship. I suspect all qualitative researchers will harbour their own fantasy projects and what working on this paper has taught me is that the act of writing experimentally about the shape of such projects can be fulfilling, invigorating and challenging – and may actually culminate in the project being realised (watch this space).

## Credit author statement

As sole author of this manuscript I am responsible for all sections [100% contribution].

## Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## References

Alexander, B.K., Weems, M.E., 2017. June 12, 2016: terrorism and hate in Orlando, America—poetic and performative responses. Qual. Inq. 23 (7), 483–487.

Archibald, M.M., Ambagtsheer, R.C., Casey, M.G., Lawless, M., 2019. Using Zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. Int. J. Qual. Methods. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919874596.

Ballinger, M.L., Talbot, L.A., Verrinder, G.K., 2009. More than a place to do woodwork: a case study of a community-based Men's Shed. J. Mens Health 6 (1), 20–27.

Berg, M., Seeber, B.K., 2016. The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy. University of Toronto Press.

Brinkmann, Svend, 2017. Humanism after posthumanism: or qualitative psychology after the "posts". Qual. Res. Psychol. 14 (2), 109–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1282568.

Carless, D., Douglas, K., 2011. What's in a song? How songs contribute to the communication of social science research. Br. J. Guid. Counsell. 39 (5), 439–454.

Chamberlain, K., McGuigan, K., Anstiss, D., Marshall, K., 2018. A change of view: arts-based research and psychology. Qual. Res. Psychol. 15 (2–3), 131–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1456590.

Connell, R., Collyer, F., Maia, J., Morrell, R., 2017. Toward a global sociology of knowledge: post-colonial realities and intellectual practices. Int. Sociol. 32 (1), 21–37.

Douglas, K., Carless, D., 2018. Engaging with arts-based research: a story in three parts. Qual. Res. Psychol. 15 (2–3), 156–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1429843.

Emslie, C., Hunt, K., Lyons, A., 2013. The role of alcohol in forging and maintaining friendships amongst Scottish men in midlife. Health Psychol. 32 (1), 33–41.

Frosh, S., 1999. What is outside discourse? Psychoanal. Stud. 1, 381–391.

Frost, N.A., 2013. Multiple methods in qualitative research. Int. Soc. Stud. Behav. Develop. Special Sec.: Qual. Methods 2 (64), 9–13.

Gibson, L., 2017. 'Type Me Your Answer': generating interview data via email. In: Braun, V., Clarke, V., Gray, D. (Eds.), Collecting Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide to Textual, Media and Virtual Techniques. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 211–212. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107295094.011.

Gough, B., 2003a. Deconstructing reflexivity. In: Finlay, L., Gough, B. (Eds.), Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health & Social Sciences. Blackwell Science, Oxford.

Gough, B., 2003b. Shifting researcher positions during a group interview study: a reflexive analysis and review. In: Finlay, L., Gough, B. (Eds.), Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health & Social Sciences. Blackwell Science, Oxford.

Gough, B., 2004. Psychoanalysis as a resource for understanding emotional ruptures in the text: the case of defensive masculinities. Br. J. Soc. Psychol. 43 (2), 245–267.

Gough, B., Novikova, I., 2020. Mental Health, Men and Culture: How do Sociocultural Constructions of Masculinities Relate to Men's Mental Health Help-Seeking Behaviour in the WHO European Region? Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe (Health Evidence Network (HEN) synthesis report 70).

Griffith, D.M., Bruce, M.A., Thorpe Jr., R.J., 2019. In: Men's Health Equity: A Handbook.. Routledge, New York, NY.

Hollway, W., Jefferson, T., 2000. Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method. Sage, London.

Hollway, W., Jefferson, T., 2010. Panic and perjury: a psychosocial exploration of agency. Br. J. Soc. Psychol. 44 (2), 147–163.

Hughes, H.E., Bridges-Rhoads, S., Van Cleave, J., 2018. Work/think/play in qualitative and postqualitative inquiry. Qual. Inq. 24 (9), 599–602. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417733499.

Lanford, M., Tierney, W.G., Lincoln, Y., 2019. The art of life history: novel approaches, future directions. Qual. Inq. 25 (5), 459–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418817834.

Lather, P., 2016. Top ten+ lists: (re) thinking ontology in (post)qualitative research. Cult. Stud. - Crit. Methodol. 16, 125–131.

Monforte, J., Smith, B., 2020. Conventional and postqualitative research: an invitation to dialogue. Qual. Inq. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800420962469.

O'Connor, D.B., Aggleton, J.P., Chakarabati, D., Cooper, C.L., Creswell, C., Dunsmuir, S., Fiske, S.T., Gathercole, S., Gough, B., Ireland, J.L., Jones, M.V., Jowett, A., Kagan, C., Karanika-Murray, M., Kaye, L.K., Kumari, V., Lewandowsky, S., Lightman, S., Malpass, D., Meins, E., Morgan, B.P., Morrison Coulthard, L.J., Reicher, S.D., Schacter, D.L., Sherman, S.M., Simms, V., Williams, A., Wykes, T., Armitage, C.J., 2020. Research Priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond: a call to action for psychological science. Br. J. Psychol., e12468 https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12468.

Oliffe, J.L., Han, C.S.E., Ogrodniczuk, J.S., Phillips, J.C., Roy, P., 2011. Suicide from the perspectives of older men who experience depression: a gender analysis. Am. J. Mens Health 5 (5), 444–454. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988311408410, 2011.

Parker, Ian, 2004. Criteria for qualitative research in psychology. Qual. Res. Psychol. 1 (2), 95–106. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088704qp010oa.

Phoenix, C., 2010. Auto-photography in aging studies: exploring issues of identity construction in mature bodybuilders. J. Aging Stud. 24, 167.

Seidler, Z.E., Dawes, A.J., Rice, S.M., Oliffe, J.L., Dhillon, H.M., 2016. The role of masculinity in men's help-seeking for depression: a systematic review. Clin. Psychol. Rev. 49, 106–118.

Shaw, R., Frost, N., 2015. Pluralism and mixed methods - breaking out of the silo mentality. Psychol. 28 (8), 638–641.

Sheridan, J., Chamberlain, K., 2011. The power of things. Qual. Res. Psychol. 8, 315–332.

Smith, B., McGannon, K.R., 2018. Developing rigor in qualitative research: problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. Int. Rev. Sport Exerc. Psychol. 11 (1), 101–121. https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2017.1317357.

St. Pierre, E.A., 2011. Post qualitative inquiry. In: Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, fourth ed. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 611–625.

Vindrola-Padros, C., Chisnall, G., Cooper, S., et al., 2020. Carrying out rapid qualitative research during a pandemic: emerging lessons from COVID-19. Qual. Health Res. 30 (14), 2192–2204. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320951526.

Wetherell, M., Edley, N., 1999. Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices. Fem. Psychol. 9, 335–357.

Willig, C., Ledingham, S., Baboulene, K., 2017. Advancing Dual Focus Methodology. Symposium at the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Conference, 5-7th July. Aberystwyth University.