DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ TÉZISFÜZET

KOVÁCS ASZTRIK

The Concept of 'Self' in Qualitative Psychological Research

Pszichológiai Doktori Iskola

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List of articles and conference participations indirectly involved in the dissertation

Articles

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Ladányi, B., Novák, G., Kovács, A., & Rácz, J. (2021). "Magamhoz tértem, és úristen, megölted az édesanyádat" - Interpretatív Fenomenológiai Analízis szkizofréniával élő bűnözők körében. In *Út a reziliens jövő felé. A Magyar Pszichológiai Társaság XXIX. Országos Tudományos Nagygyűlése* (pp. 320–320).

1. Introduction and Rationale

Scientific psychology, as the science of mind and behavior, is dealing with the investigation, explanation, prediction, and change of behavior, emotions, and thinking (Passer & Smith, 2004). However, given the subjective nature of human behavior, experience, and perception, even scholars of the 19th century expressed doubts about the possibility of an objective psychological investigation (William James, 1890; Dilthey, 1996). Reducing human experience in theoretically measurable, isolated factors, with little or no sensitivity to contextual and personal characteristics, might lead to misinterpretations (Armistead, 1974; Harding, 1992).

The strength of qualitative methods is claimed to be in their primarily interview-based data collection method, detailed analysis, and sensitivity to subjectivity. Its perspective is claimed to be close to 'real-life' (i.e. personal experience) experience and psychological practice (Creswell et al, 2007).

Qualitative methodologists refer to abstract philosophical and epistemological concepts when it comes to describing and teaching qualitative methods (del Rio Carral & Tseliou, 2019). As a result of this abstraction, the comparison of qualitative methods is difficult and foggy, often resulting in confusion in wording or inconsistency in scientific literature. Standing the question of self in the center of comparing qualitative methodologies might help to overcome the difficulties of the complexity of philosophical language.

In this dissertation I focused on three most commonly used psychological qualitative methods and epistemological paradigms: Postpositivist Thematic Analysis, Social Constructivist Narrative Analysis and Phenomenologist Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

1.1. Postpositivist Thematic Analysis

The increasing popularity of Thematic Analysis began with Braun and Clarke's article published in 2006, in which they introduced a rigorous step-by-step guide on the process of executing Thematic Analysis.

Thematic Analysis is described as a 'rigorous and systemic approach to coding and theme development' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591). In the case of Thematic Analysis, epistemology is not implemented in the methodology. Braun and Clarke refer to Thematic

Analysis as using reflexive postpositivism as an epistemological, philosophical grounding (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Postpositivism comes from the positivistic epistemology of natural sciences. As Clark summarizes "Positivist inquiry is achieved throughout the verification and replication of observable findings concerning directly perceivable entities or processes" (Clark, pp143). Positivism considers reality as one, objective reality, in which knowledge and concepts can be identified. In scientific psychology, positivism considers people as parts of one reality, their psychological processes are communicated by the language, and because of the uniformity of language and shared experience of being a human, these processes are objectively, directly measurable, and understandable (Clark, 1998). The questions of self, personal perspective, and subjectivity in the postpositivist paradigm are not that articulated, and not that relevant (Stainton-Rogers & Willig, 2017).

1.1. Social Constructivist Narrative Analysis

Social constructivist epistemology considers reality and psychological phenomena to be created through social interaction, i.e. socially constructed (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). It states that experiences do not have meaning per se, but people are creating meaning through social agreement and language. Social constructivist researchers are examining how meaning is constructed through interactions in the social world.

Social interactions consist of social discourses, which are topics and themes in the act of speeches (White, 2004). These are group memberships, values, and social norms. Members of the social reality are using these discourses to indicate their places in society, or position themselves in an interaction with another person and indicate their identities (Van Dijk, 1997).

Narrative identities are embedded in a sociocultural context (Earthy & Cronin, 2008), and are shaped and influenced by the available stories of the social-cultural environment (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Narrative analysis considers experiences as being interpreted through social discourses, learnt by the agent (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Narrative psychology is concerned with the structure, content, and function of the stories told (Murray, 2003). The self is a "story" which is created through the interaction of the research participant and the researcher.

1.2. Phenomenology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is explicitly building on phenomenologist and hermeneutic philosophical traditions. It considers that human experience cannot be isolated from the perceiver (Husserl, 1930/2012, Eatough & Smith, 2017). The experience and the experiencing self are in interaction, where the experiencing self is actively living through and interpreting the experience. This interpretation or intention towards an experience is rooted in the personal perspective, or horizon of the experiencing self (Brentano, 1974/2012; Husserl, 1900/2012; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022).

According to IPA self and experience are an undividable unity, as they are interconnected, the experience cannot be understood without the self, and the self cannot be examined without experience. Throughout the steps of the analysis, we can see that this focus on idiography is of key importance (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022).

According to phenomenology and IPA self is a being, which is rooted in the experience of existence, and which is constantly interpreting and making meanings about the wold, from its own and unique perspective.

1.3.Summary of Concepts of 'Self' in Three Qualitative Methods of Various Epistemologies

Upon discussing the concept of self in three qualitative methodologies of three different epistemologies we found that the concept of self has fundamental differences among these methods. We summarized these differences in the following table:

Table 1. Self concepts in qualitative methods

	Inductive Positivistic Thematic Analysis	Narrative Analysis	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Epistemology	Postpositivist, or naive realism	Constructivist	Phenomenologist
Experience	Objectively existing	Subjective. It can be captured through the narrative of the person	Experience has more layers, its relevance and meaning is created by the self.
Self	Not relevant. Thoughts and emotions are universal	Self is creating itself and its relationship with the experience by using narrative elements learned from the society.	Self is a subjective, yet partially intersubjective being, who is interpreting, and making sense of the happenings, events from its personal perspective.

Keeping the 'self' in sight, it is easier to make difference between positivistic (quantitative) and constructivist/phenomenologist (qualitative) epistemologies. If the experience and the self cannot be divided from each other, we have to consider what we think about the 'self'. Whether it is a general term, a base of understanding, who receives predefined (objectively existing) psychological experiences (postpositivism – Thematic Analysis); is it a creative act in which the person interprets experiences in a form which is thought by the culture and society (Narrative Analysis); is it a perspective, a point from which one sees and interprets the world (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis).

2. Studies

2.1. Study: **Mapping qualitative research in psychology across five Central-Eastern European contries: Contemporary trends: a paradigm analysis**

The present study describes the current state of qualitative psychology and gives an overview of the philosophical paradigms used in English language qualitative psychology studies from the post-socialist countries of Central Eastern Europe. For political and historical reasons academic life of this area is unique thus providing a special field for investigation. This study explored the following research questions: Which philosophical paradigms are used in qualitative psychology? What kind of methods are applied? What kind of fields in psychology are examined? Thirty-five articles were analysed from 5 countries.

Method

Articles were examined through their paradigmatic considerations, using a dichotomous qualitative quasi-testing to distinguish positivist/post-positivist from interpretive/constructivist paradigms. We examined the methodology and content of various articles and analysed the keywords to explore common themes of interest.

Findings

Our findings show that constructivist/interpretivist considerations seem to be dominant among the analysed qualitative articles. Pure positivist articles were found to be quite rare, but mixed paradigms seemed to be frequent.

In our study, post-positivist elements, such as generalization and deductive coding, also occurred. We found a substantial presence of paradigmatic eclecticism and confusion with the simultaneous usage of both constructivist/interpretivist and post-positivist considerations. According to the methodological analysis of the 35 articles, unspecified methods are used most frequently. Moreover, methodological descriptions were laconic and not detailed.

Discussion

The seeming paradigmatic inconsistency might be rooted in the sociological and ethnographical traditions where a study is considered to be qualitative when it uses interviews or focus groups (Demuth, 2015). As sociology and ethnography have a longer tradition in the

examined countries, this might cause a mixture of considerations and less strict methodology and epistemology, than mainstream qualitative psychology has. In psychology the reliability and transparency of qualitative studies has become vital and rigorous. However, qualitative psychology is still looking for its own identity and formula in the global psychological discourse, which might result in ambiguity (Gürtler and Huber, 2006). Knoblauch et al. (2005) state that research questions in which qualitative methods are used, might be influenced by political, economic, social and cultural backgrounds of the researcher.

As a conclusion, we suggest that paradigms might be used in a mixed way unless the researcher uses them consistently and transparently by the description of the epistemological foundation, the methodological choices and the process of analysis.

2.2. Study: **Discovering the "I" in the "Thou" – The Psychological Effects of Psychobiographical Research on Personality of the Researcher**

In our second study, we used Thematic Analysis to uncover how psychobiography courses affect students' identities. We used a postpositivist epistemology as we were interested in the psychological effects, thus we had preconceptions that psychological effects are existing, universal phenomena, which are understandable unbounded from the perceiver. It means that we considered our participants' accounts as valid descriptions of their experiences, which contain relevant information to our research questions 'How are psychobiography courses and research described by students? How can they utilize their experiences resulting from psychobiography courses and research?'. With this epistemology, we considered the psychological information to be a part of the reality that can be identified by the researcher.

Method

A structured written interview with seven related questions was collected. The interviews contained questions which addressed their experiences in the psychobiography research, and the possible effects of the course on their professional career and on their personality.

We used Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse the interviews. In total we created two main themes (*Psychobiography and self-knowledge* and *Utilisation in praxis*) and 7 subthemes.

Results

According to our interviewees, a psychobiography course had several influences on their lives.

Our main findings were that according to our interviewees psychobiography courses not only provided useful skills, such as theoretical knowledge, reflexive and flexible ways of thinking, new horizons of interpreting others experiences, but also affected self-awareness and self-knowledge. Our interviewees reported to get into interaction with the research object and reflect on their personal relationship and feelings towards the chosen artist's work and perspective.

Discussion

The inductive thematic analysis of the interviews suggested that the supposed interrelation between psychobiography, self-knowledge and psychological skills truly exists. The results support our proposal that psychobiography should be an integral part of the psychology students' curriculum.

We can see that these themes are different both in their point of views and epistemologies. While our primer goal was to identify those professional skills the students report to have gained during the course, we also found personal accounts on how the course affected their concept of selves.

Thanks to the duality of this perspective, we represented not only the technical effect of psychobiography research but also emphasized the subjective, personal experience of it. Thus we regarded the self as simultaneously living in the world of objective meanings and the subjective world of personal relevance and meanings.

2.3. Study: **Rehabilitation from Addiction and Chronic Illnesses: a Comparative Analysis of the Narratives of Hungarian Patients**

People recovering from addiction learn a typical narrative structure in Anonim Alcoholic programmes (Thune, 1977). In the recovery narrative the critical points are to take responsibility for addiction and to redeem passivity through activity (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 1999; Taïeb et al., 2008).

Addiction and chronic illnesses do share several features, such as chronic physical and mental changes, difficulty in managing the experience of stigmatization (Ware, 1992), and effects on the lifestyle of the person or family afflicted (Fotopoulou et al., 2015).

To understand the recovery process more, we were aiming to compare the narrative structure of the two groups.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the elements of McAdams' life story model (1995) with six people with chronic illness and six people recovering from addiction.

The interviews were analysed from two aspects in order to gain a complex insight into the experiences of patients recovering from addiction and patients with chronic illnesses. The two inductive analyses were: 1) narrative analysis to uncover the structural characteristics of the narrative (Riessman, 2005), and 2) thematic analysis to find the important themes and topics of the recovery experience of our participants (Braun et al., 2019).

Results

Results of the Structural narrative analysis:

V-shaped narratives

This narrative structure was typical of the group of patients recovering from addiction, although it also appeared in the narrative of a patient with bipolar disorder (in the group of patients with chronic illness). The V-shaped narratives started with a contamination narrative, beginning with the first use of drugs leading to the lowest point when patients reported being lonely and had to choose between recovery and death. This was followed by the "raising" narrative of redemption in which drug use was ceased and recovery took place. Revaluation and comparison of the past and future also typically appeared in their narratives.

Pilgrimage narratives

We called pilgrimage narrative when the patient had to undergo several failed treatments before the correct diagnosis was found. This way of storytelling was characteristic for our participants with chronic illness.

Results of Thematic Analysis:

Two main themes (Recovery capitals used in the recovery process, Experience of the illness) emerged from the text with eight sub-themes.

Recovery capitals

Sources of motivation and assistance were key themes in the interviews. The two groups mentioned several sources of recovery capital, namely self-care, pro-social sublimation of experiences, mentors, relationships and work

Experience of the illness

Patients recovering from drug addiction appeared to identify with their illness more than chronically ill patients. Although both of the groups reported experiences when they were stigmatized by the health care workers.

For patients recovering from addiction, a diagnosis meant liberation from society's moral stigmatization, and their "weakness. The central theme and the end of the "pilgrimage" narrative for patients with chronic illnesses was the correct diagnosis. It appeared as the turning point of their narration, after which proper medical treatment is received.

Discussion

The narrative of patients recovering from addiction was structured and uniform, while that of patients with a chronic illness tended to be more diverse. This is perhaps because patients recovering from addiction learn from their mentors' narratives and use what their mentors learned during their own recovery (Thune, 1977; Taïeb et al., 2008). Identification with the illness was stronger and more important for patients recovering from addiction (Charmaz, 1991). Patients recovering from addiction put the emphasis on the motivational function of recovery capitals. Participants with chronic illnesses highlighted a stable background and the important role of their quest for physical health.

2.4. Study: **The recovery of homicidal people diagnosed with schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder – An interpretative phenomenological analysis**

The aim of the present research was to explore how homicidal people diagnosed with schizophrenia make sense of their act, and how they identify with the homicide.

Qualitative approaches, especially IPA, are a suitable method (72) because of their sensitivity and focus on the personal perspective. Based on its phenomenological and hermeneutical roots, IPA considers the self and experience as an inseparable unity (73). There is no self without experience and no experience without self. It is the intentional relationship between the self and its experience that can be examined (74).

Method

We conducted six semi-structured interviews at a large psychiatric home. Our interviewees were patients who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder and who had committed homicide and been found to be not fully responsible for their crimes because of their mental illness.

We chose to apply IPA, as this method focuses on how participants experience and make sense of events in their lives, and how this affects their sense of self (72,73,74). In IPA, a double hermeneutical approach is used, in which the researcher interprets the participants' meaning-making processes.

Results

Homicide and responsibility

The interviewees inferred that the homicide had been committed while experiencing a distorted sense of reality. At the time of the interview, this reality was explained as a false or non-egosyntonic reality. They explained psychosis as something that took total control over their actions and thoughts. Although the manner of this influence varied across the interviews, the sense of being a victim of the illness was a common experience.

Homicide and self

Even when schizophrenic patients who have committed homicide struggle to make sense of the homicide, it has a strong impact on their self-concept. Homicide committed in a state of psychosis appears to be an act that cannot be fully integrated into the individual's sense of self. It creates an alienated, incomprehensible element in the individual's sense of self. While

it contributes to self-defence against the weight of grief and responsibility, the patient in recovery is in a continuous dynamic relationship with this part of the self.

Control as a basis for self-evaluation

Maintaining control over their habits and emotions is fundamental to their sense of self in offenders with schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorders. The threat of the illness is considered to be intrapersonal: a part of them is constantly threatening outburst and violence. Constant control over their thoughts, emotions and mental state is important if the patients are to gain a sense of competence, confidence and self-trust.

Discussion

According to our findings, the delusional self appears to be experienced as a threat to the recovering self, and as a violent and aggressive being who is able to commit homicide. This violent self is, however, a part of the patient and has victimised them as well. Constant vigilance over mental illness and distrust of the self was observed in the interviews, which elevated the importance and centrality of self-control in self-evaluation.

3. Discussion

In our researches, we found that using more epistemologies upon research helps in creating more transparent and experience-based knowledge. For example, to understand what students think to be a result of psychobiography courses, we considered these effects to be both objectively understandable and self-bounded. In our narrative analysis, besides the social constructivist narrative structure analysis we identified recovery capitals, which is a concept coming from the literature rather than from the interviews. In our IPA study we used both phenomenological and social constructivist approaches to understand the subjective and intersubjective layers of meaning making. The usage of double epistemologies prevented us from overlooking the nature of human experience, and objectification of self. In Table 3. the pluralistic epistemologies of our studies are summarized.

Table 2. 'Self' concepts in our studies

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Epistemology	Comparing postpositivist and interpretivist/ constructionism	Postpositivist and phenomenologist	Constructivist and postpositivist	Phenomenologist and constructivist
Method	Content Analysis, Paradigm Analysis	Inductive Thematic Analysis	Narrative analysis, Thematic Analysis	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Experience	Objectively existing or subjective	Objectively existing & Personally created through meaning making	Constructed through the narrative of the person, & Objectively existing	Experience has more layers, its relevance and meaning is created by the self. & Narrative elements are used upon interpreting the experience

Self	The concept of self depends on which epistemological paradigm is used.	Not relevant. Thoughts and emotions are being universal & Self as an agent who is actively creating meaning	Not relevant. Thoughts and emotions are being universal & Self is creating itself and its relationship with the experience by using narrative elements learned from the society.	Self is actively making sense of the events from its personal perspective. & Self is creating itself and its relationship with the experience by using narrative elements learned from the society.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, different qualitative methods were compared and analyzed through their concepts of 'self'. As we discussed, different qualitative methods have different approaches toward the significance and nature of the 'self'.

The main findings of this dissertation are the followings:

1. Qualitative research epistemologies are close to the nature of psychotherapy and counseling, and help to understand-in-practice.
2. Using one epistemology in qualitative research helps to provide transparent data which is applicable for further interpretation and comparison
3. Using pluralistic epistemologies in a reflected way helps in critical, multi-layered understanding.
4. Focusing on the nature of self in qualitative methods aid in epistemological and methodological rigor.

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