Reflections on a study of responses to research on smoking: A pragmatic, pluralist variation on a qualitative psychological theme[1]

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Abstract

The development of qualitative research within psychology has been characterised in recent years by fragmentation. Responses to this have emerged with the popularity of a flexible, pragmatic approach in the form of thematic analysis and with the advocacy of a pluralist approach in which the achievement of rich, deep analyses through the use of several qualitative methods in conjunction has been prioritised. This article draws upon a study of responses to research on the health implications of smoking to illustrate how a pragmatic, pluralist approach can work within qualitative psychological research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participant groups: smokers, ex-smokers and, as key informants on cigarette consumption behaviours, newsagent staff. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis from phenomenological, discourse analytic and narrative analytic perspectives within an epistemological macro-stance of critical realism. Analyses are presented of participants' representations of decision-making about smoking in cost-benefit terms. A pragmatic, pluralist approach to qualitative psychology is advocated but its challenges are also noted.

Introduction: From fragmentation to pragmatism within qualitative psychology

It is only over the last couple of decades that qualitative research methods have begun to gain acceptance within British psychology, with much debate having taken place about their value and contribution to psychological knowledge. Over time, a range of qualitative methods has been advocated and applied within psychological research (for an early example, see Henwood and Pidgeon's advocacy of grounded theory in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1992). New qualitative methods have been developed within the discipline with specific psychological foci. Perhaps the most notable example has been interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with its focus on individual meaning-making. This was developed and popularised

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in the latter part of the 1990s (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 1999) and quickly assumed a place in the core repertoire of qualitative psychological research in the UK alongside grounded theory, narrative analysis and discourse analysis, as is clear from (qualitative) research methods textbooks in the discipline (for example, see Breakwell et al., 2012; Howitt, 2010; Lyons and Coyle, 2007).

Over time, though, it is fair to say that qualitative psychology became increasingly fragmented with a proliferation of methods being advanced, each claiming to offer something distinctive to the researcher (for example, King, 2004). This proliferation was also discernible *within* methodological approaches. For example, quite distinct forms of discourse analysis came to be used within critical psychological research in the UK and beyond: discursive psychology has focused in a micro-level way on the social functions of talk (in an approach akin to conversation analysis) (Edwards and Potter, 1992) and what is sometimes referred to as 'Foucauldian' discourse analysis has attended to identity and selfhood, ideology, power relations and social change (Parker, 1992). Also, the developmental trajectory of some qualitative methodological approaches has seen them become more narrowly defined and purist, such as in terms of their epistemological commitments and expectations about sampling and types of data. For example, discursive psychologists have privileged the use of 'naturally-occurring' data, that is, data that would have been present or generated in the absence of the research project, such as telephone calls to helplines (Potter and Hepburn, 2005), although this has also been critiqued (Griffin, 2007). Such 'refinements' have rendered some applications of these qualitative approaches officially legitimate or more legitimate but have queried the legitimacy of others, with 'legitimacy' conferred or withheld by recognised experts in the approaches through peer review of journal articles and research grant applications, for example. These developments can make it difficult to apply the methods with flexibility and creativity as departures from methodological norms within an approach may be deemed unacceptable. It must be acknowledged, though, that there are limits to flexibility and creativity within any particular approach set by the approach's core, defining features: those recognised as authoritative practitioners are entitled to express views on the boundaries of the approach.

This methodological fragmentation and narrowing inspired a response from Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, who published an article in 2006 that advocated the use of a generic, flexible version of qualitative analysis in psychological research that they called 'thematic analysis' (see also Braun and Clarke, 2013). The term 'thematic analysis' had been used elsewhere to describe a general approach to the discernment of commonalities across a qualitative data set (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan and Bernard, 2000). Braun and Clarke, however, presented it as a method of qualitative analysis in its own right with a specified set of procedural steps.

What was deliberately not specified was a particular epistemological or theoretical commitment or a commitment to a particular form of qualitative data, sampling strategy or sample size. Braun and Clarke did not even specify whether a thematic analysis should be deductive, involving the application of a pre-determined coding frame, or inductive, working up from participants' own frames of reference (or a combination of both). Instead they left it to the researcher to determine these in light of their research aims and questions. This afforded enormous scope and flexibility to thematic analysis, which can therefore be regarded as a pragmatic approach to qualitative analysis: whatever epistemological, theoretical and other commitments are held to facilitate an optimal engagement with the research aims/questions can be incorporated within an analysis.

The advocacy and making of research decisions oriented to achieving an optimal response to research aims/questions is nothing new of course. Some researchers develop research questions and then choose approaches to data generation and analysis that accord with the ontological and epistemological assumptions embodied in the questions and that will most effectively address those questions. Other researchers proceed from a preferred position re ontology and epistemology and develop research questions and make methodological choices in light of that, as in the case of a social constructionist researcher developing a research question predicated on the assumption that language is constitutive of social 'reality' and opting to address that question through discourse analysis. What was new about thematic analysis within qualitative psychology was to have such a high degree of flexibility about ontology, epistemology, theory and a deductive or inductive analytic approach within one broadly-presented method. This clearly addressed a salient need within the domain, judging by the extraordinary frequency with which Braun and Clarke's article has been cited (almost 8800 times by mid-2014) and the frequency with which thematic analysis has been used within psychological research in the intervening years.

A pluralist approach to qualitative psychology

Related to this pragmatism is the advocacy of a pluralist approach to qualitative analysis. Such an approach to qualitative psychology has been advanced in recent years by Nollaig Frost and colleagues (Frost, 2009, 2011; Frost and Nolas, 2011, 2013; Frost et al., 2010) who have explored the value of applying different qualitative methods with different ontologies and epistemologies to a data set. The aim of pluralist analyses is to produce rich, multi-layered, multi-perspective readings of any qualitative data set through the application of diverse 'ways of seeing'. The intention is to maximise holistic understanding rather than to achieve consensus or 'truth', although when Frost and colleagues have applied a pluralist approach to a data set, strongly overlapping analyses have resulted. The pragmatic focus on achieving the richest possible response to the research question from the

data set can help to overcome what has been described as the problem of 'methodolatry', that is, an excessive focus on a certain research method and its framework rather than on the topic under study and the research questions (Holloway and Todres, 2003). It is also worth acknowledging that, while pluralist analyses may seem innovative within psychology, they are not exactly new to broader audiences across the social sciences. Indeed, this analytic pluralism might appear to be a restrained version of the plurality and multi-vocality sought elsewhere through a 'bricolage' approach (Levi-Strauss, 1966) which is aimed at 'learning from the juxtaposition of divergent ideas and ways of seeing' (Kincheloe, 2005: 344).

We suggest that the popularity of thematic analysis within psychology has afforded a potential route for the acceptance of pluralist analyses within that discipline too. In one place in their original paper, Braun and Clarke (2006: 80) observed that sometimes studies which claim to have used a particular qualitative method can be understood at a macro-level as versions of thematic analysis because of their analytic focus on commonalities of content, that is, 'themes' (and subthemes), across the data set. How these commonalities are interpreted will depend upon the ontological, epistemological and theoretical commitments associated with the specific method that is being applied (and/or favoured by the researcher).

It is possible to take Braun and Clarke's observation and craft an intentionally pluralist form of thematic analysis from it. For example, it would be possible to apply the procedures of thematic analysis to a data set from a phenomenological perspective, attending to participants' sense-making on their terms; then to adopt a narrative perspective, attending to how participants craft stories of their experiences (within interviews); and then to consider the data from a social constructionist perspective, attending to the functions of language use within the data set. The researcher could offer an analysis of a given aspect of the data set, drawing upon these different insights to produce a rich, deep analysis. It is important to emphasise, though, that the epistemological openness of thematic analysis does not mean that the researcher can avoid or bracket epistemological commitments. The researcher will select analytic perspectives on the basis of their likelihood of contributing distinct, valuable insights to the response to the research question and these perspectives will be accompanied by their epistemological assumptions. The task of the researcher then is to find ways of minimising or working creatively with epistemological differences across the resultant analysis.

The greatest challenge that a single researcher may face in implementing a pragmatic, pluralist form of thematic analysis is to develop sufficient competence in a range of relevant analytic perspectives and to foster a critical awareness of the role played by their own (personally and professionally-based) interpretative framework in the analytic process as they move between perspectives. It is worth noting that, in the study from which Frost developed her ideas about the possibilities of pluralist analysis, each analytic perspective was implemented by a different researcher with proven

competence in that particular way of engaging with qualitative data (Frost, 2011; Frost et al., 2010). This team approach is probably the most practicable way of implementing a pluralist analysis.

In this article, we offer some indications of the value of a pragmatic, pluralist form of thematic analysis by applying this approach to interview data on public responses to research which has identified the health risks of smoking. This study was not conceptualised from the outset as a pluralist endeavour but developed as such during the data analysis process. Our reflections here illustrate one possible route through the research decisions associated with pluralist work. First we shall contextualise the study to help readers understand the rationale for the analysis.

Contextualising the study

In the early 1950s many studies were conducted to explore the relationship between smoking and lung cancer. One 'milestone' study was conducted in the UK by Doll and Hill (1954), based on data collected in 1951, in which they examined the smoking habits and subsequent death rates and causes of death among doctors. The research showed there to be a link between the number of participants who had died of lung cancer and their smoking behaviour. Following on from an initial preliminary paper (Doll and Hill, 1950), this research was amongst the first of its kind to demonstrate a relationship between smoking and disease.

The research of Doll and Hill in the 1950s is considered to have played a key role in the development of knowledge and understanding of the negative health consequences of smoking. Yet, despite the fact that a significant body of research reported links between smoking and disease, especially lung cancer, the relationship remained a matter of some controversy for a time. For example, Berkson (1958) expressed disbelief that one single factor could have such a multitude of effects on the human body. In 1963 Delarue questioned why the research had not yet had a greater impact on smoking behaviour but it was not until 2003 that a tobacco advertising ban was implemented in the UK; in 2007 a ban on smoking in public places was introduced. By then the body of research on the adverse health implications of smoking was definitive and substantial. This raised questions for us about the ways in which health research is socially disseminated, interpreted, implemented and resisted at the level of social and political institutions, social groups and individuals, including considerations of discourse and ideology in these processes. Hence we took research on the health implications of smoking as a totemic example and elected to study its (reported) influence on smoking behaviours. The focus on individual behaviour change makes this a clearly psychological question located within domains of health psychology and, on account of the attention paid to social and cultural considerations, social psychology.

As part of this endeavour, the current study sought to gain insight into the understandings and responses to research on smoking reported by current smokers, ex-smokers and newsagent staff. The newsagent staff were recruited as 'key informants' who, by virtue of their role in selling cigarettes, could offer insights into tobacco consumers' purchasing behaviours over time (Gilchrist, 1992). These three groups were focused upon with the aim of generating a rich, textured account of responses to milestone research on smoking and health. It was hoped that participants from these groups would offer different but complementary perspectives on the research topic. It can thus be said in retrospect that a pluralist approach was applied to the sampling process as well as to the analysis of data. Frost and Nolas (2013: 78) have acknowledged the value of having data from diverse participant perspectives in pluralist analyses, yielding insights into convergences and divergences within and across those discrete perspectives. This echoes grounded theory in seeking a heterogeneous sample that could yield a rich, multi-perspectival account but stands in contrast to some approaches to qualitative psychology, such as IPA, that actively advocate the use of homogeneous samples.

Fifteen participants have been recruited from the three groups using opportunity and snowballing sampling strategies. Smoker and ex-smoker participants had to be at least 70 years old so that (a substantial part of) their history of smoking would have unfolded against a background of smoking policy and practice in which major research studies on the adverse health implications of smoking were available, even if the link between smoking and adverse health consequences may not have been known or culturally salient early in their lives. Smokers and ex-smokers had to have smoked for at least ten years (that is, to have shown a 'commitment' to smoking rather than being 'casual' smokers). Newsagent staff were required to have had at least 15 years of experience in selling tobacco products to the public. This was considered sufficient to enable them to draw upon an experiential base that covered changes in social policy in relation to cigarettes in recent years. All five of the smokers who were recruited were female; they ranged in age from 70 to 84 years. One male and four female ex-smokers were recruited who ranged in age from 70 to 79. The five newsagent staff were male. Although the sample *size* was deemed sufficient to facilitate the likelihood of discerning convergences and divergences, clearly some more focused recruitment activities would be advantageous because male perspectives on their own and others' smoking behaviours may draw upon different sense-making resources than female perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants by the first author face-to-face or by telephone. This form of interview was selected because our original intention was to conduct an IPA-type phenomenological thematic analysis but with the flexibility to include some deductive as well as inductive elements if we wished to do so after engaging with the data. Hence, in selecting a data generation strategy,

we took our lead from IPA and its favouring of semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, smokers and ex-smokers were asked about their views and experiences of attitudes towards smoking and smoking behaviours in light of scientific research, advertising and policy changes in relation to smoking. Newsagent staff were invited to reflect upon these matters primarily in light of their experiences of selling tobacco products. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to generate a set of meaningful patterns or themes associated with the research aims/questions from across the data set. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up the analysis. The initial familiarisation with the data strongly suggested that our original intention of adopting a phenomenological stance towards the analysis would not capture some important features of the data set, particularly the storied nature of the data (for example, in relation to participants' accounts of their initial engagement with smoking and the often similarly structured accounts of stopping smoking or trying to stop) and the clearly functional orientation of participants' language at some points (for example, in the crafting of explanations for having continued smoking in spite of evidence about its harmful health consequences and in the negotiation of issues of responsibility). Hence we were led into a pluralist approach to analysis and the data were examined again from narrative and social constructionist perspectives, although these would have required much less structured interview data to allow us to apply them in a concerted rather than an auxiliary fashion. Insights from these analyses were used to enrich and extend the initial, more phenomenological analysis in a pluralist, pragmatic way. In accordance with our earlier observation about the practical management of a pluralist analysis, the different analyses were initially conducted by the researcher who had particular competence in that form of analysis, with the provisional analytic insights then reviewed in terms of their groundedness within the data and their persuasiveness by two other researchers. So, for example, the first author took the lead on the phenomenological analysis and the second author on the social constructionist analysis.

The epistemological macro-stance of the study is best described as critical realist (Lopez and Potter, 2001): the reality of the phenomena under investigation is acknowledged but the only access available to these phenomena is through the participants' and the researchers' interpretative lenses. This 'reality' concerns participants' representations but the possibility of these representations mapping onto actual behaviours, cognitions, emotions and experiences in the past and present is acknowledged too. However, this macro-stance varies in its critical and realist commitments depending upon the analytic perspective being implemented at any given point. If the research questions had been extended to accommodate the new

theoretical/ epistemological perspectives more explicitly, the analyses could also have generated new themes from these perspectives. Our epistemological macro-stance was adopted at the outset as it suited our research questions and also gave us scope for a critical analytic approach which we have long favoured. This was fortunate as we found that the analyses undertaken across the pluralist approach could be readily accommodated within a critical realist stance. It may be that such a macro-stance is particularly suited to pluralist work, although its adoption means that researchers do not have to work creatively with much epistemological tension in the analysis. This may be seen as a lost opportunity by some but may be welcomed by others.

Illustrating the value of a pluralist sampling strategy

The research value that accrued from a pluralist sampling strategy can be illustrated by considering the different responses elicited from participants from the three groups by questions on how they believed scientific research on the health sequelae of smoking might have affected smoking behaviours and decision-making about smoking. Participants within each group varied in their responses but some responses seemed specific to participants' group membership and so could not have been obtained without having adopted a pluralist approach to sampling.

Victoria, a 70-year-old ex-smoker, spoke about the lack of impact that she believed had been exerted on her smoking behaviour by knowledge of the health consequences of smoking when she was younger:

> I started smoking aged about twenty two, erm, knowing by this time and sort of believing by this time that it was linked to, lung cancer was linked to smoking but this feeling that it [smoking] was part of being a gang overrode these feelings because I thought, you know, aged twenty two or whatever I was, death seemed a long way away so it didn't really matter that much, I didn't relate it to any danger, any imminent danger to me so to hell with that I thought, you know, I wanted to be part of a gang and in order to be part of the gang you had to smoke.

Later in the interview, Victoria spoke about a time when she believed that a personal, insight into potential future health consequences of smoking, gained through an illness experience, directly impacted on her smoking behaviour, particularly in relation to her decision to quit smoking:

> I couldn't breathe at all, I couldn't eat for a fortnight cos I couldn't, because chewing the food means that you can't breathe so you know, so I could just stop breathing long enough to have a sip or two and I thought when I was there this is what it's going, this is what it would be like dying of lung cancer.

In these short extracts, Victoria oriented to the way in which she believed context had shaped her response to knowledge about the health risks of smoking. In the first extract, she represented a social motivation (that is, conforming to the behavioural norms that determined membership of a desired group), combined with a standard representation of the perceived invulnerability of youth (see other interviews with ex-smokers and smokers), as having informed her smoking behaviour and as having outweighed any information about the health implications of smoking. The second extract relates to a later point in her life where a sense of invulnerability had been replaced by a vivid sense of mortality and personally-relevant health risk based on an experience of not being able to breathe easily which she represented as an insight into the experience of lung cancer. Within the interview context, the extremity of the language in this excerpt ('I couldn't breathe at all, I couldn't eat for a fortnight') rendered this a powerful and understandable basis for a decision to stop smoking. The different perceived risk context mediated research information about smoking differently and offered a basis for different decision-making about smoking behaviours

When asked about the role that she believed information from scientific research had played in her smoking behaviour, Doris, a 75-year-old smoker, stated (ellipsis points indicate where the quotation has been edited):

> Well knowing that smoking is bad for you really because your health comes before everything doesn't it…So, I, you know, I should pack up because of my health but I don't think I will do, I mean I, I mean I have cut down so much.

In response to the same question, Julie, a 75-year-old smoker, said:

> Er, I think that it probably sort of made me, well I'm sure it was more aware, I think it was probably at that time that I was certainly not taking cigarettes out with me… I think that that's what's always kept me at, smoking at a lower level.

These brief data excerpts from individuals who still smoke represented scientific research as having exerted an effect upon awareness of the negative health consequences of smoking (despite this awareness not having been translated into stopping smoking) and upon smoking behaviour (both women implied that they would have smoked more in the absence of this research). What was clear from Doris's words (and it was also evident elsewhere in Julie's data) was the dilemmatic position that the (invocation of the) scientific research seemed to have created. Adopting a functional perspective to these excerpts sheds light upon this dilemma. The women could be said to have oriented towards an expectation for explanation in the interview setting, that is, a requirement to account for continued smoking behaviour in the face of available research on its harmful health implications. Doris responded by acknowledging the legitimacy of an

expectation of behaviour change even though she declined to accede to it in a radical way; both Julie and Doris responded by invoking compromise change, which may serve partially to deflect the expectation of cessation. Doris's opening line is particularly interesting because she advanced a generic cultural 'truth' ('your health comes before everything doesn't it') and extended that into a clear personal imperative ('I should pack up because of my health') before declining this ('I don't think I will do') but then moving towards it in compromise terms ('I mean I have cut down so much'). There is a considerable amount of rhetorical work enacted here within a very limited space which points to the weight of the accounting dilemma faced by smoker participants in this context and perhaps elsewhere. These and other participants seemed to find it much easier to construct the smoking behaviour of specified others as inexplicable, though. For example, young people today were represented as being more fully aware of the health risks than young people in the participants' generation, thereby rendering their smoking behaviour difficult to understand for some participants.

Newsagent staff viewed the implications of research on the health implications of smoking in different terms such as its impact on their profits. For example, Paul, a newsagent business partner, said:

> It has impacted on my profit margins because we don't sell as many cigarettes… so yeah basically it has a huge impact as I say, probably twenty years ago I sold three times the amount of cigarettes I do now.

From his key informant perspective, Paul drew upon his years of experience and identified a major decrease in cigarette sales over a 20 year period, reflected in profits, although he did not equate sales with consumption here. This quotation offers a time frame for a perception of concerted impact. Paul worked to confer credibility on his account (not necessarily intentionally) by the use of quantification. He began with a non-specific quantitative comparison ('we don't sell as many cigarettes'), then intensified the quantification ('it has a huge impact') before offering a specific quantification of this ('I sold three times the amount of cigarettes I do now').

Although these brief analyses do not convey findings that are unexpected, they do provide an indication of the diverse perspectives on one research issue afforded by a pluralist approach to sampling on account of the different positions from which the participants spoke as ex-smoker, smoker and newsagent. It is also worth noting that a pluralist approach has been adopted in these analyses in which attention was paid to participants' meaning-making as well as to narrative shifts and the social functions performed by language use, enabling even these brief analyses of short data extracts to extend beyond what could have been achieved through the use of a single analytic perspective. This will be continued in the next section where attention is explicitly directed towards themes generated through thematic analysis of the interview data.

Further illustrating a pluralist analysis

The analysis generated a range of themes at different levels that overlapped in diverse ways. These concerned representations of layers of influence on smoking behaviour and cigarette consumption in the past and present, with scientific research represented as one layer of influence that interacts with others, such as the influence exerted by advertising and by peers and family members; accounts of cost-benefit analyses in decision-making about smoking; and the role attributed to representations of self and others (or identity) in smoking behaviours. The way in which these themes have been rendered here reflects the general critical realist, 'both/and' epistemological stance of the study. The themes are assumed to reflect the reality of participants' representations which may reflect the actualities of which they appear to speak (for instance, influence, decision-making and self) but, alternatively or additionally, may have been occasioned *in situ* by the demands of the interview context and other local considerations and may or may not transfer beyond those. It is impossible to choose with confidence between these understandings of the nature of the themes as a whole or aspects of the themes. This is not specific to pluralist analyses, of course. Any social researcher who is epistemologically aware will communicate their research findings with at least a degree of tentativeness when offering conclusions and recommendations about the (reality of the) social phenomena they have studied.

The data presented in the previous section can readily be slotted into the themes identified above. The data from Doris, Julie and Paul concerned the influence of scientific research; Victoria's quotations indicated a representation of peer influence and a cost-benefit analysis; although it is not obvious from her quotation, Doris's data related to representations of self (as not easily manipulated). In what follows we shall return to the theme of accounts of cost-benefit analyses in decision-making about smoking and consider additional data from Victoria and data from another participant, Shirley, who was also an ex-smoker. The reason for returning to this theme is that it affords insight into other considerations that were said to be at play in participants' decision-making about smoking (and their accounts of others' decision-making) and that may have outweighed or moderated the expected impact of scientific research on the health consequences of smoking.

In her interview, Victoria extended her account of the impact of research on smoking and considered the impact of social policy grounded in this research. She reflected on the 2007 UK ban on smoking in public places, reasoning about its cost-benefit implications for smokers:

> Well I think banning smoking in public places probably has an impact, I'm sure it does, it doesn't stop people doing it but nevertheless I think it makes it more difficult and in a way that probably enhances its erm attraction for people who want to be

rebellious because now, you know, they are a very highly visible gang outside, you know, aren't we, aren't we the rebels, but on the other hand it means you can't smoke all the time so you, you, you're lessening their erm, their, their exposure to it I suppose. Perhaps as they get older, you know, they will become a bit more sensible.

Here Victoria reasoned that the ban might have had an unintended effect of creating or reinforcing an attractive identity for smokers as 'rebels' who are resisting attempts to curb or eradicate their smoking behaviour. The reference to smokers having been rendered 'a very highly visible gang outside' appeared to refer to smokers congregating outside workplaces and other public venues to smoke, having been banned from smoking inside. The invocation of 'aren't we, aren't we the rebels' is most likely to be imagined speech that she was attributing to 'exiled' smokers (imparting vividness to her account) rather than evidence of Victoria as an ex-smoker entering into this identity category. Despite having represented the smoking ban as possibly inadvertently adding to the benefits of smoking and reducing the likelihood of individual cost-benefit analyses prompting cessation, Victoria also suggested that the ban would reduce smoking by reducing opportunities to smoke. However, at the end of the extract, she offered a different possible route to cessation based upon general maturity, which positioned smoking and smokers as immature or as part of a 'foibles of youth' discourse (a discourse that, in the previous section, we saw her drawing upon in accounting for her own smoking behaviour earlier in life). Of course such a construction of smoking and smokers places older smokers in a socially problematic position.

Turning to an example of a speaker referring to their own cost-benefit analysis, Shirley offered an account of her smoking behaviour that, as in Victoria's case in the previous section, was linked to changes in health status over time. She reported that when she was younger and in good health, she was readily able to sustain a belief that her smoking was not adversely affecting her and so there were no obvious health costs to challenge a decision about smoking based on perceived benefits:

You know, when you, when you're, well I'm not fit now but when I was fit I used to think well it's not affecting me.

Shirley later spoke about the time when she decided to stop smoking after experiencing poor health:

My health really yeah, my health I think and actually I have four flights of stairs to climb up here and you're out of breath by the time you get up there.

It might appear that such a consideration would readily shift the smoking cost-benefit balance and lead the person directly towards smoking cessation. However Shirley believed that she had not cognitively interpreted

the fact of her physical decline as being due to smoking. As she said of her decision to stop:

> Yes I did find it [stopping smoking] very very hard yeah because I couldn't accept it that that's [smoking] the reason.

What Shirley pointed to here was the need to align herself with the aspects of the causal relationship between smoking and ill health before she was motivated to engage in behaviour change. Earlier in the interview, it became clear that smoking had been important to Shirley's identity and social world. This renders understandable her resistance to an interpretation of smoking as having caused health problems that were adversely affecting her functioning. Nonetheless she reported having reached an understanding of her health problems as a cost of smoking which then outweighed the benefits and enabled behaviour change. What Shirley presented here was a tale of a cost-benefit analysis that was not straightforward and that took time to exert its effects. Thinking of the data in narrative and social constructionist terms, she offered a story of a struggle ('I did find it very very hard') involving core aspects of self in which she nonetheless ultimately triumphed. This may serve to deflect any temptation to see cost-benefit analyses of health-relevant behaviours in simple terms and to interpret critically her failure to stop smoking sooner. Her explanation of this failure suggested psychological insight: psychological accounts of behaviour have a powerful cultural purchase as authoritative.

Conclusion

In the brief analyses in preceding sections, we have sought to indicate practically the value of a pragmatic, pluralist approach to qualitative psychological research within the methodological framework provided by thematic analysis. The analyses that were offered combined readings of the data from phenomenological, discourse and narrative perspectives within an epistemological macro-stance of critical realism, with the research aims placed centre stage. Due to space constraints, we could only provide indications of the value of the approach but, on the basis of our previous experience of qualitative research, we contend that individual analytic approaches applied to a more homogeneous sample would not have carried the same rich analytic possibilities. Although space constraints allowed us to illustrate this only in an indicative way, the analytic points that most clearly illustrated the value of a pluralist analytic approach were when Doris and Julie oriented towards the dilemmatic position created by their acknowledgement of awareness of scientific research on the negative health implications of smoking and when Shirley offered her story of a cost-benefit analysis that exerted its personally demanding effects over time. By focusing our attention on the storied and functional qualities of the data, our engagement with the interviews through narrative and discourse analytic

lenses enabled us to extend and deepen the initial phenomenological analysis. It may be the case that a phenomenological analyst with greater interpretative insight would have achieved similar analyses from that stance alone but, for us, a pluralist approach put the foci of different 'ways of seeing' the data on our analytic agenda in an explicit and helpful way.

This is not to claim that a pragmatic, pluralist approach to qualitative psychology is without its challenges. To begin with, thematic analysis can make considerable demands upon the researcher, whether or not it is used in a pluralist manner. It requires the researcher to think carefully about the epistemological and theoretical commitments that they hold or that would best respond to their research question. An informed understanding of the nature and implications of a range of epistemological and theoretical possibilities is needed if a researcher is to exploit the flexibility and pragmatism of thematic analysis fully. In adopting a pluralist approach to analysis, care needs to be taken to avoid creating an incoherent analytic mess. In our experience, it is best to foreground one epistemological or theoretical stance in an analysis and then use analyses from other stances to extend this. Coherence is imparted to the analysis partly by the primary epistemological and theoretical stance and by the application of the same general procedures of thematic analysis across stances. More generally the quality of the analysis is guided by adherence to credible criteria that have been developed for determining what constitutes high quality analyses within qualitative psychology (for example, Yardley, 2000). Overall, though, in practical terms it has to be said that achieving rich, pluralist readings of qualitative data has as much to do with the creativity and broader interpretative lenses of the analyst(s) as with the range of analytic methods and interpretative perspectives involved. Despite these challenges, we believe that, for a researcher or research team with competence in different qualitative approaches, a pragmatic, pluralist approach offers a route for enriching, deepening and imparting invaluable 'texture' to qualitative psychological analyses.

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