The Online Survey as a *Qualitative* Research Tool[1]

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International Journal of Social Research Methodology

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Abstract

Fully *qualitative* surveys, which prioritise qualitative research values, and harness the rich potential of qualitative data, have much to offer qualitative researchers, especially given online delivery options. Yet the method remains underutilised, and there is little in the way of methodological discussion of qualitative surveys. Underutilisation and limited methodological discussion perhaps reflects the dominance of interviewing in qualitative research, and (misplaced) assumptions about qualitative survey data lacking depth. By discussing our experiences of developing online surveys as a tool for qualitative research, we seek to challenge preconceptions about qualitative surveys, and to demonstrate that qualitative surveys are an exciting, flexible method with numerous applications, and advantages for researchers and participants alike. We offer an overview and practical design information, illustrated with examples from some of our studies.

Keywords: Qualitative paradigm, qualitative survey, question design, research design, thematic analysis

Introduction

The survey is a familiar tool in social research. Mixed-method versions incorporate variable amounts of qualitative data collection, but the rich potential qualitative data can offer is often not realized, through data collection and/or analysis (Braun et al., 2017b; Terry & Braun, 2017). Less widely used are fully *qualitative* surveys, which not only collect qualitative data, but prioritise qualitative research *values* alongside qualitative techniques. As a primary method, qualitative surveys seek to harness the potential qualitative data offer for nuanced, in depth and sometimes new understandings of social issues.[2]

Qualitative surveys consist of a series of open-ended questions, crafted by a researcher and centred on a particular topic. They are self-administered,[3] with questions presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants. Because participants respond by typing responses in their own words, rather than selecting from pre-determined response options, fully qualitative surveys *can* produce the rich and complex accounts of the type of sense-making typically of interest to qualitative researchers – such as participants' subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positionings and discourses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within the framework of what is important to the researcher, qualitative survey data capture what is important to participants, and access *their* language and terminology – both frequently claimed advantages of qualitative research (Frith, 2000).

Yet *qualitative* surveys remain a relatively novel and often invisible or side-lined method (e.g. see contents in Vannette & Krosnick, 2018; Wolf et al., 2016). A very limited

methodological-focused literature on qualitative surveys is likely one key reason they are underutilised (see Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2017b; Terry & Braun, 2017).[4] A frequently unquestioned dominance of *interviews* in qualitative research (Braun et al., 2017a, 2017b) and misperceptions around qualitative surveys might also hinder the uptake of the method by those doing qualitative research.[5] We frequently encounter assumptions that surveys are too rigid and inflexible a tool for *qualitative* research, because they lack opportunities for probing participants' accounts or asking follow-up questions, and must therefore only generate thin and perfunctory data. Some think that qualitative surveys *must* be supplemented with interviews to provide data of adequate depth and richness. In a context where surveys are typically used in large-scale (quantitative or mixed methods) research, they can at first sight *appear* ill suited to the small-scale and situated samples qualitative social research often centres. But this is *not* the case. In this paper, we aim to challenge preconceptions about the *un*suitability of surveys as a qualitative research tool. We demonstrate that qualitative surveys *are* compatible with research embedded in broadly qualitative research values or paradigms (e.g. Grant & Giddings, 2002; Kidder & Fine, 1987), and that qualitative survey datasets *can* provide richness and depth, when viewed in their entirety, even if individual responses might themselves be brief. We illustrate our discussion with examples from three qualitative survey studies:

Study 1 (PI: EB) explored how women with OCD experience sex and sexuality. Participants (134 cisgender/non-trans and trans women and nonbinary people, from a range of predominantly global-North countries, recruited through OCD support space and [social] media) responded to 10 demographic questions, 7 OCD-specific (behavioural/demographic) questions, and 10 main questions.

Study 2 (PI: LD) explored experiences of living with alopecia areata, and the social discourses that situated and shaped participants' subjectivities. Participants (98 UK-based people living with alopecia areata, recruited via the charity Alopecia UK, email and social media) responded to 8 demographic questions, 4 contextualizing questions about alopecia, and 10 main questions.

Study 3 (PI: CM) interrogated therapists' accounts of social class in therapy. Participants (87 UK-based practicing and trainee counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists, recruited through training programs, non-profit providers, and personal and professional networks), responded to 9 main questions and 9 demographic/ behavioural questions.

As *online* is now the dominant mode for (qualitative) survey delivery (Toepoel, 2017), we focus on surveys delivered online through specialist survey software (hard copy or emailed surveys are also possible; see Terry & Braun, 2017).[6]

What can online qualitative surveys offer social researchers?

A key advantage of online qualitative surveys is openness and flexibility to address a wide range of research questions of interest to social researchers, as the method allows access to

data that range in focus from peoples' views, experiences, or material practices, through to representational or meaning-making practices. The range of possible questions is illustrated by existing qualitative survey research – which has, to date, been primarily concentrated in appearance, sexuality and health: experiences of living with and seeking support for alopecia (Davey et al., 2019); women's experiences of coping with endometriosis (Grogan et al., 2018); women's body identities after mastectomy (Grogan & Mechan, 2017); LGB people's experiences of (non-HIV) chronic illnesses (Jowett & Peel, 2009); lesbian and bisexual women's experiences of pregnancy loss (Peel, 2010); BDSM practitioners' perceptions of media representations of BDSM (Barrett, 2007); young adult's experiences of orgasm (Opperman et al., 2014); views on pubic hair (Braun et al., 2013); body hair practices (Braun et al., 2013; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004); gender/sexuality and clothing practices (Clarke & Spence, 2013; Clarke & Smith, 2015; Frith & Gleeson, 2004, 2008); and heterosexuals' perceptions of bisexual, lesbian and gay appearance (Hayfield, 2013).

Beyond the scope to address a wide variety of questions, using online qualitative surveys offers numerous benefits to both researchers *and* participants. Some of these benefits are conceptual or design-related, some more practical. We outline them next. In the subsequent section, we reflect on the practical aspects of *using* online qualitative surveys.

Both a 'wide angle lens' and the potential for rich and focused data

Qualitative surveys offer one thing that is fairly unique within qualitative data collection methods – a 'wide-angle lens' on the topic of interest (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004) that provides the potential to capture a diversity of perspectives, experiences or sense-making (Braun et al., 2017b). This diversity is about hearing a range of voices and sense-making, something especially useful when researching an un- or under-explored area – which all the example studies did. In Study 1, a wide-angle lens allowed EB to identify numerous unanticipated avenues for future research on women and OCD, such as experiences of reproductive decision-making, the body and embodiment, and experiences of puberty and sexual development for girls and young women.

This wide scope is also useful when the population of interest is large, diverse, or indeed unknown. Or when perspectives from *different* groups within a wider population are sought. In Study 3, which explored 87 UK-based therapists' sense-making around social class in therapy, CM sought a sample of accredited and trainee therapists and counsellors diverse in terms of their training and practice backgrounds, therapeutic modalities, specialisms and years of experience in order to explore sense-making across the profession rather than within a particular group of practitioners. Through capturing a wide range of positions and identities, CM was able to use her survey data to make a powerful argument about the therapy profession's 'class blindness' (McEvoy, 2019). The wide scope of qualitative surveys also circumvent the risk, which can occur in the typically smaller samples of interview research, that a participant who speaks from a particular non-dominant social position gets treated as 'spokesperson' for their particular demographic or background, rather than just an *individual*.

This representational/ethical issue, of how we include a range of 'within-group' voices – including for marginalised or often-overlooked groups (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996) – is one where qualitative surveys can shine. They facilitate multi-perspective designs and the use of 'maximum heterogeneity' (Fassinger, 2005) or 'maximum variation' (Sandelowski, 1995) samples, which emphasise diversity rather than typicality (Braun et al., 2017b), even in studies smaller in scope. For Study 1, EB sought to explore the experiences of a *diverse* group of women (related *especially* to sexuality, sex and gender, as most existing research on sexual problems in OCD and anxiety disorders had focused exclusively on non-trans/cisgender heterosexual women; Boulton, 2019). Using a qualitative survey enabled EB to meaningfully include and hear from *134* women and nonbinary people who identified with a multitude of sexualities, including straight/heterosexual, heteroflexible, heteroromantic, bisexual, queer, lesbian, pansexual and asexual; gendered identity, however, remained dominated by cisgendered/nontrans women. The diversity of sexualities that participants identified with was a particularly revealing finding, and potentially clinically important. Many of the women's intrusive thoughts focused on their 'true' sexuality; a context in which there is an increasing proliferation of sexuality labels (Bosse & Chiodo, 2016) provided ample fuel for such intrusive thoughts.

Online qualitative surveys also facilitate affordable and often quite easy access to large geographically dispersed populations (Braun et al., 2017b) – something rarely possible in student, unfunded, or time-limited research (see examples in Table 1). Through design, then, online qualitative surveys can allow social researchers to hear from a larger and more diverse sample than is possible with smaller scale studies. For qualitative researchers, the aim in hearing from multiple participants is typically about gaining rich(er) insights into the topic of interest, not generating a sample that achieves statistical representativeness and allows simple claims of generalizability – although wider inferences may be drawn (e.g. see Terry & Braun, 2016; Terry et al., 2018).[7] This diversity of voices matters: it matters for quality and validity of knowledge; it matters for *what* knowledge might inform practice – as "the pond you fish in determines the fish you catch" (Suzuki et al., 2007: 295) – and it matters from a social justice and inclusion point of view. Online qualitative surveys offer an accessible method to research beyond the 'usual suspects' (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2017).[8]

However, while qualitative surveys are positive for inclusion and participants in many ways, an obvious *disadvantage* is that they require literacy and risk excluding participants with limited literacy skills – though reassuring participants that they need not be concerned about correct spelling or grammar can address this to *some* extent (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2017). Similarly, given the widely recognized 'digital divide' (Hargittai, 2011; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019), online delivery risks inadvertently excluding some of the least privileged and most vulnerable groups in society. Such factors need to be considered during design.

One ready critique of qualitative surveys is that depth of data is lost (implicitly compared to interviews). We feel this critique is falsely based on imagining what qualitative surveys *cannot* offer, and an idealization of what interviews *will* offer. Indeed, qualitative surveys have capacity to deliver rich, deep and complex data. Box 1 provides such an extract from Study 1, part of a long, deeply intimate account about how intrusive thoughts impact on particular sex acts. This is the sort of disclosure *qualitative* surveys *can* facilitate. Clearly not all qualitative survey data are as rich or nuanced; there are thin or perfunctory responses. But most participants in the example studies provided *valuable* accounts of their experiences and perspectives, and some were long and richly detailed. For Study 2, "the accounts given … were rich, detailed and intimate, with high emotional content" (Davey et al., 2019: 12). We have found survey data tend to be densely packed with relevant information, more focused and 'on target' than interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Our experiences of using surveys suggest concerns about thin data seem largely unwarranted – while an individual response may lack the meandering detail of an interview transcript, if surveys are a good 'fit' for the research question, topic and population, then the whole dataset will likely be rich and complex. As previously noted, surveys require us to reconceptualize and assess richness in terms of the dataset as a whole, rather than individual data items.

Box 1

The richness of qualitative survey data: excerpt from EB's 'sex and OCD: Women's experiences' survey*

> **Q3. Please tell me about how any obsessions and/or compulsions impact on your sexual experiences**
>
> My contamination obsessions make it difficult to engage in certain sex acts. […]
>
> Another example is fellatio. Fellatio used to be extremely difficult for me to do because of my contamination obsession. I used to feel that the penis was horribly contaminated by fecal bacteria and other bacteria. (While trying to perform fellatio, my mind would bombard me with obsessions about my partner's hand touching the public bathroom doorknobs, then touching his penis at the urinal -- which makes the penis feel contaminated to me.) I do actually enjoy giving my partner fellatio, so I have done ERP exposures (didn't tell my therapist about these exposures -- too embarrassing) to help myself habituate to the high SUDS that I used to get while doing fellatio. Since I have done these exposures, it is now easier (but not totally free of SUDS) to perform fellatio. However, on days that I forget to take my NAC dose, or on days that the OCD feels worse (or when I know my partner has defecated that day without showering after), it is still very challenging for me to perform fellatio on him. The obsessions just make me have so much anxiety. […]

> So it impacts my sex life in this way, too. (It might not seem like a "big deal" to just leave the shirt on for these instances, but I feel it leads my partner to get turned off in the moment, which can -- over time -- affect our relationship.)

*Spelling errors corrected to aid readability

Encouraging disclosure and participation for sensitive topics

Online qualitative survey research potentially 'gives voice' to people who might choose to abstain from face-to-face research due to the nature of the topic or "might not otherwise be able to participate in qualitative research" (Davey et al., 2019: 12). From the field of sex research, we know that the methods used shape who is willing to volunteer. Wiederman (1999), for example, found that questionnaire studies were more appealing to potential participants than face-to-face interviews or laboratory studies. Online qualitative surveys are ideally suited to sensitive research (Braun et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2013) – beyond sex-focused topics – because they offer a high level of *felt* anonymity (Terry & Braun, 2017). In practice, online surveys may not be completely anonymous (e.g. software captures IP addresses and thus the location in which people completed the survey; Terry & Braun, 2017; Toepoel, 2017), but online surveys can nonetheless *feel* completely anonymous – from the participant's perspective, the researcher cannot see them, and does not know their name – which can facilitate participation and disclosure in sensitive research. In Study 1, several participants commented that they welcomed the anonymous response mode because of the sensitivity of the research: "unless they pressured me, I probably wouldn't admit how completely non-existent my sex life is to someone in a non-anonymous setting" (Boulton, 2019: 100). A serendipitous opportunity to compare (video) interview and survey responses was provided by one participant who, after completing the survey, requested to further discuss her experiences via an interview (see Table 1). There was far more explicit detail about sex and intrusive thoughts in her survey response, compared to the virtual face-to-face interview, supporting our supposition that the felt-anonymity of surveys facilitates intimate disclosures (even here, where the survey *preceded* the interview).

In all of the example studies, participants commented positively on the anonymous mode of data collection. In Study 1, some noted they had shared things in the survey that they would not (comfortably or willingly) have shared in a face-to-face encounter – and may not have shared with *anyone*. One participant noted this about a very socially-taboo thought:

> I have a recurring intrusive, anxiety-producing thought about seducing (as an adult) or being sexually abused (as a child) by my father. It is hard to even put into words because the stigma and shame are so overwhelming, but I realise most of the time when this thought occurs that it is an OCD symptom and can manage it as such. Still, this is a thought that I have not shared with my therapist, partner, or even acknowledged myself much of the time. (Boulton, 2019: 53)

Another advantage of survey felt-anonymity relates to topics where issues of 'face' and social desirability might strongly impact face-to-face data collection. Several participants in

Study 3 commented on the anonymity the survey provided – "I'm glad it's anonymous" – suggesting they would have been less candid, and more protective of their professional identity and therapeutic competence, in a face-to-face encounter (something evident in interview research with therapists; e.g. Rance et al., 2010).

Of course, such potential benefits for sensitive topics will be ameliorated by context of participation. Participants who lack private spaces or access to devices that can be used in private spaces – an inequity that the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare in educational contexts – are potentially unable to participate in *sensitive* research online (though other modes of delivery *may* facilitate participation). This point underscores the importance of thinking inclusively and imaginatively about the life worlds of potential participants, as well as their psychologies. Which brings us to a less-considered element that may *facilitate* both disclosure, participation, and data quality with qualitative surveys: social comfort. Not everyone feels comfortable in face-to-face interactions: online qualitative surveys can serve well populations who experience high levels of anxiety around social interaction (e.g. women with OCD). Likewise online surveys can work well for topics where participants might not want to be visible to, or feel scrutinized by, the researcher (e.g. people with a visible difference such as alopecia), or when face-to-face data collection might be 'triggering' for participants.[9] Relatedly, surveys do not require the same skills and experience from researchers as interviews (e.g. around fostering rapport), meaning they sidestep some ethical concerns around inexperienced researchers interacting with (potentially vulnerable) participants, and asking invasive or 'triggering' questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2017b; Terry & Braun, 2017).

Practical and participatory advantages for participants and practical benefits for researchers

Qualitative researchers often seek to foreground the needs and concerns of participants in their research design, as part of a broader research practice of challenging traditional hierarchies and power-dynamics of researcher and researched (e.g. Wilkinson, 1998). In terms of participant-centred research practice, qualitative surveys afford participants *control* over key aspects of their research participation. They can be considered *unobtrusive*, as people do not need to travel to meet a researcher or 'host' them at home. The method is also typically less *burdensome* for participants than face-to-face methods that necessarily take place at a particular time or in a particular location. People with physical or mental health challenges, or with commitments such as caregiving obligations, may not simply value, but actually require, the flexibility offered by qualitative surveys in order to participate. In Study 2, we found many participants completed LD's online survey late at night or early in the morning – unlikely times for an interview (Davey et al., 2019). Furthermore, without the social pressure resulting from a researcher sitting opposite them, survey participants can choose how long they spend with the survey, as well as *when*, *where* and *how* they complete it (Braun et al., 2017b; Terry & Braun, 2017). In most formats,

participants can choose to complete a survey all at once, or over several sittings,[10] the latter giving the person time and space to reflect on earlier responses.

The practical features of online qualitative surveys that offer advantages to participants also make them an accessible and non-onerous method for researchers. No direct contact with participants minimises risk to researcher personal safety. Data collection is typically non-demanding of time and resources, and there is little or no need for 'out of hours' working (e.g. late-night *Skype* interviews with participants in different time zones). This leaves researchers more time for the always-takes-longer-than-expected analysis, something *particularly* useful in limited-time projects (Braun et al., 2017b).

The 'anonymous' mode of responding may also mean participants feel comfortable 'talking back' to the researcher, expressing views on survey design, question wording or perceived researcher agenda (Braun et al., 2017b; Terry & Braun, 2017). In a 'trolling' culture, this is a mixed blessing, but such comments can provide useful material for reflection. One participant in Study 1, for example, commented on the wording of a demographic question related to participants' sex/gender, which they felt was potentially alienating for trans women:

> In my experience, most trans women do not like to be referred to as "transwomen" or set aside from cis (not trans) women as if they were a separate gender. If I had designed this survey, I would have asked participants if they were cis(gender) or trans(gender) (Cynthia R., 27, Bisexual, White)

Some participants in Study 3 commented on, and expressed suspicion of, the perceived *agenda* of the research – for example, "I hope you don't have any preconception that counsellors initiating mention of class difference in the counselling room is therapeutically desirable." The meaning-making within such comments was often also *relevant* to the research itself. However, such (mis)perceptions *may* reflect design issues. In our experience, for the advantages of online qualitative survey research to be fully realized, good planning, design and preparation are *essential*. We now share our reflections on design, based in our experiences with online qualitative surveys. Many of the design considerations are not *unique* to qualitative surveys, applying equally to quantitative and mixed method surveys. We discuss them in relation to *qualitative* online surveys, to ensure a comprehensive discussion of qualitative survey design.

Designing and using qualitative surveys

Qualitative surveys offer an (almost entirely) fixed data generation tool. This means that although data collection is usually quick, time and effort needs to go into getting the whole survey *and* individual elements right, ahead of use. This makes *piloting* (or pretesting; Willis; 2016) a vital part of qualitative survey practice, but there are many other elements to consider before then.

Question design

Question wording is *crucial* in survey research (e.g. Smyth, 2016), as the fixed design means you cannot evolve questions during data collection, and you cannot probe or clarify individual responses. Qualitative surveys generally contain two types of questions: topic-based and demographic.

Demographic questions

How 'demographics' are asked for is an important consideration for online qualitative surveys, given many qualitative researchers are often concerned with centring participants' voices, rather than representing mainstream demographic categories. *Sometimes* we use standard demographic click box closed-response questions but tend to include an 'other – please specify' option. The key advantage of fixed options is an easier and 'cleaner' summary of demographic data. But open-ended questions give participants more control over *how* they define themselves, and we have found that, for identities that particularly matter, or are contested, open options give richer responses (as the previously noted self-identified sexual identities for Study 1 demonstrated).

Regardless of style, a complex but non-trivial consideration for demographic question design is terminology (e.g. Treharne, 2011). The Study 1 feedback we quoted earlier regarding the sex/gender demographic question helped EB to reflect on the way the question wording could have potentially alienated both trans and non-trans participants alike. It can be difficult to get terminology 'right' or acceptable for *all* participants, but considering impact on those socially marginalized is particularly important. Using open-ended questions (e.g. 'how would you define your sex/gender?') can help to minimize marginalizing categorizations and negative impacts.

We have found that it is also important to avoid making assumptions about the meanings participants might attribute to key terminology and concepts. We have managed this by making clear how *we* define key terms.[11] Study 1 illustrates this: in a context where the term 'sex' is widely used, and typically (hetero)normatively assumed to refer to penis-in-vagina intercourse (Myerson et al., 2009), but where people *do* have different understandings of this term (e.g. Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), clear definitions can both clarify *and* signal an inclusive, non-heteronormative approach. Study 1 defined both *sex* and *sexuality*:

> By **sexuality**, I mean what is sometimes referred to as sexual orientation or sexual preference (whether you think of yourself as straight, gay, bisexual or something else). By **sex**, I mean sexual activity with or without a partner (or partners) – this can include anything from solo masturbation to penetrative sex, and sex with a man or a woman, or someone who identifies as gender queer.

By providing such definition, participants did not have to second-guess the researcher's assumptions or limit themselves to normative ideas. This fits with taking a participant-centred perspective during design (Smyth, 2016). Similarly, we understand demographic questions can appear intrusive, so we explain the purpose of these questions to minimize any sense of threat. A standard explanation we use is: 'to help us understand something

about the range of people taking part in this research, we would be grateful if you would answer the following questions about yourself'.

Where the demographic questions section appears is also important to consider. We initially followed recommendations from quantitative survey design, and placed the more 'threatening' personal questions at the end (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Having subsequently conducted and supervised numerous survey projects, we are now more inclined to place these questions at the *start* (Terry & Braun, 2017) – as they are often the *least* threatening questions in our research.

Main or topic-based questions

We have found guidance on *interview* question design (e.g. Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012) helpful for designing survey questions. But clarity in question wording (and likely participant *interpretation* of the question; Smyth, 2016) is *particularly* crucial for surveys (some studies have published their questions; see Davey et al., 2019; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Grogan et al., 2018; Opperman et al., 2014). Good qualitative survey questions are generally open, and as short, and expressed as clearly and unambiguously, as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2013).[12] We strive to avoid making assumptions about *how* participants might think, feel or experience particular things. For example, Study 1 included the question: "please tell me about any impact (*if any*) OCD has had on your sexual partners and/or relationships" (our emphasis). Avoiding assumptions is important to make participants with diverse experiences or views feel included, but also to allow for the widest range of possible answers.

We have found that achieving maximum clarity for questions might require 'breaking the rules' of conventional interview question design. This might involve using a more closed question, followed by some sort of 'please explain' instruction. Study 3 asked "how do you think class matters in therapy, if at all? Please explain in detail". It might involve a main question followed by clarificatory secondary questions. If guidance might be useful to *focus* a response, we sometimes provide examples of the types of issues we wish participants to discuss, in brackets after the main question – for instance, Study 1 asked "Please tell me how you think your experience of sex compares to someone who doesn't have OCD (I'm interested in things like frequency of sex, using sex toys, contraception for birth control and /or STI protection)."

Question wording also matters in the overall context and flow of the survey (Smyth, 2016). We have found that if a qualitative survey starts with an open and broad question ("please tell me about your experience of…"), some participants will inevitably write 'see above' or 'already answered' in response to some/all of the later questions. If most or all participants do this, the survey probably requires some reworking. For flow, we tend to cluster together questions on a similar aspect of the topic; for longer surveys, we have separated the main questions into two or more distinct and coherent *sections* (see Braun et al., 2013). As with an interview, we always end the survey with a final open question ("Is there anything else

you would like to add about…?"), inviting participants to share *anything else* they think or feel is important, but that we have not anticipated in our questions. This often generates unanticipated and useful data.

Survey length

Length is an important survey design consideration, both overall length, and the number of topic-based questions. Qualitative surveys often ask very few of these, such as four (Barrett, 2007; Frith & Gleeson, 2004, 2008) or six (Clarke, 2016, 2019); our example studies were longer, with nine or ten. For surveys focused on *lived experience*, which seek detailed responses, a smaller number of questions seems to work best (the highest number of questions in an 'experience' survey we have identified is 16; Opperman et al., 2014). Longer qualitative surveys remain rare and seem to work better when focused on perceptions and practices (Braun et al.'s [2013] pubic hair survey had 22 questions), where shorter responses to each question are often sufficient. In general, the longer the survey, the greater the potential for participant disengagement and/or fatigue (resulting in increasingly shorter or incomplete responses). But we have found considering participant motivation and commitment important when determining length.

Participant information

In our experience, all the (*increasing*) detail researchers are required to include as participant information can mean that participants do not read it all, or *at all* – but there is no easy way to navigate this. Such information cannot be left out for the sake of brevity. But some participants *are* likely to complete the survey without having read some or *any* of the participant information. The pragmatic challenge this provides[13] can be partly managed by locating key *completion* instructions before the first (main) question. Such information might include: reassurance around spelling and grammar; encouraging use of emojis to express emotion; instructing participants if they should spend time reflecting on their responses, or write what first comes to mind; indicating if 'returning to edit' previously completed questions is possible; emphasizing that detailed responses are sought; and indicating if partial responses will be collected.

Piloting

We nearly always make changes to the (draft) survey following piloting (we typically pilot on around 5%-20% of the anticipated sample – 5% for larger samples, 20% for the smallest). For instance, in Study 3, one (two-part) question was split into two separate questions, to ensure both parts were addressed: "Can you describe a time when you have worked with a client whose class and class background was different from yours? How did this impact on the therapeutic relationship, if at all?" became "Can you describe a time when you have worked with a client whose class and class background was different from yours?" *and* "How did this class difference impact on the work you did with the client, if at all?" In Study 2, a key objective was to generate data that could inform therapeutic practice, but no pilot participant had actually been offered counselling or psychological therapy, so LD added

questions around *interest* in, and *perceived* value of, counselling and psychological therapy. In Study 1, piloting led to *removal* of the question "If you haven't been formally diagnosed, how did you decide you have OCD?" On reflection, it risked alienating some participants by inadvertently inferring that 'self-diagnosis' was problematic. Eligibility wording was also revised to make the sexual/gender *inclusivity* of the study more explicit. A quite different *unexpected* insight was also gained through piloting: the time it took to recruit a small number of pilot participants informed the decision to subsequently recruit outside the UK.

Sample and sample size

With online qualitative surveys, potential participants' familiarity and comfort with, as well as access to, particular modes of communication is an important consideration around sampling. Those actively engaged in online social media platforms and communities, comfortable with communicating online, will likely be similarly comfortable expressing themselves in an online survey. And while we have noted the ways qualitative surveys can foster inclusivity, it's good to consider who might be inadvertently excluded by online surveys. (In such instances, emailed or even hard copy versions could be provided.)

The question of sample *size* for qualitative surveys is not simple (Braun & Clarke [2013] provided some 'rules of thumb' for student projects). Samples are usually larger than typical for *qualitative* studies: ranging from a lower end of 20-49 (e.g. Barrett, 2007; Clarke & Smith, 2014; Clarke & Spence, 2013; Grogan & Mechan, 2017; Grogan et al., 2018; Hayfield, 2013) to a mid-range of 60-99 (e.g. Braun et al., 2014; Clarke, 2016, 2019; Frith & Gleeson, 2004, 2008; Peel, 2010) and an upper end of well over one hundred (e.g. Jowett & Peel, 2009; Opperman et al., 2014); two mixed (but very qualitative) surveys have reported samples well over 500 (Terry & Braun, 2016; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). We have found sample size is shaped by: the scope of the study and breadth of the topic; the research question (e.g., focused on experiences, perspectives, practices, or discourses); the characteristics of, and diversity within, the population; the motivation of participants; and, relatedly, the depth and detail of the individual responses. Some of these *cannot* be entirely anticipated in advance (Malterud et al., 2016; Morse, 2000), and dataset richness and ability to address the questions become more important considerations than reaching an exact number – in our example studies, samples of 87 (Study 3), 98 (Study 2) and 134 (Study 1) provided a rich dataset of appropriate scope to address the research questions and produce publishable analyses.

Follow-up data collection

Despite a predetermined question structure, there is scope for (pre-planned) *additional* follow-up data collection if needed. We have done this through inviting participants to provide a contact email *if* they would be willing to participate in further data collection (anonymity is precluded if so). In a study[14] that explored the experiences of people with the auto-immune condition Pernicious Anaemia, the initial survey was deliberately short – only three main questions – to avoid overly burdening participants, some of whom would likely

be managing on-going fatigue and other physical disabilities related to the condition. Of 39 participants, 34 indicated they would be willing to participate further. Following initial analysis of the first dataset, areas to probe further were identified, including some unanticipated ones. A link to a follow-up online survey containing a further three open questions was blind copy emailed to all participants who had volunteered for further data collection. Roughly two-thirds (22/34) completed the second survey.[15]

Analysing qualitative survey data

Qualitative survey data offers wide scope for analysis, from the fairly 'descriptive' through to the more interpretative and even discursive (e.g., Terry & Braun, 2016). Yet analyses of qualitative survey data *are* typically presented as thematically-organized patterns developed from *across* the entire data-set, illustrated by vivid and compelling excerpts from participants' responses (e.g. Opperman et al., 2014; Peel, 2010), and very commonly using a version of thematic analysis (TA) (often Braun and Clarke's [2006, 2019] reflexive approach).[16] Such analyses report a small number (e.g. 2-5) of thematic patterns from *across* the entire dataset (e.g. Toerien & Wilkinson 2004); some have combined thematic and discursive approaches (e.g. Clarke, 2019; Terry & Braun, 2016). Data analyses can go *beyond* description to provide richly theorized and interpretative accounts, socially-located explorations of experiences and sense-making, or interrogations of social norms (e.g. Braun et al., 2013; Clarke, 2019; Terry et al., 2018). Participant subjectivities or positionings can be explored in a particular setting, or in the context of social discourses. In Study 1, for instance, EB drew on feminist and queer literature on sexuality to examine how heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality shaped women's accounts of their subjective experiences of sex when they live with OCD (Boulton, 2019). In Study 3, CM used discourse theory to interrogate the rhetorical strategies the predominantly middle-class sample of therapists in her study used to minimize their own class privilege and the relevance of class to therapeutic practice (McEvoy, 2019). With Study 2, LD published a descriptive-but-socially-located account of her participants' experiences around alopecia in a medical journal, with the aim of *educating* health professionals about the profound distress associated with unpredictable hair loss (Davey et al., 2019). She *also* produced a theoretically-informed exploration of how the social meanings of and norms around hair, gender and appearance shape the subjectivities of people with alopecia (Davey, 2019).

The more structured data generated by qualitative surveys compared to – say – interviews can seduce researchers into summarizing the responses to each question and dubbing these 'themes'. We urge users of qualitative surveys to resist any temptation to summarize responses to each question, as this typically results in an impoverished and underdeveloped *qualitative* analysis. We have found it most productive to treat, and work with, the data as one *cohesive* dataset, coding and developing analytic patterns *across* the entire dataset. Although a question might direct participants to share a particular aspect of their experience (e.g. how obsessions and compulsions impact on experiences of sex), material relevant to developing understanding of an issue can often be identified in responses to other questions

too (Terry & Braun, 2017). The more interpretative or discursive the analysis, the more potential there is that 'meaning' will not be attached to particular responses or questions.

To qualitative survey or not to qualitative survey?

We hope we have convinced readers of the potential value of online qualitative surveys. But given the historical dominance of interviews, one question that might remain is 'when an interview and when a qualitative survey design?' First, it does not *necessarily* have to be an either/or choice, especially if you understand qualitative data as accounts collected from participants that are always situated, partial and particular to the constraints and possibilities of a particular telling (Suzuki et al., 2007). With that noted, qualitative surveys may be more appropriate when: they are the best 'fit' for participants' needs (e.g. for very sensitive topics); a population is dispersed, hard to engage or access and/or diverse; a wide range of perspectives or positionings is sought; the topic suits a 'wide angle lens;' or the topic is likely adequately explored in a survey because your focus is quite specific.[17]

We end by emphasizing that we learn something *new* every time we use surveys, and intentionally experiment (in the broadest sense) with survey design to enhance this learning. We have changed our minds about some aspects of survey design over the years, and anticipate continuing to refine and develop how we design and use surveys. In sharing what we have learnt from years of 'experimenting,' we hope social researchers will take our insights as a starting point to devise their own experimental adventures with online qualitative surveys.

Notes

[1] Thanks to Naomi Moller for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to the anonymous reviewers.

[2] Beyond sole or primary method, there are a few instances of qualitative surveys being used in multi-method *qualitative* designs – essentially as a 'substitute' for, or to extend the reach of, interviews or focus groups as the primary data collection technique (e.g. Clarke & Demetriou, 2016; Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Whelan, 2007).

[3] A researcher *asking* a participant a series of open-ended questions is effectively a structured interview.

[4] The specific features and concerns of *qualitative* survey research are rarely addressed in literature on online surveys (e.g. Hewson, 2016).

[5] We do not wish to suggest an ontologically real, hard and fast qualitative/quantitative demarcation here. In using this demarcation we recognize blurred boundaries. Where (fuzzy) lines are drawn is as much about research values as data form.

[6] For history and demarcation of different types of "online" and "internet" surveys, see Vehovar and Manfreda (2017), and for detailed consideration of survey software, see Kaczmirek (2017).

[7] The extent to which qualitative researchers can make claims 'beyond' their sample is an important and live debate (e.g. see Smith, 2018), but beyond the scope of this paper.

[8] Where and how you recruit *will* necessarily delimit the diversity of the potential participant pool, something EB experienced in relation to race/culture.

[9] The sole (virtual face-to-face) interview participant in Study 1 commented that if she had not experienced some degree of recovery, the content of the discussion would have been triggering of her intrusive thoughts.

[10] Survey software usually can save partial completions, allowing participants to pick up where they left off when completing the survey on the same device; *editing* previous responses may or may not be possible.

[11] We sometimes compromise on what we view as *ideal* language to make things accessible for (most) participants.

[12] Multimodal elements can be incorporated into question design if appropriate and platform-supported.

[13] The complex ethical issue of too *detailed* participant information is a question for a different paper.

[14] VC supervised VA, who completed this project as part of an MSc in Health Psychology.

[15] For these repeat participants, quoting their participant code from survey one meant they did not have to provide demographic information again, reducing the burden of participation.

[16] There is no necessary reason *why* TA is so dominant, although its flexibility makes it suited to the analysis of data generated by a wide range of methods, including qualitative surveys (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

[17] We see limited value, and potential participant-costs, in very short face-to-face interviews, which may be the case if the topic requires only brief data from each participant.

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