

## *What do Therapy & Qualitative Research have in common?*

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A few years ago, after many years of being a qualitative researcher, I decided to embark on post-graduate training in Couples and Individual Psychodynamic Psychotherapy. This was a fascinating experience which enriched me not only as a person, but also in terms of my approach to qualitative social research.

Ultimately therapy and qualitative social research have different aims and purposes. While therapy aims to help the individual's psychological and mental health by offering support to resolve their problematic behaviours, qualitative social research does not aim to resolve the individual's problems but rather seeks to gain a greater understanding of how people experience or view the world. It could be said that while a researcher **observes issues** experienced by individuals, a therapist aims to **resolve or fix their issues – or enable and empower the recipient to**.

However, despite this fundamental difference in stance between observing and resolving, these two professions do share some common characteristics which are worth exploring.

Firstly, for both professions it is important to have a **curious approach** and a desire to understand and learn more. Indeed, for both modalities, having an ability to stay curious and an **urge to explore deeper** are helpful qualities. This is because curiosity leads to exploration which leads to greater depth in understanding. Secondly, in both professions it is important to be **personal, approachable, and empathetic** as this helps the individual feel at ease. Indeed, making the individual **feel comfortable and safe** while developing a sense of **trust** are vital ingredients in both fields. At first glance, this would seem like a more obvious feature for therapy where it is fundamental to create a **safe space** for the individual to be open and vulnerable. However, in research there are certain topics that touch on emotions and can make an individual feel vulnerable, therefore creating a **safe space** is key too. For example, when exploring views on topics such as leadership, youth conflict and confidence, this exploration will touch on psychological and emotional aspects of these topics. This means that creating a sense of safety and trust can help the interviewer explore these delicate topics more effectively while ensuring the interviewee feels comfortable and safe. Thirdly, both professions aim to **gain deeper understanding of the issues being explored**. For example, a social researcher asking an interviewee a question about their views on self-confidence will aim to understand how (and in what ways) a person may feel less or more confident. In some cases, this exploration may lead an individual into reflecting on why they feel less/more confident which can make them feel potentially vulnerable. Similarly, when the therapist works together with the client to gain understanding on how and why they feel about their confidence levels, this again can lead them to inhabit a vulnerable space. However, it is crucial to note that there is a clear limit/boundary in research in terms of how far a researcher can try to probe in their quest to understand a particular view further, whereas a therapist has more scope to dig deeper.

Fourthly, for both professions it is important to **ask open rather than leading questions**. At first glance this may seem like an obvious feature in qualitative social research but in therapy too, it is also key to not be leading but rather to follow the flow of your client by maintaining a neutral and open stand.

Fifthly, for both professions having a 'caring approach' towards others is helpful. It could be said that therapists and social researchers get into these professions because they fundamentally care about people and society.

Finally, there are interesting techniques from therapy that can be used in qualitative social research to create a **reflective space**. For example, techniques such as **summarising, mirroring, and reflecting** can be very effective tools when conducting in-depth interviews. Indeed, these techniques can help a researcher gain further understanding about a view on a certain topic. These three techniques help create a safe and **reflective space** for participants to **reflect** on their own views. Indeed, creating a space for effective reflection is very important in both professions as reflection allows for a space where new levels of depth in understanding can happen.

Undoubtedly, these two professions have different purposes, however, it is fascinating the way they share these important characteristics of: curiosity, empathy, trust, caring about others whilst creating a safe space for reflection and self-awareness.