

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Pursuing the question of reflexivity in psychotherapy and qualitative methods: The contributions of David L. Rennie

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## Abstract

*Background:* This article documents the intellectual contributions of the psychologist David Rennie to the fields of psychotherapy research, qualitative methods and humanistic psychology by tracing the central position of reflexivity across these bodies of work. This work had a profound influence on his field and led to his viewing the fostering of clients' reflexivity as the central task of psychotherapy. *Aims:* It follows his path as a researcher, beginning with his advancement of grounded theory methods and their application within psychotherapy research. His development of a humanistic experiential person-centred approach to psychotherapy is described as an extension of this valuing of reflexivity and the recognition of the role of clients' agency within sessions. In addition, the paper reviews the innovative methodological research that led him to propose a model of inferential processes that underlies qualitative research methods and that is rooted in the process of embodied reflexivity. His contextualising qualitative methods within a form of methodical hermeneutics permitted a unifying framework for understanding the logic of qualitative methods.

**Keywords:** qualitative research, grounded theory, hermeneutics, humanistic psychotherapy, David Rennie

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## An introduction to the review

This article is an intellectual biography of sorts, outlining some of the major contributions made by David Rennie (1940–2013) to the field of psychology. Rennie generated significant and novel conceptual contributions to the fields of psychotherapy research, grounded theory methods, humanistic psychotherapy, qualitative methodology and the philosophy of science. His work has not only contributed towards greater understanding in these fields, but also transformed each of them. His influence on the field has been far reaching, and the full implications of some of his more recent work are just beginning to be recognised.

He once shared a metaphor that I (Levitt) find compelling when I seek to understand his research trajectory. The metaphor arose within a discussion focused upon the luminaries in the psychology department at York University, Canada (see Rennie,

2010 for a history of this pioneering department; e.g. Bakan, 1967; Danziger, 1990; Greenberg, 2007). He conjectured that the wisdom of these creative scholars came from actively carrying research questions with them – not only when engaged in their research but also throughout their daily conversations, experiences and activities. David proposed the metaphor of a pegboard with a single peg that represented an initial idea. By continually examining the relationship between this peg and their other experiences, they forged new associations and their pegboards gradually became replete with pegs. The relationship between this idea and other issues would become clearer and the understanding of the issue would become increasingly complex. Having known him for two decades, I understand David as having carried a question within himself in just this manner which guided him through his varied research foci – that of how reflexivity leads to enhanced understanding.

His work began conducting research on clients' in-session experiences and then developing an approach to experiential person-centred counselling that reflected what he had learned. In both these theoretical and empirical writings, the enhancement of clients' reflexivity emerged as the central function of psychotherapy. Next, his attention turned to the role of reflexivity within the research endeavour as he developed his own treatment of grounded theory methods and introduced this approach to the field of psychotherapy research. This interest then broadened and his later work focused upon the development of a coherent framework to support the logic of making meaning across qualitative methods. In this paper, these contributions are reviewed and the connections between them made clear as evidence of a singular academic mission to query the role of reflexivity and understanding.

### Qualitative research on clients' experience in psychotherapy

Although known for his qualitative research, Rennie began his research career as a quantitative psychologist. Even then, he was interested in the in-session experiences of therapists and clients (e.g. Rennie, Burke, & Toukmanian, 1978; Toukmanian & Rennie, 1975). Also, he worked with colleagues, notably frequent collaborator Shake Toukmanian, on a number of projects focused upon the process of training counsellors to enact client-centred skills (e.g. Rennie, Brewster, & Toukmanian, 1985). He described making the turn to qualitative research as a risky decision during his time but one driven by these evolving interests.

It was his recruitment of grounded theory research methods to study clients' experiences in psychotherapy, however, that led to his most significant contributions in the field. Within a context in which psychotherapy typically is defined as therapists' application of (ideally empirically based) treatments into patients' treatments, he developed empirical evidence that forced the recognition of clients' agency and reflexivity. For instance, in his now-classic (1994a) article, he drew attention to the ways clients defer to their therapists – even when they believe therapists are incorrect. He described how clients act to preserve the therapeutic relationship by swallowing criticisms of their therapists, tempering their expectations, complying with suspect advice, forgiving therapists' errors and attempting to understand therapists' perspectives – engaging in much of the same type of work as therapists. Building from Goffman's (1967) idea of *facework*,

Rennie suggested that a central goal of clients' deference is to maintain the status of the therapist as an expert. This sociological interpretation of the power dynamics in therapy speaks to the often interdisciplinary character of Rennie's research. His research uncovered other ways that clients covertly contribute to session work as well. To provide another example, his study on client storytelling (1994b) documented how clients may shape narratives in order to maintain distance, to develop a positive self-presentation or to redirect therapists away from painful truths. Even so, the act of narrating could grant clients insight into their thoughts and emotions. Both storytelling and deference were described as central exemplars of client reflexivity – clients' ability to examine themselves as actors within their experiences.

Rennie's research on reflexivity (e.g. 1992, 1994c) positioned therapy as a product of self-aware clients engaging in behaviours in order to elicit responses from therapists in a way that is not especially manipulative but typical of human interactions broadly. In this way, clients might passively resist particular modes of treatment and avenues of exploration or engage in power struggles over the focus of treatment as therapists and clients negotiate in session. He described reflexivity as the *central function* of psychotherapy, in that clients not only become aware of their desires but also assign worth to different desires – deciding, for instance, that some desires are more valuable than others. This understanding empowered the client in the session as a participant making decisions instead of a patient receiving treatment.

This work was in the same tradition of humanistic research initiated by Carl Rogers (1961) and continued by Gendlin (2009) and Bohart (e.g. Bohart & Tallman, 1999) that highlighted the active role of the client within psychotherapy. Rennie's focus on reflexivity, however, was a contribution that extended prior humanistic discussions of this concept. His philosophical treatment of this reflexivity (e.g. Rennie, 2004a) was rooted in the writings of Frankfurt (1971), Searle (1983) and Taylor (1989) on the nature of selfhood. He argued that having a 'self' is having the capability of self-evaluation and the ability to determine not only what to do but also what one believes is worthwhile to do. It necessitates self-awareness as well as agency.

Across studies, Rennie's psychotherapy research demands that therapists recognise clients' central role in the co-creation of psychotherapeutic change – which can have a transformative and humbling effect on therapists' understanding of their own role. Instead of seeing themselves as generating change

within passive clients, therapists can understand their interventions as offering ideas and inviting experiences for the client to consider using within their own change process (cf. Bohart & Tallman, 1999). This acknowledgement demands that psychotherapy researchers shift their focus from studying behaviours and treatments to exploring how clients experience interventions – and how they may be received quite differently than expected. His work also charges therapists with initiating an explicit dialogue about the process of change, frequent requests for feedback from clients and an open discussion of the therapy relationship. This view of psychotherapy as an act to enhance clients' self-reflexivity and awareness has had considerable influence on psychotherapy researchers internationally (e.g. Chow, Lam, Leung, Wong, & Chan, 2011).

### **An experiential approach to person-centred psychotherapy**

The person-centred psychotherapy approach that Rennie developed was influenced heavily by his research findings. As in Rogers' (1957) approach, clients were credited with the capacity for agency and self-determination and therapists did not direct the content of the session focus or determine the solutions that clients develop. Unlike Rogers, however, Rennie described his approach as *process directive*. He described this direction as aiding in times when clients were unable to solve their problems on their own. In these cases, 'given assent, the counsellor may have to seize the reins for a while until the client can take over' (Rennie, 1998, p. 9). It is in these moments that he advocated the use of direction to re-engage clients' reflexive capacity.

He described his approach to process direction within the *leading edge model* (Rennie, 1998, p. 9), in which therapists notice the edge of clients' conscious experience and then direct their awareness to this edge. For instance, a client may be aware of an upsetting situation but not yet able to label their emotions. Or a client may be aware of feeling scared but unaware of what they might need to soothe their fear. By structuring reflexive self-examination upon this edge of awareness (e.g. 'You are scared but are not sure what you can do to find reassurance?'), the limits of consciousness are expanded.

Rennie described different methods of guiding the client to this experiential edge. For instance, process identification is 'the activity of drawing the client's attention to what they are doing' (Rennie, 1998, p. 73). Process identifications can have different

qualities and can be descriptive (e.g. 'You are considering...') or interpretive (e.g. 'You are working hard to figure this out because it is important') and can be immediate ('You are puzzled') or historical (e.g. 'You used to be puzzled by that'). He described selecting strategically between empathic responses and process identification because empathic responses can help develop clients' emotional attunement and process identification can draw reflexive awareness to their activities and goals. Process identification reminds clients that they *are* acting and that they are indeed capable of action and therefore of change.

Emphasis is placed on the therapist's reflexive process as well in Rennie's approach. A high value is placed on the therapists being self-aware so they are able to act transparently and navigate the client–therapist relationship. It acknowledged that therapists can never completely understand their clients' experiences and so assumed that clients will struggle for power in the therapeutic interaction at times – typically using covert and deferential methods. Therapist self-disclosure is a skill that the therapist must cultivate to facilitate the process of checking in with the clients, with the caveat that it does not detract from the focus on the client (e.g. 'It feels to me like there is some sadness here'). This checking could use basic attending skills (e.g. reflections that encourage clients to assess fit of a statement) or could entail meta-communications that assess the therapeutic process at a given moment (e.g. 'We are focusing on what you might do next. Is this the most important question to focus upon?').

In this articulation of his therapy approach, his involvement in humanistic psychology extended beyond his many years of service in the American Psychological Association Division 32 [Society for Humanistic Psychology], which culminated in his serving as president from 2005 to 2006. Rennie's (2004a, 2006) detailed examination of how therapists' and clients' reflexive capacities could be recruited to foster new understandings to guide therapists was grounded in both his research and his own therapy practice. This work created a firm foundation for his shift to the exploration of how understanding develops within the research endeavour.

### **The advancement of a grounded theory method and its influence on psychology**

Although grounded theory methods were already in use within sociology and nursing, Rennie can be credited with the introduction of grounded theory approaches to psychotherapy research (e.g. Rennie,

Phillips, & Quartaro, 1988) as well as generating a logic to support the method across fields of research (e.g. Rennie, 2000). He described (2004b) how grounded theory methods came to influence the development of postpositivist adaptations of his approach to grounded theory, such as comprehensive process analysis by Robert Elliott (e.g. Elliott, 1989), which required group consensus, as well as Hill's (e.g. 2012) consensual qualitative research, which then further developed this criteria of consensus. The profound effects of his introduction revolutionised qualitative research in the field of psychotherapy research.

His own approach adapted Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original method in a number of respects. Technically, he imported the use of meaning units from phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009) to create the initial units of coding. Also, he reframed the approach within a humanistic and constructivist philosophy (cf. Charmaz, 2006) – aligning the approach with Whewell's (1860/1971) stance that propositions are formed by bringing researchers' imaginations and prior conceptions to bear upon the facts and in opposition to J.S. Mill's (1865/1973) conviction that induction functions via a convergence of something from within facts.

In this treatment of the grounded theory method, Rennie (2000) described how in the process of categorising units of analysis, researchers need to decide how quickly to shift into higher levels of abstraction. A justification for this decision was developed in his later work with Karen Fergus (Rennie & Fergus, 2006), leading to the method of embodied categorisation. They drew upon Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) experiential cognitive model and Gendlin's (1991) experiential phenomenological model, which describe acts of understanding as based upon a merging of the ontological moment of an embodied experience with the epistemological moment of labelling it. They argued that researchers, in the process of categorisation, interpret participants' utterances using an empathic lens (much like therapists) that is based upon their own personal lived experiences and that equips them with an embodied felt-sense to guide their categorisation. A good fit creates a sense of stillness and stability for the individual creating the categories and hierarchy. This process of vacillating between the data and the researchers' interpretations was thought to mitigate tensions between the processes of realism and relativism.

Also, Rennie (2000) developed a rationale for the practice of memoing, in which researchers record observed patterns in the data, methodological deci-

sions and ideas about the relationships between the categories developed. He justified memoing as a procedure of *fallible bracketing*, in that he recognised the impossibility of achieving transcendental objectivity through bracketing (agreeing with Heidegger's, 1927/1962 and Gadamer's, 1960/1992 critique of Husserl, 1913/1962 on this point). Still, he argued that there are aspects of the researcher's perspectives that are accessible and that their reflexive self-awareness through the analytic process can help to limit the influence of biases on the analysis. Explicating those perspectives was considered to be a form of reflexivity that permitted a middle ground between realism and relativism – and within the Husserl–Heidegger debate.

In addition to developing grounded theory methods, Rennie documented the rise of qualitative methods broadly (e.g. Rennie, Watson, & Monteiro, 2002) and promoted these methods. In Rennie and Frommer's (2001) edited book, *Qualitative Psychotherapy Research: Methods and Methodology*, they described the uptake of qualitative research in both Anglo and Germanic countries and provided exemplars of a range of approaches. He (2004b) described regional trends, such as the focus on narrative (e.g. Balamoutsou & McLeod, 1996) and discourse analysis methods (e.g. Madill, 1996) and philosophical issues in the United Kingdom as compared to a focus on grounded theory methods (e.g. Rennie, 1994a) and consensual qualitative approaches (e.g. Hill, 2011) and procedural issues in North America.

Also, he was a founding member of the editorial board of *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* journal, remained active on the board for the span of a decade, and was invested in promoting qualitative methods in the United Kingdom. Among his many professional contributions advancing qualitative research in psychology, Rennie acted as a keynote speaker at conferences and offered workshops on qualitative methods internationally, in accordance with his involvement in the international Society for Psychotherapy Research. In keeping with this international involvement, his work gradually shifted into a focus on philosophical concerns – with perhaps his most significant contribution being his writings on the role of methodical hermeneutics in qualitative research.

### **A unifying framework for qualitative research: Methodical hermeneutics**

At the vanguard of qualitative research in psychology, Rennie acted to foster the acceptance of these approaches. Bill Stiles, a past president of the Society

for Psychotherapy Research, described him as ‘the person most responsible for making qualitative approaches respectable in psychotherapy research’ (personal communication, November 7, 2013). As part of these activities, he worked with colleagues (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999) to develop a set of guidelines for qualitative research that were not restricting methods to specific procedures, but could advocate for coherence with the different philosophies that might underlie qualitative methods. This paper was influential within a growing movement of qualitative researchers advocating for guidelines that encourage epistemological coherence within the research endeavour in contrast to guidelines that fix methods at the level of procedure (e.g. Levitt, in press a; c.f., Gergen, 2014).

The task of creating guidelines to preserve rigour or trustworthiness within qualitative methods can become complicated quickly because qualitative researchers vary in their epistemologies, goals and procedures – even when using the same methods. For example, researchers commonly subscribe to post-positivist, constructivist and critical ideologies, but may blend or generate unique approaches that influence how trustworthiness should be assessed (e.g. Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). Some approaches generate description (e.g. Wertz, 1983), while some theories (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and others promote social change (e.g. Fine, 2013). Some approaches advocate for researchers to bracket preconceptions (e.g. Giorgi, 2009), while others use them as the basis for their analysis (e.g. Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). As a result, reviewers who are evaluating qualitative approaches need to familiarise themselves not only with specific methods but also with different sets of epistemologies, styles of rhetoric and research aims and then adapt these to meet their studies’ demands (e.g. Levitt, 2014). In the face of all this divergence, there has been a need for a foundation to shape understanding of how to enhance research across these approaches – closing this gap was Rennie’s mission for the last two decades of his career.

In 2000, Rennie described methodical hermeneutics as the underpinnings of grounded theory, and then, in 2012, he extended this argument to include other qualitative methods. We review key arguments from these papers. All qualitative methods of research, he asserted, share a process based on the application of a hermeneutic circle in which the meaning of all the data (interview, text or otherwise) informs the meaning of its discrete parts and, in turn, the meaning of the parts shed light upon that of the whole. When

entering the circle, researchers can begin by studying one unit from a dataset or with a focus on the entirety of an experience. In his 2012 article, Rennie describes how this cycle can be adapted for conversational analysis, the descriptive phenomenological psychological method and thematic analysis. The method researchers use may determine their focus at the initial point. He built in particular from the work of Dilthey (1996) Hirsch (1967) and Peirce (1966) as he posited that the process of methodical hermeneutics is based within the following four processes cycling together.

Regardless of how the cycle is entered, the first step in the process of developing an interpretation is the act of *eduction*. In this process, researchers examine their data while drawing forth from themselves (that is, referencing their history of embodied experiences; Rennie and Fergus, 2006) a way to organise meaning from the text. He exemplified this process by referring to Gendlin’s (e.g. 1991) writings on the process of focusing – a humanistic method of creating of meaning often used in psychotherapy contexts. When engaged in focusing, meaning is derived from attending inwardly to the embodied felt-sense of an inchoate or implicit understanding and then testing different interpretations (e.g. is it grief? loneliness?) to discover the ones that fit that specific felt-sense the best. He argued that qualitative researchers use this same process of drawing forth and testing different meanings as they work to interpret the meaning of text.

The other processes in his model were based upon C. S. Peirce’s theory of inference. Peirce (1966) asserted that the central scientific process was *abduction* – the generation of guesses about what might be true, given data at hand. Following the eductive process, Rennie argued that qualitative researchers engage in abduction to shape their felt-sense into a guess about what the data might mean. After an abduction is established, he argued that analysts engage in *theorematic deduction*. For Peirce, this process entailed the conception of an experiment to test the abduction. In response to my (Levitt) questioning Rennie about this process, however, he recognised that he had modified theorematic deduction for methodical hermeneutics so that it no longer involves this conceptualisation but that, ‘one simply deduces that analysis of the text should provide evidence bearing on the abduction’ (D. L. Rennie, personal communication, August 24, 2012). Other sources of data (e.g. new interviews) can be incorporated into the analysis based upon a similar deduction.

Next, investigators either test whether an interpretation derived from a piece of data under analysis

illuminates the understanding of the whole or whether an interpretation derived from the whole clarifies the understanding of the parts (depending on how the researchers entered the circle). The process of *induction* then begins as this new evidence is collected in the text and analysed. Commonalities and differences are observed which either support the interpretation or demand a modification and fuel the cycle to begin anew. In this way, the process of induction becomes self-correcting and the progression between these stages gradually produces interpretations that approximate the experience. Eventually, the cycling leads to increased stability in the conceptualisation and signals the end of the analytic process.

In his 2012 article, he described differences between his understanding and other descriptions of abduction within qualitative research (e.g. Haig, 2008). Rennie's model is a contribution to theories of inference, in that it builds upon Peirce's model but incorporates education and embodied experiencing, enabling it to account for the substance of an abduction – which Peirce failed to do. This development of the role of education within methodical hermeneutics can be seen to cycle back to his earlier work on psychotherapy process as it captures the ways in which reflexivity is folded into the process of developing understanding.

Indeed, in some of his other writings (Rennie, 2007), the connection between methodical hermeneutics and humanistic psychology is made explicit. He cites Maslow's (1967) interviewing and study of people he came to see as self-actualised and Rogers' development of a theory of personality as tacitly rooted within a hermeneutic framework (e.g. 1961). He makes clear why humanistic researchers have been at the helm of qualitative research developments (see Churchill & Wertz, 2001; Levitt, in press b), perhaps because of the convergence in their ontological and epistemological perspectives, which emphasises utilising both conscious and inchoate experiences in meaning-making, and the recruitment of reflexive and agentic potentials in developing understanding.

### The legacy: Mentor, teacher, inspiration

Being able to follow a line of enquiry through these many instantiations required self-awareness, flexibility, an openness to exploration and a confidence in oneself, which he modelled for his mentees, who he encouraged to identify and research their own passions. To pay tribute to his memory, the graduate students who were mentees of him at the time of his

death decided to embark upon a fitting project (Hollis-Walker, Kagan, & Barnes, 2013). Over his career, David Rennie graduated 23 doctoral students and influenced many others, and hence, they decided to collect thoughts and memories from these students. With this data in hand, they set upon conducting their own grounded theory analysis. The categories developed describe his passion for ideas and his interest in supporting, inspiring and empowering his students (e.g. Angus & Rennie, 1989). The core category in their analysis was 'congruence', which they defined as a process of being genuine and bringing a consistent and authentic sense of self to bear in each of one's activities. The account also describes how this sense of self was stable across different realms of his life – noting in particular his deep love for his wife, Judy, his children and grandchildren and his passion for the outdoors. It is a moving tribute in his honour.

That David Rennie pursued the question of reflexivity was no accident. His remarkable patience in drawing from within himself new understanding was transformative. Across contexts, he moved his readers, clients, students and audiences from the passivity of listening into self-reflection and active engagement in making meaning. He encouraged others around him to attend to and foster their own educative capacities so as to develop authentic understandings. The hermeneutic process was his way of moving in the world and also was his gift to others. It is via this process that his methodological work has arisen to challenge our field to abandon fragmented method and to seek coherent approaches to discovery.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

**Appendix S1:** An alphabetical listing of the scholarship of David L. Rennie.



**Appendix S2:** A chronological listing of the scholarship of David L. Rennie.

### Biographies

**Heidi M. Levitt** is an Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology, at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Her psychotherapy research concentrates on processes of change that span psychotherapy orientation. Using mixed-method and qualitative approaches, she has studied topics such as significant moments, emotion, narrative and silence within psychotherapy. She has developed sets of principles to guide therapists through decisional points in sessions. In addition, she conducts research on experiences of sexual and gender minority communities and their gender constructions. She is an integrative experiential psychotherapist and her approach to both therapy and research is rooted within humanistic and constructivist traditions.

**Ethan C. Lu** is a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. He is interested in the process of psychotherapy, identity formation, design of culturally competent interventions, and therapeutic communities. He is conducting a grounded theory analysis focused upon therapists' experiences in psychotherapy. As both a researcher and a therapist-in-training, he is identified broadly as a humanist with a foundation in intersubjective-systems theory.

**Andrew Pomerville** is a graduate student in the Clinical Psychology Programme at the University of Michigan. He graduated from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in 2013 with a B.A. in psychology and sociology, where he worked with Dr Heidi Levitt on the development of a system of qualitative meta-analysis and its application to psychotherapy literature. His research interests include problematic stress, stigma and coercion in therapy for ethnic, racial and sexual minorities, particularly Native American and LGBT clients. He is also interested in the sociology of clinical psychology, especially in how sociocultural factors affect the science of mental health.

**Francisco I. Surace** is a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology, at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. His research concentrates on Latino sexual minorities, risky sex behaviours and Latino mental health. He uses mixed-method approaches that incorporate qualitative and quantitative methods. He has engaged in a number of grounded theory projects, including research on men who perform drag as well as a qualitative meta-analysis of client's experience in psychotherapy. Other interests include political advocacy for sexual and ethnic minorities and the intersection of these identities.