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Interview

Marco Gemignani (President of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology in the United States) talks to QMiP

Jo Brooks and Nigel King

In September 2014, QMiP were delighted, with support from the BPS's Section Initiative Fund, to host a programme of seminars and workshops delivered by Dr Marco Gemignani. Marco, who is the President of SQIP (the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology- a recently formed section of the American Psychological Association [APA]), gave a variety of very well-received presentations at academic institutions across the country including Middlesex University, Aston University, Coventry University and Leeds Beckett University. We caught up with him over dinner in Leeds to find out a little bit more about him, his work and about SQiP, QMiP's American equivalent.

Marco is an Associate Professor at Duquesne University in the United States. We started by asking Marco how he first became interested in qualitative psychology. "I became interested in qualitative research from my days as a psychology undergraduate. Professors teaching us seemed to rely heavily on purely quantitative enquiries to explain human behaviour, and there remained just too many unanswered questions for me. I remember a number of exchanges, at times arguments, with these teachers because it seemed to me that they took many potentially very complex phenomena - like gender for instance - for granted, without really thinking. I was - and still am! - interested in the diversity of different perspectives in the world. For example, rather than simply looking at differences between men and women on some variable or other, we might need to ask instead what being a man or being a woman might mean in a particular culture - is this really a simple dichotomy or might it mean different things to different people in different contexts? I'm talking about aspects such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and culture, as well as social labels like being an immigrant or being a refugee, being an international student. I am interested in understanding the ways in which these particular demographic descriptors impact on the perception that people have of themselves. From being a student of psychology, I was interested especially in the way which culture and power creates knowledge. So that was for me the entry into qualitative research."

Marco credits his introduction to constructivist psychology through the writings of Dr Franz Epting as having an important influence on his own approach to psychology. "I wrote an email to him as a final year undergraduate, having read his book, and to my surprise, he replied and invited me to meet him at a constructivist conference in Berlin. The following year, I began a PhD in Counseling Psychology at the University of Florida and Dr. Epting became my advisor and mentor. I started to develop more knowledge and understanding about qualitative psychology, its underlying philosophies and also to meet other like-minded people. That was quite eye-opening for me, to see that there were others who thought this way and to see the strength and vitality of this growing movement."

Other key figures and colleagues identified by Marco as part of this drive to promote and progress qualitative psychology in the United States include Ken Gergen, Ruthellen Josselson and Mark Freeman. These three individuals were part of a movement keen to establish greater acceptance and recognition for the work of qualitative psychologists in the United States. "These were people that were working very hard to create a new Division initially, within the APA, for qualitative psychology. Ken Gergen sent out a petition asking people to support this proposal and collected over a thousand signatures."

Although the APA did not eventually endorse the creation of a new Division, an intriguing alternative proposal was suggested – an alliance with an existing Division which Marco admits might initially appear an unlikely match for qualitative psychologists: Division 5, the Division of Evaluation, Measurement and Statistics. "There were a lot of conversations amongst qualitative psychologists as to whether or not this was a good move. Ken Gergen was inspirational and a really wonderful leader. He persuaded us that perhaps it was better not to live in our own bubble as a separate division, that if we wanted to keep surviving and thriving, it was important that we kept in dialogue with the dominant group, with the mainstream. And how better to keep in dialogue than by joining with the people that we perceive as being different from us? I think it's wonderful that he motivated us to go in that particular direction." The divisional name was understandably felt to be unrepresentative by many qualitative psychologists, but a new title has recently been agreed. "We proposed a name change for the division which has now been approved. So Division 5 will, in due course, become the Division of Quantitative and Qualitative Psychology."

"So it is exciting times for qualitative psychology in the US. We would very much like to continue building closer connections with other divisions within the APA - for example, by sharing panels at the APA conference. We certainly plan to continue lobbying the APA to ensure that qualitative psychology continues to become better understood and recognised. For me, one of the priorities is making sure that qualitative psychology and research are part of the curriculum for psychology courses and programmes that are connected to the APA. There are many different strands of qualitative psychology and I think it's also important to keep communicating and to keep building our community. At this stage of our history, I

think it's more important to come together rather than to think about differences. For me, what's needed at this stage is for us to get to know each other, to hear each other's voices, and to collaborate. We're really a very new family but there's certainly a lot of enthusiasm. And of course we want to keep growing and another major goal for this year is increasing our membership. Right now, we have just over two hundred members, which is not bad - but we can do better! We really want to expand our membership both at the national level, within the APA, and also internationally. The success of QMiP in the UK is very heartening for us. To an extent, QMiP's success in becoming one of the largest sections in the BPS paved the way for us. It would have been much harder had we not had this example, and the encouragement of colleagues in the UK and we are very grateful for that. We certainly look forward to more collaboration with colleagues from QMiP and the BPS. It is all very exciting and we are looking forward to seeing how it goes!"