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The thorny issue of pluralism, 'paradigm wars' and politics in qualitative methods and
mixed methods research

Anon version of paper

MIXED METHODS RESEARCH is clearly a recognized area of research in psychology. With the ascendancy of that work there does need to be a sustained debate surround methods and approaches in psychology. However, I think that we also need to consider alternative methods and approaches outside of and beyond psychology. In this paper, I will return back to the theme of ‘paradigm wars’ that was presented in the last issue of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin. I want to consider in more detail some of the key similarities and tensions between methods and approaches in psychology. I will discuss my research where I have drawn on a qualitative mixed methods approach to study textual representations of September 11th and the aftermath. The paper concludes with a discussion about the social, cultural and political implications of psychological knowledge and whether we need to consider alternatives to psychology.

First of all, it is important to problematize the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research methods because it is not as clear-cut as it may first seem. Heath (2014), quite rightly highlights, that ‘the very term ‘mixed methods’ may serve to perpetuate a false dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research, emphasizing their differences, while ignoring any similarities and disregarding the diversity with qualitative and quantitative paradigms and methods themselves (p.77).

Arguably, the act of making sense of quantitative data is in itself an interpretative process where one takes numerical data and makes sense of what that may mean. The act of writing psychology reports, whether that be quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods, is a process of argument and legitimation of one’s claims and thus such language functions rhetorically to persuade and convince others of the veracity of research. The position of the psychological scientist as a detached observer and the subscription to objectivism is arguably a form of subjectivity (Freire,

1972; Hollway, 1989). When we apply the idea of objectivity to considering quantitative experimental psychological research, the notion that those psychologists are making objectivist claims to truth about peoples attitudes and behaviour can be recast as actually being possible to get into peoples heads vis-à-vis the paradigmatic framing of positivism and cognitive psychology.

To move onto my next point, Frost and Shaw (2014) argue that:

Until recently, qualitative methods were brought to mixed methods research simply as a means of triangulating data and findings. The contribution made by the qualitative component was often overlooked in the final presentation of mixed methods research and its findings (p.1).

I agree with those authors that there is more scope in mixed methods and multidisciplinary research to indicate that qualitative methods research does have more status. However qualitative research in psychology is still somewhat marginalized in relation to the ‘top dog’ status of quantitative experimental psychology research. That is particularly the case if we consider the recent Research Excellent Framework in the United Kingdom, where in sub-panel 4, Psychology was aligned with Psychiatry and Neuroscience with the three disciplines being composed of quantitative experimental methods.

I do have concerns that where qualitative research is used alongside quantitative research, particularly in current applied psychology research projects, that the qualitative element of such work could potentially be ‘watered down’ and made to fit and support the claims of the quantitative experimental side of such research projects. For that reason, I think there is still some benefit to doing qualitative research which could be in opposition to quantitative research so that we can do work which raises critical issues about psychology as a discipline and so that we can

critically consider the use of that knowledge in wider public contexts such as by the government, the mass media, the mental health system and various other institutions and systems. I'm not against the use of mixing methods in psychological research but if we are to do that in our research then we need to be careful as to how that should be done. In the following example, I will how I theoretically worked through the conundrum of drawing on various qualitative methods in my PhD (Bridger, 2009). In that work I drew on a range of methods to study media representations of September 11th 2001 and the aftermath as well as to interpret the physical space around Ground Zero in New York. I began with analyzing the words and images used by the media to account for what happened on September 11th 2001 as well as how the events were represented and remembered one year and five years after those events. I drew on a rhetorical approach to study the words used to represent those events. I used that approach because I was interested in the use of language to represent those events but I was interested in exploring the relations of power in language as well as with ideas of ideology and politics. However, one of the limits of discursive approaches to language that I considered in that thesis was the lack of focus on analyzing any other than the written and spoken word. Having interpreted the words of September 11th 2001 and the aftermath, I then began to think about the meanings surrounding the space at Ground Zero in New York as well as key images which denoted the events of September 11th 2001 and the aftermath (such as the planes crashing into the World Trade Centre and Pentagon and Bin Laden in a cave). This led me to consider what sorts of questions, methods and theoretical approaches should I use to make sense of Ground Zero and the key images of September 11th 2001 and the aftermath. The majority of qualitative research at that time was (and still continues to be) focused largely on the use of the semi-structured interview method. However, with the

publication of books such as Parker and the Bolton Discourse Network's (1999) book, this heralded a turn to study not only include the written and spoken word but other forms of text such as cities, gardens, films, television and comics. I read that book and it sparked my interest in the analysis of television news reporting and the study of built environments. Reading this book coincided with my visit to an exhibition at the Urbis Museum in Manchester about Tony Wilson, Factory Records and the Hacienda. At that exhibition I was intrigued by a book, which was 'enshrined' in a glass cabinet. The book was called *Leaving the 21st Century: Incomplete work of the Situationist International* by Chris Grey (1998) and was notably a situationist text on the class struggle and presented a case for the problems of contemporary society which was dominated by consumerism, images and the ever prevalent spectacle. After that book, I read Sadie Plant's (1992) book titled *The most radical gesture: The situationist international in a post-modern age*:

Capitalist production has permeated all areas of social knowledge and culture, with the consequence that people are removed and alienated from the goods they produce and consume, but also from their own experiences, emotions, creativity and desires. People are spectators of their own lives, and even the most personal gestures are experienced at one remove (p.1).

Plant (1992) and Gray's (1998) arguments chimed with my political views and this led me into my interest into the work of the Situationist International. In the mid to late 1950s and early 1960s, the situationists engaged in a walking practice called psychogeography in various cities such as Paris, London and Amsterdam. They wanted to critique the capitalist development of towns and cities and they envisioned a non-capitalist world, which they would be actively involved in constructing. Psychogeography is broadly an approach to understand the effects of environments

behaviourally, consciously and unconsciously on peoples' psyches (Debord, 1958). However, their study of environments is quite different to the approach taken by psychologists from environmental, criminological and social approaches (see arguments by Bridger, 2014). I was quite interested to see how I could use that practice of psychogeography in relation to considering the space at Ground Zero. Hence a large part of my thesis is an explanation of how I used psychogeographical methods to study the space of Ground Zero (Bridger, 2009). In relation to my PhD, it made sense to deploy a range of different methods in order to study the various textual representations of September 11th 2001 and the aftermath. My research aims and questions led me to choose which methods and practices would be most appropriate for that work as opposed to choosing a particular method and then using that on any given topics. However, in making those choices as to use discourse, and situationist methodologies, I had to ensure that there was some degree of compatibility between those methods. It would not have been appropriate to use positive or phenomenological methodologies because that would not have fitted with my ontological way of seeing the world. First of all, I don't believe that language is a route into peoples' inner cognitions or into the essence of their 'being-ness' and so using quantitative methodologies such as measuring attitudes via questionnaire scales or using qualitative psychological approaches such as phenomenology to interpret peoples' experiences would not have been appropriate. Indeed, I argue as with many other discourse analysts, that language constructs peoples' experiences of the social world and that means that particular methodologies and psychological approaches would not fit with my ontological way of seeing the world.

To conclude these points regarding the use of various methodological and theoretical approaches in my research, I would have found it very difficult to draw

only on one method or one approach. I take on board Elichaooff, Rodriguez and Murphy's (2014, p.20) point that there can be serious limitations of researchers confining themselves to just one method and that sometimes that sort of work can be quite dogmatic in tone. However, the contrasting position to this could be that all psychological research should draw on a mixed methodological approach. That could surely, lead to similar problems to those researchers that use just one methodology and one theoretical approach? If one does not reflect properly on how to address the tensions and contrasts between various qualitative and quantitative methodologies then one runs the risk of 'glossing over' key differences between methods and approaches. At least if researchers choose to take a mixed methods approach they should ensure that they address any relevant issues in terms of the combining of bringing together of quite disparate and different methods and approaches in psychology. I don't want to argue that all researchers should use mixed methods approaches as I have done, as there may be good reasons for the use of one particular method and one particular theoretical approach. I don't think that that using one method and one approach should necessarily lead to a dogmatic position as it depends on how such researchers build up a rationale for the particular use of a methodology and approach in their work. Indeed, there are may be important ontological, political and social reasons why researchers would choose to take one theoretical approach and one methodology over other approaches and methods.

There is clearly much work to be done if we are to avoid qualitative research as simply being an 'adjunct to the 'main event'' (Frost & Shaw, 2014, p.3), with the main event being defined here as quantitative experimental psychology. I certainly think that we should not be 'content to be marginalised' (Shaw, 2014, p.4). Though at the same time we need to reflect and consider what being 'marginalised' means and

what implications it has for our roles and what we can do in the discipline and with respect to our wider engagement with individuals and groups in society. I am of the position that psychology is actually part of the problem and that we need to think of alternatives to psychology. I identify my research standpoint as being critical of psychology because I am trying to conceptualise alternatives to the mainstream psychology approach (typically quantitative and cognitive methods and approaches). I think arguments by critical psychologists such as Parker (2007) are important to consider in regards to the problematic relations of neoliberalism, capitalism and psychology. He refers to the 'intuitive appeal of psychology that is part of the problem' (Parker, 2007, p.7). Furthermore, Langdrige (2012) also states that, 'the mainstream is better suited to the rational-technical nature of capitalism and the market rather than to the utopian alternatives of critical social psychology' (p.212). One of the core reasons for the formulation of a critical psychological approach and for the deployment of qualitative methods was in order to challenge quantitative experimental psychology, to conceptualise radically new approaches in psychology and to formulate distinctly left wing Marxist and Anarchist research (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984; Parker, 1989; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Indeed, the debates that took place during the 'crisis' in psychology were often fuelled with anger and passion directed at quantitative experimental psychology with consideration of alternatives to that work.

To conclude this essay, I want to argue for the deployment of mixed as well as singular methodological approaches. A certain reframing of how our work is psychological, alternative to psychology and whether it be quantitative, qualitative or mixed methodological needs to be fully formulated, argued and justified in one's work. Therefore when conducting any research it is important to provide a full

justification for why one would use one method or a mixed methods approach in their research. The other core point to add is that we must be reflect on the type of knowledge that we produce and consider the relations of our research to political issues and in terms of wider social impact. Parker (2007) argues quite rightly that:

Now it is necessary to find a way to open up new ways of thinking about the domain of the 'psychological' – perhaps by refocusing on such things as 'experience', 'subjectivity' or 'interaction' – so that the methodologies we develop follow from the research question (p.136).

I hope that this paper opens up further debate surrounding questions of methodologies inside, outside and beyond the discipline of psychology.

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