Double the challenge: Reflections on supervising qualitative *and* critical dissertation projects

Abstract:

Drawing on our own experience, we reflect on the documented challenges of undergraduate supervision faced by qualitative researchers, and extend this discussion by further considering the issues raised by supervising projects that engage with critical perspectives. Concerns are identified regarding the dominance of traditional psychological thought in psychology programmes and the lack of teaching around critical psychology. We outline the implications for students embarking on critical qualitative projects and the additional demands placed on supervisors using examples within the fields of gender and sexuality. We end by emphasising the value of projects that require engagement with critical frameworks for students' future personal and professional development. The importance of teaching critical psychology and critical ideas as a staple and integrated part of the psychology curriculum is made clear.

Main paper:

Our careers to date have been focused on teaching qualitative research approaches and as such, supervising students' qualitative dissertation projects. Many of these projects focus particularly on the areas of gender and sexuality, and therefore incorporate themes of equality, diversity and inclusivity. Like many qualitative researchers, we have found that supervising qualitative projects can be challenging, particularly in departments and programmes that predominantly focus on mainstream psychology. An added challenge occurs when the research involves a critical framework, which can increase the level of demand placed on both supervisor and student. As qualitative and

critical researchers, we strongly believe these challenges also include important benefits for the academic, professional and personal lives of students. We aim to reflect on this, whilst emphasising the political importance of such work for students' future personal and professional development.

We have noted that, traditionally, psychology is dominated by quantitative methods (Gelo, Braakman & Benetka, 2008). Qualitative methods seem to be gaining more popularity, but quantitative methods and statistics are still promoted to uphold psychology as a 'science', with qualitative research pressured to assimilate with quantitative research (Bhati, Hoyt & Huffman, 2014). This reliance on quantitative methods means that there is a lack of knowledge and support of qualitative methods for the students and for staff. Universities offering a BPS-accredited degree must provide at least one taught qualitative methods component as part of accreditation (BPS, 2019), something that only came into effect in 2004 (Gibson & Sullivan, 2018; Sullivan, Holyoak & Willan, 2009), but quantitative methods and statistics may be taught across the entirety of the course (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Rubin, Bell & McClelland, 2018). Some institutions may do this by incorporating qualitative research methods teaching into a combined research methods module, but do not offer a standalone module that focuses solely on qualitative methods and analyses. We have identified that students are likely to pursue the expected route of a quantitative project due to a level of comfort and ease of following statistical methods that have been integrated into their courses.

We feel that this identifies two key issues; 1) the dominance of quantitative methods means there is still a lack of qualitative methods being taught in Higher Education, and 2) this means there is a lack of qualitative expertise in staff to supply qualitative teaching, something that Madill, Gough, Lawton and Stratton (2005) also noted. Neither issue can successfully be rectified on their own without a willingness to address them, but this seems unlikely as there are more posts advertised for quantitative method-skills, or 'mixed-method' skills, as opposed to solely qualitative methods being sought (based on the nature of posts published over a 9-year period at our institution). The

advertisement for 'mixed-method' is in itself problematic, suggesting that qualitative research is an 'add on' to quantitative research skills and expertise within the psychological discipline.

Our experiences of learning qualitative research methods and analyses during our own psychology degrees for undergraduate and postgraduate studies have been mixed. Earnshaw completed qualitative assignments in both first year and second year of undergraduate, pursuing different analyses through the dissertation process and into postgraduate study. Abbott however was limited to one module in the second year of undergraduate study, before embarking on a predominantly quantitative research methods Masters, and had to equip herself with qualifications alongside PhD studies to ensure she gained the necessary skills and knowledge needed to conduct a discursive PhD. Other HE members of staff that we know have reported similar experiences. Reflecting the national trend, in our current institution, there is still a strong emphasis on quantitative research methods and statistics being taught across all levels of a BSc programme. This has been reinforced via requests from external examiners and panel members at revalidation events, both commending the quantitative provisions provided and encouraging more experimental studies at dissertation level. With only one qualitative module offered in comparison at our institution, the likelihood that students have a comprehensive understanding of qualitative methods is small. This perpetuates the next issue highlighted, that there are not enough members of staff trained in qualitative methods, ensuring a continuous cycle.

Another matter that we have observed in our current institution is that qualitative dissertation supervision is demanding and time-consuming. Students are often not prepared for the demands of qualitative research itself, given the lack of qualitative teaching they receive outside of their standalone module taught in the second year of the programme. For example, students often struggle with the flexibility of qualitative analyses. Breuer and Schreier (2007) note how qualitative methods are often viewed as a 'craft' instead of just a technique or procedure to follow, with Seale (1999) and introductory qualitative textbooks, such as Barbour (2014), often discussing a 'craft-skill';

students often do not have the opportunity to do 'a learning by doing' approach to acquire the necessary skills for qualitative analysis. This means a lot of time is spent guiding, assisting and reassuring students throughout the dissertation process in comparison to our quantitative counterparts, despite set contact hours for all projects (in our current institution, each student is allocated 4 hours of supervision time regardless of whether they are qualitative or quantitative).

Despite a strong rhetoric around the similarities in quantitative and qualitative projects (time, demand, and project management) from our quantitatively-inclined colleagues, qualitative projects are often more labour intensive at certain stages than quantitative projects. For example, from our own experience of supervising dissertation students, we have found the following stages require more input in the qualitative supervision process: ethical applications, interview design and conducting analysis. As a result, students are better resourced to design, conduct and analyse quantitative projects, and qualitative students can lack the necessary confidence to make various choice regarding key aspects of the design and/or there emerges a level of confusion. A good example is students who slip into talking about hypotheses rather than research questions or aims. While such fundamental differences are taught and understood in the context of their previous qualitative module, they can be easily forgotten when the majority of their peers are talking about their quantitative research projects, where hypotheses, measures, reliability, validity and generalisability are dominant vocabulary. Consequently, students vocalise concerns around feeling disadvantaged or, more problematically, question their ability to complete the tasks in the designated framework; something that again, falls to the supervisor to address and make the necessary assurances to the contrary. While it is common for students to be given certain reassurances (usually by module leaders and peers) regarding the similarities regarding design and write-up of quantitative and qualitative projects in response to such concerns, this tends to conflict with what is emphasised by those specialised in qualitative methods. Often, as qualitative researchers, we seek to emphasise how and why qualitative research differs significantly to quantitative research. Our worry is that this creates further anxiety in students who wish to conduct

qualitative research, as this can lead to mistrust between student and supervisor about their knowledge and advice (Wiggins, Gordon-Finlayson, Becker & Sullivan, 2016). This often starts at the very early stages of the supervision process, where we have noticed students questioning the legitimacy of qualitative methods.

Qualitative projects have increased in popularity over the last 10 years, both within the psychological discipline and for dissertation research in our own department. Locally, we think this is attributable to the increase in dedicated qualitative-focused members of staff and the change of structure of the second-year Qualitative module. These changes included expansion of the assessment to a full written report where students are required to design and conduct a qualitative study and perform Thematic Analysis on datasets, providing them with an opportunity of carrying out a qualitative project from start to finish. We plan to evidence the growth in qualitative dissertation projects through metric data to help demonstrate the increased need for knowledge and expertise about qualitative research, and the different demands on supervisors, as well as for specialist equipment such as Dictaphones, video equipment, role-play environments, and transcription software and services for future projects.

More recently, students have also shown an increasing interest in critical perspectives and the desire to employ a more critical agenda, as well as a more reflexive practice as part of their research. This mirrors a shift towards critical approaches across the discipline of psychology (Kidd, 2002). When supported, the value of this approach can be significant, particularly for student's personal development and improved critical thinking, although this 'work' can be challenging for students and demanding for supervisors to support.

One of the main challenges we face in our supervision of critical projects, is that students are often new to critical ideas and associated theoretical concepts and debates. As topics related to gender and sexuality become increasingly popular amongst students, the importance of having been taught critical perspectives and LGBTQ content in the curricula becomes even more apparent. Despite the

importance of this content, students are not routinely exposed to these perspectives as part of the core curriculum. Although critical psychological research has become increasingly popular within many psychology departments, it remains at the periphery of undergraduate psychology curriculum. Within the undergraduate programmes we have worked in, critical modules or critical ideas have featured but are often offered as optional modules or introduced as 'alternative' perspectives rather than core elements of the discipline. As such, students are not sufficiently exposed to critical perspectives and tend to be taught about topics such as gender and sexuality in ways which reinforce essentialism and binary assumptions about sexual and gender identities. Given the role privilege plays in research and practice (Riggs & Choi, 2006), and how heteronormativity and heterosexism is embedded in the discipline of psychology, including research (Barker, 2007; Braun, 2000; Kitzinger, 1990), students ideas around their own research projects inadvertently reflect and reinforce such issues.

This is evident in the initial stages of supervision, where students begin to think about possible projects with their supervisors. For example, when discussing ideas for research projects on relationships and parenthood, it is our experience that students don't often acknowledge that may of the ideas and assumptions mobilised relate to heterosexual couples and relationships. Similar issues are also evident when students come to consider recruitment techniques and participant demographics, where often they slip into collecting information that reflects binary understandings of sexual and gender identities. For example, students tend to offer two response options (male/female) for gender questions without recognising the issues and barriers to answering this question or how the design of such questions is not inclusive of all individuals or groups (e.g. those who identify as non-binary or gender queer). As such, the terminology students' use within their work can also be either problematic, inaccurate or fail to consider how people prefer to self-identify. For example, students tend to use gender and sex, and ethnicity, race and nationality interchangeably. Of course, such issues are prevalent (but remain unproblematised) in quantitative

research, but become necessary to consider in the context of critical and qualitative projects. While arguably easy issues to highlight within supervision, such issues are p

art of a much bigger theorising around the construction of gendered and sexed identities. Here, discussing the power and importance of language and how this relates to (in)equality, prejudice and inclusivity becomes fundamental but difficult to adequately explore in supervision alone. Similarly, where students do wish to explore LGBT perspectives and experiences, they tend to view these groups as homogenous, failing to see the diversity and complexity within the community and overlooking important gender differences.

Without having been taught critical perspectives as part of their learning, students fail to recognise the way power differentials and structural issues operate to marginalise, oppress and create disparities for individuals and groups in society. Many of these challenges become evident throughout the dissertation process, not only during the initial stages of project design but also, noticeably, where students start considering the ethical dimensions of their critical qualitative projects and begin ethics applications. In most cases, these projects require more reflexivity than many 'mainstream' projects, and as such, place more demand on supervisor and student at every stage of the process. Specifically, it is often the job of the supervisor to ensure that their students are well informed on many of the aforementioned issues around the plurality of gendered and sexed identities, including respectful and appropriate collection of demographic data, in addition to critical perspectives more generally during the supervision process.

Critical work comprises many complex and inaccessible theoretical discussions and debates that students can find challenging. This is nevertheless fundamental for particular dissertation topics, requiring critical reflection at each stage of the project design through to the final write up. This can be difficult for students, and sometimes uncomfortable. We have experienced students getting frustrated, and in some instances, suspicious of our supervisory capabilities based on comparison of their peers' research and supervisory relationships that occur under mainstream assumptions and

methods. These frustrations are often fleeting however, dissipating when students begin to recognise the importance of value and integrity in the research process. This does however require trust between student and supervisor, and may necessitate additional (emotional) labour on the supervisor's part, particularly around formative stages of the dissertation (e.g. ethics application, data analysis) to ensure students have adequate support. One of the ways we try to build trust with our students is to introduce them to our research areas (and indeed, other critical scholars) as early as possible, for example, at the end of the second year qualitative research method module where we ask students to start thinking about topics/areas. Being taught qualitative research methods and analysis with those of us who supervise critical qualitative dissertations, also helps to build trust and familiarity with us and, by association, our critical gaze.

Under critical frameworks, students commonly struggle to reflect on their values, assumptions and the subjective nature of the positions they present, and these often become the elements of their work that they report enjoying the most. Moreover, these elements yield a more significant impact on their personal and professional values. As Riggs & Choi (2006) emphasise, it is important for students to reflect on the assumptions they draw on when developing research questions and judgements in practice settings, as part of their current and future training and work as psychologists. We agree, particularly in relation to sexuality and gender, as we have seen many students graduate without having engaged with such issues as part of their undergraduate programmes, yet go on to work as practicing psychologists. On the flip side, when engaged in critical work, it has also been our experience that this 'work' can have a transformatory impact, ultimately transcending their professional development and impacting their everyday life. This is evidenced in the feedback we have received, where one of our more recent female students wrote: '*I feel empowered and motivated as a psychologist and a woman*' and '*feel inspired to begin challenging the norm*'.

In our experience, exposing students to critical arguments and issues also facilitates a greater level of awareness about the political nature of knowledge and the importance of social justice within psychological work. We have received feedback that suggests exposure to more critical ideas has helped students to '*explore and solidify*' their views, having admitted not understanding the importance of reflecting on values and assumptions beforehand. This is reflected in one of the more humorous comments one of our dissertations students made in a thank you card: '*I'll probably spend the rest of my life correcting and challenging the heteronormative norm!*' As this feedback suggests, our students are extremely positive about their experience, emerging with meaningful learning as well as enhanced critical thinking skills. As such, we believe critical work and reflection around their own values and privileges is both engaging and vital for their future professional abilities. It has been our experience that students become invested in this work and are open to doing this level of reflection.

With this paper, it has been our intention to highlight both the challenges of dissertation supervision under qualitative and critical approaches, but to also highlight the benefits these projects yield. As supervisors who specialise in the areas of gender and sexualities, and who recognise the importance of including LGBTQ perspectives, we strive to facilitate students' engagement with critical approaches as it is fundamental to students understanding and future personal and professional development within the discipline of psychology. It is also our experience that students increasingly wish to address political issues and support social justice as part of their academic work and experience wealth of benefits from being able to do so. This reinforces the significance of critical perspectives, which should be recognised as a core element of the psychology curriculum as opposed to alternative, optional or supplementary. In addition to facilitating the delivery of such projects during the dissertation, these perspectives have been demonstrated to provide additional benefits that would be well received by all students within the discipline. This work can be challenging, uncomfortable, and confronting, but that is its beauty. As academics we should strive to

connect with our students on the issues that engage and matter to us; facilitating students'

engagement with critical issues through their qualitative work enables us to do just that.

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