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HEADER: LOOKING FORWARDS

Psychologist Special Issue:

10th Anniversary of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section

[Let a thousand flowers bloom](#)

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### **Qualitative Psychology: Looking Back and Looking Forwards**

Qualitative approaches have a long history in psychology. Jean Piaget drew heavily on qualitative observational methods and interviews, and psychotherapists have maintained a qualitative strand of practice-based inquiry since the very first narrative case studies of Sigmund Freud. However, the 1960s brought a change in “the development of qualitative research as method, with a concern for rigour and an interest in epistemology” (Madill & Todd, 2002, p. 5). Key to this was the publication of ‘*Awareness of Dying*’ by Glaser and Strauss (1965) followed closely by their classic ‘*The Discovery of Grounded Theory*’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These works from sociology offered a methodologically sophisticated, qualitative approach to tackle questions of relevance to social scientists, drawing broadly on the language of science to do so. Shortly after, Harré and Secord’s ground-breaking book ‘*The Explanation of Social Behaviour*’ (1972) proposed ethogenics as a new approach within psychology, in many ways pre-empting the ‘turn to language’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s and providing qualitative methods an increasingly secure foothold in psychology.

In the 1980s psychotherapy researchers began to champion rigorous qualitative methods for understanding the in situ processes of therapy (Elliott, 1983) and educational psychologists appreciated quickly their potential for studying classroom behaviour and communication (e.g., Spector, 1984). From the mid-1980s, drawing from the wider social sciences and humanities, psychologists also began to explore the implications of social constructionist approaches for studying sexuality and gender and developed a major strand of qualitative research in these areas (see Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Probably the key publication of this period was Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) ‘*Discourse and Social Psychology*’ with its assertion that everyday language is worthy of study in its own right. And as the 1980s closed, Parker (1989) captured the ensuing upheaval in social psychology in his charismatically entitled book ‘*The Crisis in Social Psychology and How to End it*’.

The 1990s saw fuller development of qualitative approaches speaking to central concerns – substantive and methodological – of psychology as a discipline. Discursive social psychology maintained its successes with Edwards and Potter (1992) continuing to develop an ethnomethodologically-informed version and Burman and Parker (1993) outlining an alternative, more politically-informed, vision for discourse methods in psychology. In terms of thematic methods with an interest in experience as it is lived, a key publication of this period was Henwood and Pidgeon's (1992) presentation of grounded theory as a method of relevance to psychologists: the first major article on qualitative methods in the *British Journal of Psychology*. Rigorously 'methodological' qualitative research continued to flourish in psychotherapy process research with adaptations of existing approaches (e.g., task analysis, Greenberg & Foerster, 1996), creation of new (e.g., consensual qualitative research, Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), and application of discourse methods (Madill & Barkham, 1997) and grounded theory (Rennie, 1994). And the way in which many qualitative approaches incorporate sensitivity to the workings of ideology allowed researchers to study the politics and processes of exclusion, discrimination, and disability pertinent to educational institutions (e.g., Kastberg, 1998). Similarly, research on gender and sexuality have been incredibly fruitful areas for the development of qualitative methods in psychology (e.g., Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996).

Recognising these developments, a highly influential series of workshops on qualitative methods was held between 1992 and 1994 at Cumberland Lodge, organized by John Richardson and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Psychological Society. The workshops resulted in the 1996 *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*, well ahead of the first qualitative methods handbook of the American Psychological Association (Camic et al., 2003) which, itself, was influenced strongly by British academics with chapters by Karen Henwood, Nick

Pidgeon, Jonathan Potter, and Lucy Yardley. At this point, Richardson (1996) identified several unmet needs of qualitative researchers in psychology: suitable textbooks, skilled supervisors, and competent examiners for postgraduate research.

At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1999 the 18<sup>th</sup> International Human Science Research Conference, chaired by Peter Ashworth, took place at Sheffield Hallam University. At this conference I was part of a small group of qualitative psychologists wondering what it would be like to have our own section of the BPS. The idea stuck with me and I stayed in touch with Zazie Todd about developing a proposal. After presenting it at a BPS Research Board meeting, we were strongly supported and in 2005 the Section came into being, the one required revision to change the proposed name from Qualitative Psychology to Qualitative Methods in Psychology. Another list of needs was included in the original proposal to the BPS for a qualitative methods section (Madill & Todd, 2002) stemming from formal and informal discussions at a Higher Education Academy-funded workshop at the University of Leeds (Gough, Hugh-Jones, Lawton, Madill & Stratton, 2002): pressure on a small number of staff to fulfil increasing qualitative methods teaching requirements; poor access to research funding; poor access to publishing in quality journals; and potential for marginalization within psychology departments. In contrast to Richardson's list of needs, which have largely now been fulfilled, some of the list compiled from the 2002 HEA workshop are still issues for qualitative psychologists today.

As co-founder of QMiP, and former chair (2008-11), my vision for the Section was to be supportive of diversity in qualitative methods. Psychology is a hub-discipline (Cacioppo, 2007) that makes meaningful connections with a wide range of other subjects such that other disciplines can be understood to be arranged around it. Although arguably a sign of scientific vibrancy, as a discipline psychology could fragment. Qualitative psychologists have always drawn heavily on other subjects and often work in very interdisciplinary ways, and there are

identifiable fracture lines between different approaches to qualitative research (Madill & Gough, 2008).

This fracturing of qualitative psychology was the topic of a QMiP-sponsored keynote from David Rennie - 'Toward a Meta-Methodology of Qualitative Research' - and related symposium at the BPS Annual Conference in 2007. One position is that qualitative methods are extremely diverse at the paradigmatic level and that it would be inappropriate to seek an overarching coherence. Against this is the argument that it is fruitful to seek an overarching theory of, or methodology for, qualitative research and expedient in terms of matching the apparent over-arching paradigmatic coherence of quantitative methods. Rennie, in particular, was a strong exponent of this latter position, presenting his developed argument in a keynote at the 2010 QMiP conference, published as his swan song in *Psychological Methods* (Rennie, 2012). David was a huge support to me as a developing academic, but we never saw eye-to-eye on this issue and I am, myself, persuaded of fundamental differences across the spectrum of qualitative methods and that these differences should be celebrated (Madill & Gough, 2008).

To me, a nicely pragmatic way of getting to the bare bones of qualitative methodology can be found in the articulation of 'thematic analysis' by Braun and Clarke (2006). Most qualitative research starts out with some kind of thematisation (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and Braun and Clarke unpick this seemingly simple process, identifying the methodological bifurcations leading to different kinds of analysis. Not all qualitative methods will use all the steps, and some will veer off thematisation very quickly, but major types of qualitative analysis can probably be recognised, at least in their initial stages, as certain pathways through the process outlined and Braun and Clarke's a-theoretical thematic procedural has been a major success for qualitative psychology. Another huge success in contemporary qualitative psychology is that of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

(Smith, 2004): a qualitative method by and for psychologists which is a dominant approach in the discipline today. Less well known, but worth keeping an eye on, are dialogical methods based on Bakhtinian theory, particularly that adapted for the rigorous methodological standards of psychology by Paul Sullivan (2011) - QMiP Outstanding Early Career Scholar award winner 2009.

A huge step-forward in the last 10 years has been the number of mainstream psychology journals willing to publish qualitative research. For example, the qualitative methods special issue of *Health Psychology* (2015) edited by Brendan Gough and Janet Deatrack is an amazing coup. There is much more work to be done to make it commonplace to find qualitative research in top psychology journals but we are getting there. Another big success is the journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (first issue 2004) which has published a number of extremely well-cited papers. Qualitative research has had a much harder time getting accepted by the American Psychological Association and the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology inaugurated in 2012 is, on the face of it rather bizarrely, part of Division 5: Evaluation, Measurement and Statistics. However, creating further opportunity for high-level qualitative methods publications, their flagship journal *Qualitative Psychology* was launched in 2014.

Qualitative methods in psychology got a foothold in the sub-discipline of social psychology, and 10 years ago I would have considered myself to be a social psychologist. However, today, qualitative psychologists are just as likely to be working in health psychology. Who would have through 10 years ago that it is almost a requirement to have a qualitative methodologist (although not always a qualitative psychologist) on large National Institute of Health Research funded randomised controlled trials? It does look like qualitative health psychology has a bright future, with NIHR funding ring-fenced for the moment at least.

Some psychologists specialising in qualitative methods are situated in general social science departments, and the success of qualitative health psychology has meant that many of our colleagues are employed in inter-disciplinary, health-related departments, and some are working even further afield (e.g., Victoria Tischler has recently moved to the University of the Arts, London). I think this demonstrates the wide applicability and value of qualitative methods, and psychologists as key proponents who bring additional specialist skills and knowledge. On the other hand, it has been a concern for QMiP that psychologists specialising in qualitative methods may find it difficult to secure a post in traditional psychology departments. This may be getting harder as a result of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) with psychology most recently positioned in a Unit of Assessment with psychiatry and neuroscience and, hence, towards research not associated particularly with qualitative methodology.

Qualitative methods are specified in the BPS undergraduate syllabus and in the Quality Assessment Agency subject benchmarks and there appears to be no shortage of doctorates (PhDs and Doctorates in Clinical Psychology) drawing on qualitative methods. There was a special issue on teaching of qualitative methods in *Qualitative Research in Psychology* in 2008; and, when the HEA was re-organised 2010-2012, the group Teaching Qualitative Research Methods at Undergraduate Level in Psychology had been so successful that it was one of the few subject specialisms to be retained in the form of a Special Interest Group. In 2010 QMiP commissioned research to understand the extent and context of the teaching of qualitative methods in BPS accredited psychology departments (Hugh-Jones, Madill, Gibson, Keane & Beestin, 2012). This demonstrated that the qualitative methods being taught at undergraduate level do reflect the dominant methods used in UK research (interviewing, focus groups; discourse analysis, IPA, and thematic analysis). However, a ‘culture of marginalisation’ was still being experienced by many qualitative methods staff.



Qualitative psychology has come so far that Sage is publishing a major retrospective edited by Brendan Gough of key qualitative methods papers. I wonder what a retrospective in another 10 years will include? I would like to see qualitative methods papers commonplace in top, mainstream psychology journals and for there to be secure career paths in traditional psychology departments for psychologists specialising in qualitative methods. Health sciences may offer qualitative psychologists a safe haven, but I hope that this will not overly narrow the range of acceptable methods or hold qualitative research to simplified and sometimes inappropriate evaluation criteria. The REF is driving what is valued in research and has, so far, pushed psychology further away from the social and human sciences. This is unfortunate because qualitative psychology is well-placed to discover and import the most innovative theories and methods from the social sciences and the humanities reworked, perhaps, for the methodological requirements and research questions of interest of the discipline. My training in psychology has made me value methodological rigour and empiricism, but sometimes this may stop us making the audacious leaps and trying out new ideas that scholars in the humanities appear freer to do. Qualitative health psychologists are well-placed to contribute to the medical humanities and this may be a particularly useful forum for cross-fertilisation with methods and theories developing in English.

Semi-structured interviewing is still the mainstay of qualitative psychology, but the sustained critique of this method I think has had a fruitful impact on developing more innovative way of generating data (Potter & Hepburn, 2006). In particular, there is a blossoming of visual methods, which is particularly interesting given qualitative research's usual focus on words. Innovative methods include the use of the Pictor technique (King et al., 2013) and photo-elicitation and a huge area of development awaits qualitative psychology in analysing not just what visual methods facilitate participants to say, but in working directly with the visual material itself. Digital cultures are a huge area of interest for the Arts and

Humanities Research Council and, again, qualitative psychologists have the methods and are likely to find innovative cross-fertilisation here with work being done across the humanities. Central to this is exploiting the affordances of new technologies in data generation and analysis and understanding how this impacts subjectivity as well as the ways people express themselves and interact with others.

We are in a higher education environment more heavily regulated than ever before and there are real tensions with founding notions of academic freedom. As well as provide excellence in our teaching and research we are being asked to show how our research has impact and QMiP can play a huge role in supporting qualitative psychologists to showcase the social relevance of our research. However, I hope that there is still a role for research that is pursued out of pure curiosity and an intuition that there is something novel, important, and interesting to be found.

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