

Coming out within: Qualitative inquiry in psychology

On the eve of the 30th birthday of **PINS**, celebrating its coming-of-age as the key journal for publishing critical psychological work in South Africa, I had the delight of participating in the “coming-out party” for a new-kid-on-the-block in New York. The event was the official launch of the newly formed Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP) and its associated journal, **Qualitative Psychology** and, like in all the best parties, the talk was both full of frivolous fun, and serious, interesting ideas.

The launch was hosted by the Graduate Centre, CUNY (City University of New York) and followed by a day-long conference with sessions focused on multiple qualitative methodologies, including narrative, art performance, critical participatory action research, visual methodologies, phenomenological research, spatial mapping methods and even psychoanalytic methods, which may often not be included in this stable of methodologies. Participants were of course primarily US-based, but in addition to myself as the sole (South) African representative, there were also researchers from other quarters who have provided psychology (and the broader social sciences) with key texts on qualitative methodologies over the past few decades, oft cited in **PINS**: from the UK (Corinne Squire) and from New Zealand (Virginia Braun and Nicola Gavey). In line with the editorial agenda of the journal, the conference themes were methodologically driven rather than content orientated.

The editor of the journal, Ruthellen Josselson, has explicitly stated that “any content area of psychology is fair game, as long as it uses or develops new qualitative modes of inquiry” (De Angelis, 2013: 79). The use of qualitative methods by no means guarantees a critical agenda just as conversely, quantitative methods should not be dismissed as inevitably politically conservative, as they often are. However, the mutually informative relationship between content and method means that qualitative methods are most likely to be employed in relation to critical subject matter or, in the terminology of **PINS**, where psychological and societal realities are understood as intertwined. The clear recognition that methodological choices are not transparent, neutral vehicles are evident in

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that, despite the explicit foregrounding of methods, each issue of **Qualitative Psychology** will include “a special section featuring several different types of analysis on a particular content area, whether it’s memory, gay and lesbian identity, or the immigration experience” (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/qua/>). The choice of these examples offers an express statement of the journal’s commitment to psychology for social justice.

Foreshadowing the kind of work that the new journal will publish, the conference showcased a range of methods engaged with a range of psycho-social issues, demonstrating these linkages between method and content in the development of **Qualitative Psychology** as a field of knowledge. By way of illustration, the sessions included: 1) Ethnographies of place to explore questions of inequality and social exclusion; 2) The practice of active listening as feminist or queer practice for exploring lived experience; 3) Art performance techniques for creatively representing social issues; 4) An exploration of insider-outsider status in conducting (narrative or in-depth) interviews: in the case of Joseph Gone, interviewing his own native American grandmother and her generation of family relatives; in the case of Lisa Suzuki, interviewing holocaust survivors with whom she shares very few identity markers being neither Jewish nor elderly and with no experience of the kind of trauma that her participants had survived; 5) Analysis of historical narratives and memorial spaces (Susan Opatow), and how meanings are inscribed and erased in the disciplinary canon (Fran Cherry).

Of particular relevance for **PINS** readers, two conference sessions warrant a little further description: the first, as an exemplar of psychosocial praxis, engaging multiple methods in a critical participatory action research project; the second, engaging with the politics of knowledge production and publication. The Morris Justice Project is located in the Bronx and addresses this predominantly Black community’s experience of “stop and frisk” policing. Co-ordinated by Maria Elena Torre of CUNY, using multiple methods (including quantitative statistics), and working together with community members (predominantly mothers of young boys who are often stopped by police), this collaborative research project has developed both a solid body of knowledge and an impressive track record of action. The impact of the project is based on the collection of empirical data; for example, 4882 stops resulted in only 8 illegal guns being recovered; the comparative statistics for the similarly sized, predominantly white, East Village, reveal less than half the number of police stops (2135) in a year with far lower levels of violent or aggressive police behaviour in these stops (<http://morrisjustice.org/report>). This evidence-base provides a frame for the community’s lived experiences to be heard in creative protest, entailing street theatre, poetry and illuminated slogans on city walls, and for formal advocacy with the New York City police department on the issues of violence and racism in policing. The project is a remarkable synthesis of theory and practice, and of careful, rigorous research and creative political action.

The second session that I wish to highlight was a panel discussion entitled “Publish or perish redux: Contexts and dilemmas in publishing qualitative work.” The panel members (Virginia Braun, Nicola Garvey, Jeanne Marecek and Corinne Squire) explored the difficulties entailed in publishing qualitative work, and the inevitable pressure that this also creates in terms of developing and establishing this kind of psychology in academic institutions. Panel members and participants in the session commented from a variety of contexts (for example, New Zealand, the UK, Chile, the US, South Africa) and from a variety of positions in the academic system (senior professors with substantial publication records to young emerging scholars and PhD students). However, there were remarkable similarities in the nature of the challenges discussed: the inevitably time-consuming nature of data collection; the commensurate requirement for both breadth and depth

of theoretical (often interdisciplinary) knowledge entailed in rigorous analysis; difficulties with standard length restrictions or inappropriate structural requirements in many psychology journals. We know that we must publish or perish but also, to paraphrase Biko, want to read and write what we like, do more than simply publishing for the sake of it. We want to play the academic game with the seriousness that all beautiful games deserve. Writing this article as the spectacle and drama of the World Cup unfolds in Brazil, we know that politics both on and off the field matter, and that we must play the game off the field effectively in order to get to play at all. Solving this conundrum with integrity entails sensitivity to context and strategic decisions about when to nurture alternative spaces for writing and publishing outside of the mainstream (as **PINS** did in its initial years) and when and how to stake a claim within the mainstream (as **PINS** did post-1994 and as **Qualitative Inquiry** is doing now in 2014).

As Miller (1989) argued in a paper in the very early history of **PINS**, for many South Africans, critical psychology was a “territorial imperative” emerging in conditions of racist oppression, which required new ways of theorising psychological realities and new ways of practising psychology. It is evident that our place in time and space, which we take seriously in our research and in the lives of our participants, also plays a vital role in shaping our own research activities and the social practice of publication. Being on the periphery both geographically and politically may have provoked South African researchers to grapple with issues with more easily silenced and marginalised in the North where the weight of epistemological certainties and disciplinary power is more firmly established. It is very evident that **PINS** provided an essential platform for this work not only to find its way into print, but then also through its readership, to reflexively inform and shape the discipline in South Africa. **PINS** at 30 finds itself in a very different social context, but a context in which the imperative to think through the relations between the personal and the political, is no less urgent. Likewise, the timing and laborious process entailed in the launch of **Qualitative Inquiry** as an *APA* journal and the establishment of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry as a *sub-division of the APA*, is a comment of the state of the discipline and the context of its practice, globally.

De Angelis’s (2013: 79) interview with Ruthellen Josselson, *Qualitative Psychology makes a comeback*, reminds us that “Freud did it. Maslow did it. Even Wilhelm Wundt did it”, causing those of us who are older than **PINS** to hum Cole Porter’s tune and sing his lyrics under our breath, suggesting that once upon a time, qualitative work in psychology was as natural as “falling in love”. Josselson claims that “All three seminal figures were passionate about qualitative analysis, forming their groundbreaking theories not through the vaunted randomized controlled trial, but by gathering in-depth insights and perspectives from people.” The opening panel discussion for the conference: “**Qualitative Inquiry** in Psychology: Past, present and future” offered a similar perspective on the history of psychology highlighting qualitative approaches, and including these three and multiple other luminary figures along the way (Fred Wertz). In these ostensibly curious invocations of the authority of the father-figures, qualitative methodologies are inserted into the earliest traditions of the discipline, claiming mainstream credentials and suggesting that these authentic methods are constitutive of “real” psychology and that more recent behaviourist formulations of psychology’s subject and the elaborate development of quantitative methods, are aberrations.

In this opening session of the conference, Mark Freeman, Ken Gergen and Ruthellen Josselson told a strange and ironic tale of the frustrations in establishing this claim to legitimate status for **Qualitative Psychology**, regaling us with the minutiae of the politics involved in establishing the Society for **Qualitative Inquiry** in Psychology (SQIP). Having decided that APA recognition was

essential for the effective development of the field, negotiations began with more obvious partners in another division of the APA, Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (APA Division 24) of which Freeman is a member. However, these discussions ran aground on the basis that working with particular methodologies does not constitute either a theoretical or philosophical project. My discussion of the linkages between method and content above demonstrates that this is a somewhat spurious case but nevertheless, they decided to take the fight elsewhere. The attempt to establish an entirely separate new division for Qualitative Methodology was thwarted by a single vote. Without recounting each step of a tireless campaign, the final resolution of this struggle was surprising to say the least: the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology has been established as a new subdivision of APA Division 5: Evaluation, Measurement and Statistics. The emphasis on methods rather than a particular content domain, provides the common denominator, regardless of the fact that many members of this subdivision would eschew the methods of wider division on, either or both, intellectual and political grounds.

This account of collective bargaining and its peculiar settlement reminds us that the politics of knowledge production is as often as much about petty politicking as it is about big issues. The narrative tells us why Michelle Fine insistently, wryly and joyfully, referred to the launch event as a “coming-out party” in which the Society for Qualitative Inquiry collectively staked its identity claim for qualitative methodology as a legitimate form of inquiry and disciplinary practice in psychology. The metaphorical allusion to “coming-out” connotes delight and public celebration of identity but also recognises the seriousness of the politics that require the declaration of marginal identities in this way and raises questions about the possibilities for subversion within.

So as we celebrate the body of work that **PINS** has made public over the past three decades and look forward to the ongoing development of rigorous and incisive theoretical and empirical work in the South African context, the community of practice for critical psychology is enlarged and enhanced by the opening of another publishing platform at the heart of the powerful APA. Congratulations on coming-of-age to **PINS**, and on coming-out to SQIP and **Qualitative Psychology**!

References

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