

Mapping Qualitative Research in Psychology across Europe: Contemporary Trends.

Editorial to Special Issue

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Abstract

In this special issue, we aim to introduce a mapping of qualitative research in psychology across European settings. Qualitative research in psychology constitutes a complex terrain with a multiplicity of epistemological and methodological perspectives anchored to a diversity of historical, political and socio-cultural settings. Despite recent progress towards the institutionalisation of qualitative research in certain countries, the landscape of qualitative research in psychology in Europe remains largely unexplored. Following a brief overview of qualitative research in psychology, we proceed with narrating the story of the ‘birth’ of this special issue. We then briefly introduce the constellation of articles included in this special issue. We conclude with wider implications concerning the venture of establishing qualitative research in psychology in Europe.

Keywords: qualitative research; qualitative research in psychology; qualitative research in Europe; qualitative research in psychology in Europe

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The main aim of this special issue is to create – for the first time – a mapping of qualitative research practices in psychology across European settings. Research practices are organised in specific ways in different national and regional contexts, giving rise to multiple ways of doing research and leading to the production of different kinds of knowledge. Our objective here is to give voice to authors from different geographical regions in Europe in order to highlight challenges, strengths and needs in relation to particular cultural, social, and historical backgrounds.

In the social sciences, qualitative research constitutes a lively and constantly developing, vibrant terrain inclusive of various epistemological and methodological approaches. Since the 1990s, this terrain has been mostly associated with the constructionist/interpretivist paradigm, critical theory and related ideological position in a rather straightforward way (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Heterogeneous research perspectives were brought together under the term ‘qualitative research’. At the same time, this constellation is underpinned by certain main premises, including: understanding the world and phenomena from social actors’ own perspective; an increased interest in concrete contextualised practices; a focus on language, and a reflexive orientation (Finlay & Gough, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Santiago-Delefosse & del Rio Carral, 2017; Tseliou & Borcsa, 2018). In theory, the use of qualitative methods results from specific, interpretivist ‘visions of the world’ which determine how every stage of the research process is to be implemented

(Lincoln et al., 2011). However, the straightforward association between constructivist/interpretivist principles, critical theory, and qualitative research is reductive (Lincoln et al., 2011; Santiago-Delefosse & del Rio Carral, 2017). In practice, implementing what we commonly refer to as ‘qualitative research’ within the social sciences is not that straightforward. In line with previous work, we argue that qualitative research needs to be further understood in the light of its constitutive multiplicity and tensions (Brinkmann, Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2014).

In psychology, qualitative approaches are to be considered in the context of their specific background. Historically, these approaches have drawn their influences both from clinical fields (medicine, psychopathology) (Wertz, 2014), as well as from a diversity of nonclinical research practices (Giorgi, 2009). Psychology has a long qualitative tradition, implemented by main figures who strongly influenced its history and development, like Wundt, Freud, Jung, James and Piaget (Brinkmann et al., 2014; Wertz, 2014). Nonetheless, this tradition has been marginalised, even repressed, over the years (Brinkmann et al., 2014).

In the past decades, we have witnessed a progressive revival of qualitative research within psychology, partly inspired by social constructionist, pragmatic and/or (post)structuralist approaches that have been developed in neighbouring fields, such as cultural studies, (post)feminism, philosophy and sociology (Brinkmann et al., 2014). Today, qualitative approaches have become institutionalised to some extent via the establishment of scientific associations/societies and conferences; the foundation of journals devoted to publishing research with these kind of methods and, to some extent – the creation of academic positions and courses within higher education curricula (Santiago-Delefosse & del Rio Carral, 2017). Yet, to date, qualitative research in psychology remains a complex composite field. This may

be linked to a number of issues, including: first, its plural historical origins, implying specific political, societal and cultural influences; second, the diversified character of theoretical and methodological inspirations due to this diversity and, third, the development of specific methodological innovations depending on different societal and institutional contexts of application.

Multiplicity and complexity in qualitative research in psychology is equally evident in the numerous theoretical and methodological perspectives which have inspired its composite development. Main influences include: grounded theory (e.g. Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003; Henwood & Pigeon, 1992), phenomenology (e.g. Giorgi, 1992; Moustakas, 1994), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), (e.g. Smith, 1996, 2011, 2015), narrative approaches and hermeneutics (e.g. Murray, 2003, 2017; Sarbin, 1986), discursive approaches (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Gergen, 1985; Parker, 1989, 1992, 2015; Potter, 2012; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), critical approaches (e.g. Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001; Holzkamp, 1992; Teo, 2014, 2015; Tolman & Maiers, 2006) that may adopt a (post)structuralist and/or (post)feminist turn / perspective (e.g. Riley, Evans & Robson, 2018) and, finally, historico-cultural approaches (e.g. Clot, 1999; 2002; Engeström, Miettinen & Punamaki, 1999; Ratner, 1997, 2008; Valsiner, 1989, 1997; Vygotsky, 1999). Furthermore, such diversity has evolved in more recent methodological innovations in the field which have led to the use of mixed approaches (Frost & Nolas, 2013), a renewal of participatory approaches (e.g. Campbell & Cornish 2014; Campbell & Murray, 2004), developments in therapeutic or applied work (Wilson, Bungay, Munn-Giddings & Boyce, 2016) the fore-grounding of an applied psychology perspective (Tseliou, Smoliak, LaMarre & Quinn-Nilas, 2019) as well as new perspectives in post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2018). Also, alternative ways of representing human experiences and the surrounding world have been explored creatively

through methodological developments that adapt digital media, social networks, memory work, visual forms, or specific art forms to research in psychology (e.g. Reavey, 2015).

In Europe, qualitative research in psychology is gradually acquiring institutional visibility, at least in certain regions. This is certainly the case in the United Kingdom, where the *British Psychological Society* (BPS) created a specific section devoted to qualitative research methods, greatly contributing to its legitimisation within the discipline. Also, journals like *Qualitative Research in Psychology* have been established with the aim to stimulate scientific debates and methodological innovations within the field. Additionally, numerous methodological manuals have been published in Western Europe, mostly written in English, often by Anglo-Saxon authors (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Flick, 1998; Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Murray & Chamberlain, 1999; Parker, 1992; Sullivan, Gibson & Riley, 2012; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017; Willig, 2013).

Despite undeniable recent developments toward the institutionalisation of qualitative research in psychology across Europe, this terrain still remains underexplored for at least two reasons. First, paradigms represent ‘ideal-types’ that are both, abstract and theoretical (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As underpinning principles, these ‘visions of the world’ fail to take-into-account their actual implementation depending on the values, norms, and social structures that organise research communities and research practices. To date, little is known about the ways in which clear-cut epistemological, ontological and methodological principles are concretely put into practice. One way to explore this is by considering the multiplicity of socio-historical backgrounds across European contexts and how the latter may define different ways of interpreting such paradigms and, furthermore, of doing research. Second, qualitative research in psychology in different parts of Europe has been developed through rich and diversified

traditions. Yet, little is known about how these influences may contribute to the scientific debate in this field, or how such traditions have been conceptualized and embodied depending on specific backgrounds, and even less, regarding the statutory position of qualitative research in psychology in European countries.

Within this landscape, our special issue underlines the urgent need to address the multiplicity within qualitative research in psychology across European settings with respect to concrete applications in relation to historically and socio-culturally embedded research practices which are, hence, necessarily political (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 2015; Schneider, 1998; Stam, 2004).

Note on the backdrop of this special issue

This special issue has been developed as an opportunity to strengthen qualitative research in psychology in Europe by mapping current research practices and modes of conducting this kind of research. The origin of this project can be traced back to a workshop that took place at the University of Lausanne in September 11-12, 2016 entitled: Creating Bridges between European Researchers across Qualitative Research in Psychology, co-organised by Maria del Rio Carral and Marie Santiago-Delefosse (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and the Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne). The main objective of that workshop was to bring together – for the first time – established and early career, promising researchers from different cultural/theoretical backgrounds in qualitative research in psychology across Europe, in order to map contemporary practices and modes of organisation and recognition within qualitative research in psychology. Specifically, the workshop's aims were defined as follows: a) mapping personal practices of conducting qualitative research in psychology; b) mapping modes of organisation and recognition of through the identification of institutional and national practices; c) identifying strengths, challenges and needs in at

personal, institutional and national levels; d) reflecting upon the aims and the means of creating a European association devoted to develop links across different research cultures, countries, and generations. To achieve these aims, four working groups were implemented, mixing 10 established researchers and 10 early career researchers. During these workshops, participants addressed key issues concerning qualitative research in psychology, such as quality, ethics and innovation in methods. Most importantly, however, participants acknowledged the urgent need to initiate new synergies across Europe for scientific co-operation and training of younger generations by promoting a multiplicity of research postures and methodological approaches.

As a consequence, two main actions were decided. Firstly, to create the first *Association of European Qualitative Researchers in Psychology* (EQuIP). This action was further consolidated in the context of a second workshop which took place in Aalborg in June 2018. Today, EQuIP (<https://www.equipsy.org/>) has been established and is currently preparing the 1st Conference which will take place in Thessaloniki, Greece (18-20 June, 2020 www.EQuIP2020.gr). The second action undertaken in Lausanne was the decision to proceed with the publication of this special issue.

Introduction to the contributions that compose this special issue

With this special issue our aim was to provide an unprecedented space which would enable contributing authors to reflect upon concrete forms of constructing research practices across different historical, cultural, political and societal settings. It's content concerns nine contributions representing the following regions: a) 'Southern Europe' or 'Mediterranean' countries – Spain, France and Italy – b) 'Eastern Europe' – Hungary, Poland, Czech and Slovak Republic, and c) the 'Northwestern coast of Europe', namely, the United Kingdom. Each selected article tells/narrates a particular story within the European landscape. Each one of them implies the adoption of a given standpoint grounded on a cultural, historical and

political stance, that produces an array of epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues.

This constellation of articles can be defined as an attempt to structure a still obscure terrain, with the hope of further generating new possibilities of action, beyond Anglo-Saxon trends. Simultaneously, it adds to the visibility of qualitative research in psychology by highlighting the existing multiplicity and by identifying contemporary strengths, needs, challenges and potentials. All nine contributions from different European settings contribute to the demarcation of a plurality of ‘visions’ and ‘ways of doing’ qualitative research in psychology across an array of domains: health, social, organizational, community, clinical, gender and diversity, etc. – with a common ‘applied’ nature. This heterogeneous constellation includes equally powerful and yet specific research practices which are systematically considered within the framework of local university departments, faculties, and research centres, within a given political system, but also dependent upon a globalized, increasingly neoliberal academic culture.

In Eastern Europe, Masaryk and colleagues (Masaryk, Petrjánošová, Lášticová, Kuglerová & Stainton Rogers, this issue) underline the key role of political values in the organisation of contemporary ways of thinking about psychology in the Slovak and Czech Republics. In their paper, they analyse how experimental research practices, which had been developed under communist regimes, evolved into constructivist approaches after the collapse of such regimes. As argued by these authors, the ‘Velvet Revolution’ inspired novel ways of thinking, namely through critical perspectives. However, today, qualitative research in psychology in Eastern Europe seems affected by the propagation of neoliberal values within academia. This societal and institutional transformation may be considered as a threat to creativity and originality by many academics. This concern is highlighted also by Kovacs and colleagues (Kovacs, Kiss,

Kassai, Pados, Kalo & Racz, this issue) in their article on the mapping of epistemological groundings in published research from: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic & Romania. These authors point out an important use of post-positivist approaches across these countries and, furthermore, a consistent lack of methodological precision regarding 'qualitative' publications. To them, this widely spread 'intuitive' use of qualitative methods needs to be countered, namely through a better institutionalization of qualitative research in psychology at national and international levels, which would imply the improvement of (under)graduate curricula to include qualitative research skills.

Concerning the 'Mediterranean' region, qualitative research communities seem to constitute a minority within the broader contemporary landscape of psychology, dominated by positivism and quantitative approaches. In France, qualitative research in psychology seems to have evolved, at least in part, to differentiate itself from a dominant psychoanalytic/clinical background (Santiago-Delefosse & del Rio Carral, 2017). Given their complementary contribution, two papers have been selected in this special issue which focus on social interactions and the co-construction of different kinds of knowledge. Both are inspired by Social Representation Theory and its relation to triangulation (Caillaud, Doumergue, Préau, Haas & Kalampalikis, this issue; Restivo & Apostolidis, this issue). According to Restivo and Apostolidis, triangulation in Social Representation Theory constitutes a powerful strategy used in applied research to enhance scientific rigour while taking-into-account complex institutional and societal aspects of psychological phenomena, such as health. In their article, Caillaud et al. reflect upon triangulation in relation to Social Representation Theory as a tool to better study the inherent 'conflicts' that characterize the construction of social knowledge and practices through different perspectives, like the historical, institutional and subjective. The article by Gemignani, Benitez Baena & Ferrari (this issue) highlights the rich historical

background in another Mediterranean country – Spain – marked by origins in hermeneutics and phenomenology. This paper also takes into account the role of Anti-Francoism and societal movements from the late sixties and seventies, through the promotion of values in qualitative research that foster social justice and change. The article by Montali and colleagues (Montali, Benozzo, Ripamonti, Frigerio, Galuppo, Gemignani & Vergine, this issue) presents an in-depth mapping of ‘the Italian way’, by reflecting upon the roots of qualitative research practices in Italy in order to better understand contemporary strengths and challenges of qualitative approaches within psychology as a whole.

The analysis of contemporary qualitative research in psychology in the UK is presented through two papers. Through their specific focus, each highlights the benefits of institutionalizing this research trend within our discipline. The paper by Riley and colleagues (Riley, Brooks, Goodman, Cahill, Branney, Treharne & Sullivan, this issue) analyses the positive consequences that have resulted from creating the *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section* (QMIP) within the BPS to acknowledge the contribution of this kind of knowledge to psychology as a whole. Within a decade from its creation, QMiP has progressively moved from a ‘defensive’ stance against hegemonic positivistic approaches to an incredibly abundant theoretical and methodological project (Willig & Stainton-Rogers 2017). This fruitful development seems to have been motivated by the implementation of concrete tools of scientific dissemination and communication (journals, conferences, prizes, funding opportunities, etc.). Today, important challenges have emerged among UK qualitative researchers with regard to new political measures (Riley et al, this issue), such as the system for evaluating research quality – *Research Excellence Framework* (REF) – and recent *Open Science* policies (Branney, Reid, Frost, Coan, Mathieson & Woolhouse, this issue). However, Branney and colleagues insist on the collective responsibility that is needed among qualitative

researchers within psychology to become active members of current debates. Collective participation appears as a very strong message that needs to be heard to fight against the marginalization of alternative and critical ways of doing research that differ from dominant mainstream psychology. This message seems essential to promote diversity within qualitative research in our discipline, which unlike other social sciences, is deeply anchored in individualistic and positivistic ways of studying human mind, human behavior, and human experience.

Like Giles (this issue) we think that mapping qualitative research in psychology across Europe necessitates acknowledging the critical role of language barriers, of the political and cultural contexts, as well as the role of idiosyncratic disciplinary issues.

Our hope is that this special issue will contribute to the foregrounding of a perspective favouring the acknowledgment of complexity and interdependence among such aspects. Through the mapping of different European settings, we further hope that this special issue can significantly contribute to ongoing methodological debates in psychology through two main cross-cutting dimensions. The first dimension concerns the need for an increased legitimization of theoretical and methodological diversity within qualitative research in psychology at an international level, alongside the promotion of rigorous research practices and explicitly addressed epistemological foundations. All eight contributions note the rich potential of acknowledging specific historical, cultural and political backgrounds that have given rise to original ways of producing knowledge. The second cross-cutting dimension underlines the need to create bridges through collaborations and enhance existing links across institutions and countries through increased cross-national ‘fertilization’ or exchange among researchers working in this field. The potential of such links may be grasped by looking at the unique ‘histories’ narrated in this special issue. Each one of them highlights how research

practices were the fruit of co-constructions among researchers with different backgrounds. All of them -either implicitly or explicitly – present how specificities and skills were developed by means of international exchanges, namely in Europe between: Eastern European countries and the UK (Masaryk et al, this issue; Kovacs et al, this issue); France, Eastern Europe and the UK (Restivo & Apostolidis, this issue; Caillaud et al, this issue); Italy, France and the UK (Montali et al, this issue); or Spain and the UK (Gemignani et al, this issue), without noting the many other influences overseas and across the globe.

From our point of view, these two cross-cutting dimensions necessitate further attention. We believe that a more solid institutionalisation of qualitative research within psychology across Europe is promising for the discipline of psychology as a whole in the following sense. The diverse historical, cultural and political backgrounds which have given rise to a multiplicity of methodological innovations bears potential for psychological research in that it adds a nuanced perspective to the study of contemporary, challenging societal issues across Europe, like migration (see Murray, this issue). In that sense, we also think that the legitimisation of the multiplicity of approaches and related research practices beyond the Anglo-Saxon landscape seems imperative. Finally, the institutionalisation of this kind of research would greatly help to raise awareness among researchers on the risk of standardisation or ‘Macdonalisation’ of qualitative research in psychology within an international context that values fast science through increased productivity and efficiency (Brinkmann, 2015; Demuth, 2015).

To conclude this introduction to our special issue, we think that collective efforts are needed internationally to increase the participation of qualitative researchers in conversations that are taking place within psychology across Europe. Mainstream psychology seems particularly powerful at the present, possibly given the anchorage of contemporary academia within

neoliberal values. Thus researchers engaged in qualitative approaches need to become active members of these institutional processes. This call for enhanced political awareness shall extend to the international community (Gemignani et al., this issue; Riley et al., this issue). Our special issue presents different examples that shall encourage researchers engaged in qualitative approaches to occupy academic positions *within* psychological departments, but also at decisional boards concerned with publication and funding issues. This could greatly contribute to the elaboration of new rules that include different research perspectives, including more critical ones, within a contemporary academic system where qualitative researchers tend to be marginalized (Brinkmann et al., 2014). Hopefully, this will contribute to the demarcation of future directions (Gough & Lyons, 2016), which will strengthen and enrich the potential of qualitative research within psychology.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the editors of the *Qualitative Research in Psychology Journal* for trusting us with editing this special issue. We are particularly indebted to Brendan Gough for his continuous and invaluable support throughout this project. We are also thankful to the contributing authors, whose work made this special issue possible, as well as to David Giles and Michael Murray who accepted our invitation to contribute with thought-provoking commentaries. Finally, we are thankful to the anonymous reviewers, all experts in the different thematic areas covered by this special issue, for their valuable contribution in the reviewing process.

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