

Do we really want a future as qualitative psychologists?

Abstract

In this article I pick up some threads from the contributions in the previous special issue of IPSB dedicated to the future of qualitative psychology, and elaborate them around two main points. The first is the status of qualitative psychology as a social and institutional category; the second is what we mean by experience.

As concerns the first point, I have argued that using the label of qualitative psychology may separate us from the rest of psychology, also creating a false impression of homogeneity among qualitative approaches and a false opposition with quantitative methods. Implications for teaching as well as doing research are discussed.

The second issue has to do with experience as the object of qualitative psychology investigation. I have proposed three ways to formulate experience in research avoiding naïve assumptions about accessing it directly through language. These are 1) experience as experience of the researcher, 2) experience as situated intersubjectivity, and 3) experience as expression. I discuss how being clearer about definitions of experience and going towards engaged forms of research could safeguard the integrity of both researcher and participants.

Do we really want a future as qualitative psychologists?

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7 Following on the debate in the last (special) issue of IPSB dedicated to the future of
8 qualitative psychology, I would like to concentrate on two aspects of the discussion.
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11 The first is the status of qualitative psychology as a social and institutional category;
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13 the second is what we mean by experience.
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1. Are we self-segregating?

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24 I am in two minds about considering the flourishing of dedicated journals and
25 conferences (Demuth, 2015a) as an indicator of success. On the one hand it certainly
26 means that qualitative psychologists are taking more space on the scene and affirming
27 their rights to be heard; on the other hand, creating defended, alternative venues for
28 publications and presentations may reiterate and perhaps reinforce our minority status.
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31 There are journals of the psychology of this-and-that and there are journals of
32 *qualitative* psychology of this-and-that. Of course, forcing our way into mainstream
33 journals is simply not viable most of the time, but perhaps it would be a good parallel
34 strategy to create journals with a focus on either specific topics or epistemological
35 stances which are elective for qualitative psychology, like the very journal publishing
36 these lines, or open to qualitative research in general like the recently established
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Journal of Interactional Research in Communication Disorders and the brand new
Research for Children and Social Interaction. This would mean qualifying the kind of
psychology we do, rather than forcing us to difficult cohabitations and bestow on us a
label that none of us identifies with.

1 The same can be said for teaching Qualitative Methods under such term. I teach
2 the qualitative part of both undergraduate and post-graduate units including
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4 quantitative and qualitative methods, and I completely agree with Terkildsen and
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6 Petersen (2015; by the way, how interesting to have the students' perspective in the
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8 special issue) that in doing so we build the false perception of all qualitative methods
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10 sitting close to each other and roughly at the same distance from those quantitative
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12 types across the room– which is not the case at all. As we know, but is worth
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14 repeating, some qualitative approaches are more distant from each other than from
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16 quantitative ways of reasoning. Those which include coding data and identifying
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18 relations between variables, for example, are not conceptually alien to what
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20 experimental cognitive psychologists do, whereas the practice is incompatible with
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22 ethnomethodological or critical perspectives; or treating written texts as stand alone
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24 items, as certain forms of discourse analysis concedes, is also closer to quantitative
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26 content analysis and at odds with what other qualitative approaches– such as
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28 ethnography – that deem necessary to investigate how texts are produced and used as
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30 well as their content¹.
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39 Terkildsen and Petersen's (2015) suggestion that students should be taught the
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41 epistemologies rather than the 'tools' (besides making me want to hug them) is also
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43 worth pursuing. Contextualizing the different qualitative methods in the history of
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45 psychology and its different epistemologies would break the image of homogeneity
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47 between them and show their full legitimacy within the discipline.
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51 A recurrent paradox in the history of knowledge is that when certain things are
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53 so culturally engrained that never need to be mentioned, they may be entirely
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56 ¹See ten Have, 2004 for a systematic comparison of different qualitative methods and
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58 their compatibility with ethnomethodology.
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1 forgotten, their being tacit subtracting the resources for reclaiming them. De
2 Santillana and Dechend (1996 p.4), discussing the disappearance of the once firmly
3 established connection between astronomic knowledge and mythology, note that:
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5 “Ancient historians would have been aghast had they been told that obvious things
6 were to become unnoticeable”². The forebears of psychology, as Brinkmann (2015)
7 reminds us, did not refer to what they were doing as qualitative or especially distinct
8 form experiments, as there was no need to justify or give a separate label to central
9 psychological practices such as examining subjectivity or studying single cases. Now
10 that what was marginal in psychology has become central stage, and vice versa, it is
11 difficult to bring back this awareness into the short memory of the discipline. To
12 come back to our point, if the different research methods were grounded in their
13 history and theory of knowledge, the absurdity of having to fight for doing research
14 on the very subject matters psychology was born for would stand out more clearly.
15 However, I have met a number of difficulties to include such notions when teaching
16 the qualitative part of units which also comprehended quantitative methods. After
17 giving students batteries of techniques in the first half of the course, introducing
18 historical and theoretical content as a premise to qualitative methods only confirm
19 them that qualitative methods produce a psychology in inverted commas, full of
20 caveats and fine distinctions, and that it is safer to stay away for it. (The fact that
21 history of psychology is not a required subject in psychology courses does not help
22 either: revealing that Wundt was much more interested in cultural psychology than in
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² Here’s how they continue, if you are curious: “Aristotle was proud to state it as
known that the gods were originally stars, even if popular fantasy had later obscured
this truth. Little as he believed in progress, he felt this much had been secured for the
future.” (de Santillana & Dechend, *ibidem*)

1 his experiments is not going to be much of a scoop if you are unaware of Wundt's
2 role in establishing the paradigm of experimental psychology). This is just to say that
3 a commitment to a different psychology might require getting involved at an
4 organisational level, and try to shape our teaching in sensible ways. We will be soon
5 separating the qualitative from the quantitative methods module in my department,
6 and we will try not to have a twin denomination, but I doubt I will be able to teach a
7 unit called, say, Researching Human Activity and Experience, rather than Qualitative
8 Methods. It would be a much clearer title though, and abandoning the
9 quantitative/qualitative opposition would also help undoing the belief that in studying
10 these things we cannot 'count', which is also untrue.³

11 One last thing I would like to say about the risks of hardening the boundaries of
12 qualitative psychology is that in so doing we reinforce our insularity. We need to go
13 back to the forebears also in terms keeping up with the cousin disciplines –
14 anthropology, sociology, literary studies, and increasingly human geography. I agree
15 with Brinkmann (2015) that multi-disciplinarity has got the potential for seriously
16 innovative endeavours in the social sciences; however in psychology there is a strong
17 tendency to reinvent the wheel, and qualitative psychologists have often exploited the
18 fact that we can count on an audience of psychology-only readers for rebranding

19 ³ As Schegloff (1993, p.114) put it, we can count, as long we make sure that 'we
20 know what the phenomena are, how they are organized, and how they are related to
21 each other as a precondition for cogently bringing methods of quantitative analysis to
22 bear on them'. In 1993 Schegloff deemed premature a statistical approach to the study
23 of talk in interaction, but he argued that the attention to each and every instance of a
24 given phenomenon also has numerical significance: '*one* is also a number' (ibidem,
25 p.101).

1 concepts and theories from neighbouring disciplines, or hair-splitting an analytical
2 practice so to create one's new cute acronym. In a way, qualitative psychology has
3 become a brand in itself, and not one that up to now has favoured interdisciplinary
4 recruiting and collaboration.
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19 As many of the topics that are discussed in the special issue, the researcher-participant
20 problem is at once ethical and key to creating better science. Tateo (2015) strikes right
21 into the heart of the question, I think, when he discusses this relation together with the
22 problem of experience. A point both he and Demuth's (2015a) make clear, so I will
23 not reiterate it at length, is that the basic equivocation about qualitative research is
24 that it is about the *interviewee's experience*, where experience is the pre-existing
25 internal content of the individual heart/mind that the interviewer will– with the aid of
26 some 'skills' of course – liberate. I think that if we make the effort of clarifying the
27 ways experience can be studied we can attack both these fronts simultaneously.
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41 Here's my twopence.
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46 *Experience as experience of the researcher.* As cultural anthropologist Kapferer
47 (1986) says, "I do not experience your experience. [...] I experience my experience of
48 you" (Kapferer, 1986: 189; see also Bruner, 1986). Bearing this in mind can
49 strengthen two existing practices in qualitative psychology, which are not yet as
50 established as they could be. The first is treating the researcher's experience as an
51 asset in the process of scientific creativity and accountability, also strengthening
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‘second person’ approaches (Reddy, 2008); the second is developing participatory research.

From an ethnomethodological standpoint, if I stay in the position of the observer I can access only half of the process of making sense in everyday life: my experience is one-sided and I do not have the natural confirmation of the other’s action toward me that would validate my interpretation (and theirs of mine and so on: Rawls, 2006). Engagement is thus a requisite for ‘quality’ findings, and one that can bring into psychological knowledge an array of sources that are unavailable from a mere observer position. As discussed by Reddy (2008, pp.34-6), engagement and disengagement necessarily alternate in the research process, but disengagement is not equal to detachment and leaving participants beyond a glass wall.

Forms of engagement can vary, and it is not the place here for discussing all the options for engaged research in different fields of inquiry. It is interesting though that neuroscientists have noticed how a shift in the position of the researcher can produce better science, and have now begun to incorporate second person approaches into their observational paradigms (Schilbach et al., 2013; see Tateo, 2015, for an illustration of the different researcher’s positions as derived from Peircean semiotics).

Speaking about the experience of the researcher, Bruner (1986, p.9) says: “Most good ethnographers, interestingly enough, reintroduce vitality in their descriptive accounts by including illustrative snatches of personal narrative, bits of biography, or vivid passages from their fieldnotes [...] In effect the experiential component return to the account as a by-product rather than an explicit object of research”. This was 1986, and a lot has changed in anthropology since⁴; in

⁴ To an extent: the 80s have probably seen the greatest innovation on this matter. And it is often the case that first person reflexive accounts are made the subject of separate

1 psychology, however, we still feel lucky if we get any of that. Dating problems aside,
2 what the quote helps us see is that the problem is also centrally one of writing. The
3 fact that Bruner uses the word ‘vitality’ is revelatory: I am sure we can all remember
4 reading a qualitative article and really enjoying those fragments in which the study
5 came alive, the uncertainty and openness of doing research vibrating again in the
6 description. However, we treat these fragments as luxury, and we use them with
7 extreme moderation. The problem of course is that this kind of things sounds
8 perilously ‘subjective’, and the more they seep through the more there is fear that they
9 may make a study weaker to outsiders’ eyes. This is just another reason, though, why
10 it could be worth making a point of it, and arguing that we are in fact trying to offer a
11 more credible and more informative science (Freeman 2011).

12 We should deal with the question of subjectivity upfront in our teaching as
13 well, making it one of the defining features of qualitative approaches. I found Parker’s
14 (2004, pp.26-30) way of explaining views on subjectivity and how to put them right
15 particularly helpful: “Th[e] ‘merely subjective’ version of subjectivity is misleading
16 because it overlooks the difficult conceptual work that we need to engage in to make
17 subjectivity part of the research, and it reduces subjectivity to something that only
18 pertains to the individual researcher as if it were hidden inside them, waiting to be
19 revealed to the reader [...] To talk about ‘the position of the researcher’ is not at all to
20 wallow in one’s own bad (or good) feelings about what happened in the research, to
21 spill your guts about what you felt, but to explore how that particular form of
22 subjectivity came to be the way it was by virtue of the particular institutional
23 relationships that were drawn up and recreated so to make it intelligible and
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66 publications rather than being interwoven with the object of study, or even become a
67 separate method, like autoethnography.

1 accountable". The concept is clear; how to transform it into a writing practice is less
2 immediate, especially when we want to make it part of our very standard way of
3 exposing research findings. However, dedicated works that explore these dimensions
4 specifically can also help building a shared writing practice. Medved and Brockmeier
5 (2014) offer a useful reflexive exploration of the researcher's position in a study
6 involving Canadian First Nation women. The authors show how to articulate an
7 analysis about the conceptual apparatus that any investigation brings to bear on the
8 dialogue with the participants, exploring for example the zones of opacity around the
9 use of a term like culture or the genre of personal narratives the women adopted.
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21 So, to conclude, we have to be really careful not to contribute to the
22 demonisation of subjectivity, which can also happen when adopting the rhetoric of
23 rigour, and instead indefatigably promote forms of writing that encourage engagement
24 in the research process and identifying the position of the researcher in its multiple
25 determinants.
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33 Following up from the previous discussion, the distinguishing mark of all
34 qualitative research should be to seek intimacy (Williams & Gantt 1998) with whom
35 and what we study, but this is impossible if we do not turn around many tacit
36 assumptions about the role of participants in research. Participatory research was
37 repeatedly brought up in the special issue; Brinkmann (2015) mentions it as one the
38 new creative ways of making psychology that are happening at the fringes, and Tateo
39 (2015) argues that the curiosity of the participant is as valid as that of the researcher. I
40 think that seeking intimacy with and give *recognition* (Todorov, 2001 Ricoeur, 2004)
41 to the participants in our studies can have deep epistemological consequences; ethical
42 and scientific objectives meet here as recognition reinstates the integrity of both the
43 researcher and the participants.
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1 An equal footing and an active involvement may be achieved through different
2 strategies, but broadly speaking it entails annexing the participants' experience by
3 making them researchers as well, sharing the culture of research and finding ways to
4 merge researchers' interests and concerns of participants – or the other way around.
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6 The practice is consequential not only from the participants actually involved: a clear
7 example comes from the field of communication disorders and intellectual
8 disabilities. Experimental, 'detached' studies perpetuate images of deficit and
9 difference, widening the distance between people with typical and atypical
10 competence and reproducing definitions of conditions that are partial or incorrect.
11 Involving participants has permitted to capture the sense-making, relation-seeking
12 efforts of people with different mental health conditions and with communication
13 impairment, enabling intersubjectivity and building more detailed and accurate
14 pictures of what a condition entails and how to better support those who live with it
15 (Williams, 2001; Biklen, Attfield 2005, among others).

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17 Understanding in participatory research comes from a prolonged, sustained
18 and mutual relationship (although not necessarily a symmetrical one point-to-point);
19 interpretations and new questions as well as ways to pursue them develop within a
20 project; the research changes and the participants change with it; the implication here
21 is that the experience this process will eventually make available to the scientific
22 community is not a pre-existing property of the individuals, but a forward-looking,
23 goal orientated and intersubjective achievement. Which brings us to the second way
24 of conceiving of experience.

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56 *Experience as situated intersubjectivity.* Staying loyal to experience means
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58 investigating the details of the practices members bring to the situation, and all what
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1 the situation entails (von Helm, 2014). It is an ecological approach, which reshapes
2 itself artistically around the object of research, finding ways of catching the action of
3 participants in their orientation to each other and in a space and time that is
4 meaningful to them.
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9 One fundamental aspect of human psychology that experimental approaches –
10 and many interview-based one - are doomed to fail seeing is that human life is
11 organised into domains which have their own distinct organisation in terms of time,
12 environmental structures and interactional frames that come into play together (for
13 examples of domains in relation to socialisation practices see Nucci & Weber, 1995,
14 Fasulo, Lloyd & Padiglione 2007). Conversely, ecological, situated approaches are
15 interested to capture precisely those interrelations, and are adopted by various strands
16 of Anthropology, Cultural Psychology and Ecological Psychology (Hutchins, 1995:
17 Lave, 1988 Costall & Leudar, 1996 Goodwin, 2000, 2002). Situated approaches were
18 was advocated even earlier on by Garfinkel, Goffman, and Bateson, all recognising
19 the primacy of ‘situation’ and its specifics. Bateson has particularly evocative ways of
20 describing what differs in this stance, as exemplified by his recommendation for ‘the
21 substitution of a temporalized “eco-logic” for the timeless “logic” which previously
22 served as a model or image of mind.’ (Bateson & Donaldson, 1991, p.xvii; on the
23 issue time in psychological inquiry see Fogel, 2011). Again, this is a way of framing
24 experience that does not imply pursuing the rendering of consolidated feelings and
25 thoughts, but that tries to get closer to the moment-by-moment, action-to-
26 counteraction perspective that characterises activity in context.
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*Experience as expression*⁵. Finally, we may want to explore how people give shape to
experience in culturally inflected forms. These may entail narratives variously
constructed or performed, artistic creations, and possibly collective enactments of
ritualised or symbolic activities. Investigating experience through its expressions does
not collapse one onto the other; on the contrary, it looks at how available cultural
resources support the entextualisation of subjectivity, and how texts and performances
refresh and renew the cultural resources that makes them intelligible. As
anthropologists see it, in this perspective we leave to other people to define the unit of
investigation (Bruner, 1996), as they choose the shape in which to articulate their
experience.

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The psychological explorations of the interplay between subjectivity, culture
and expressive media has happened mostly outside psychology itself, with the study
of literary narratives, fictional or autobiographical, by literature scholars such as
Eakin and Olney (with few exceptions; see Brockmeier, 2008, 2009). These works
show that that the more refined, elaborated and properly artistic a narrative, the more
powerful it can be in illuminating the complexities of our reflexive relation to
ourselves and the world. Life-stories and narratives in interviews can be enlisted
amongst expression of experience, but only if we also consider the cultural resources
they draw upon and we treat them as occasioned performances.

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At present, the treatment of narratives in qualitative psychology is highly
problematic (Atkinson & Delamont 2006). One problem is the narrow interpretation
of narratives as always or mainly doing identity work, or positioning. First of all,

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⁵ I owe the formulation to the group of anthropologists which have worked to the
articulation of an anthropology of experience (Turner & Bruner, 1996).

1 personal identity often includes or is defined by the narratives we build about others,
2 places, and other non strictly autobiographical events (Fasulo, forthcoming).
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4 Secondly, narrative is a machinery for the production of sense that is applied across
5 social and natural phenomena, and we use it for the organisation of knowledge far
6 beyond the limits of the autobiographical sphere, as is evident when looking at
7 conversational narratives (Fasulo Zucchermaglio 2008). Another problem in the way
8 narratives are used is that meaning is extracted from them as if it were readily
9 available; stories, however, are not uni-dimensional in their meaning, and are not
10 about routines or all-clear facts: they often arise precisely to work through breaks
11 from expectations and opaque events.
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24 Ruppel and Mey's (2015) reflections on how to do justice to narratives within
25 the Grounded Theory approach is welcome, but in a way is more revealing of
26 problems than of solutions, a fact they do not try hiding. Let me give an example. In
27 putting together some material for a workshop, I recently went through a collection of
28 life-story interviews gathered by 3rd year students for their coursework. I selected a
29 few that seemed at once more elaborate and more enigmatic, and seemed promising
30 for a good discussion. Together with the workshop participants, we worked out that
31 the interviews made sense only if examined in their entirety as a gallery of selected
32 images that worked together toward the *suggestion* of meaning⁶. Take the interview of
33 a woman who had left London (where she had spent all her life) in her middle age, for
34 a more rural and isolated place in England. There was a lot of bitterness about that
35 turn of events throughout the interview, and a marked before and after in the narrative
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54 ⁶ Perhaps not by chance these are interviews in which students had selected
55 participants knowing that there was a good story there, and during which they did not
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1 structure. But what was that she felt she had lost? She never stated it in an explanatory
2 fashion. The woman recalled instead a series of stories about London, all from her
3 childhood (where many life myths notoriously come from). These included
4 witnessing the first V2 rocket launched by the Germans; her mum moving heavy
5 furniture from place to place as they got hit, resolute not to leave the city; herself, 4
6 years old, offering flowers to the Queen Mother who went to visit the hospital where
7 she was being cured of pneumonia, and spending nights in tube stations as it is often
8 seen in war documentaries and photographs. Breaking down these stories, even
9 according to a story grammar model as proposed by Böhm (cit. in Ruppel and May
10 2015) would not take us anywhere near the atmosphere and imagery this part of the
11 interview on the whole conveyed. We felt that at least one thread running through was
12 that London was a place where history with the big H happened, and could rub off on
13 ordinary people any time ⁷, whereas this kind of potentiality had been taken away
14 from the woman's life horizon in the new place.

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34 My point is that narratives are always oblique, creating meaning in
35 synecdochical fashion, and have multiple entry points (some of which can get lost if
36 the interviewer goes down a different path). This openness is intrinsic to human
37 symbolic expression, and qualitative methods that try to reabsorb it by breaking them
38 down into smaller unit of meaning simply miss the point and its psychological

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46 ⁷ The concept of the proximity of the big and the small, the celebrities and everyone,
47 is not only visible in the collection of stories but also in a break-through into reported
48 speech, during the telling of the hospital episode: "Strangely enough while I was in
49 there her majesty the queen mother came to the hospital to visit because Buckingham
50 palace had been bombed as well and she then made the famous statement "*I can look
51 the East End in the eye now*" because her home had been bombed as well ...".
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1 significance. It is also not wise to put the method of analysis before the research
2 question and the data, as if the method were the unchangeable part and the rest had to
3 adapt to it (Demuth, 2015b). As for narratives, it may be better to stay with the more
4 humble idea that we can use narratives to open up “regions of truth” (Freeman 2011)
5 to which to go back again and again.
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11 Finally, it may worth considering that by studying artefacts already existing -
12 naturally occurring data - we can study not only problems and difficulties but also the
13 resilient processes, the artefact itself often being part of the solution. The
14 representation of experience in cultural forms is a reflexive and often self-therapeutic
15 process. Whereas this kind of information can be elicited in interview as well, the fact
16 that a certain narrative or artistic project has been undertaken spontaneously at a
17 certain point in a person’s life, and in a certain form, gives us more information than
18 can appear in an interview about how cultural resources and narrative representations
19 function in supporting people’s psychological needs. There are many possible
20 examples here; Eakin’s (2014) analysis of Sartre’s autobiographical writing is an
21 unforgettable (for me) lesson in how since childhood we actively work on our
22 negative experiences by shaping them into cultural forms, always looking forward to
23 the next instantiation.
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43 To conclude this long section, I can only add that most of the time referring to
44 experience as the objective of a study may be unnecessary if not confusing. Like
45 identity⁸, the term may have accumulated too much history for us to be able to
46 demystify inappropriate uses; a term that covers so many declinations may also have
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54 ⁸ For arguments on the limited utility and frequent abuse of the notion of identity in
55 social science see Bendle, 2006, Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, Kulick, 2005; see Fasulo
56 Piazza, 2014 for a review.
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1 limited heuristic value. As the Buddhists say, I offer these thoughts for reflection
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9 Conclusions

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14 I have examined two main issues with the aim of understanding what creates
15 misleading representations of qualitative psychologists and what are the ill-defined
16 areas in the methodological practices themselves.
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22 The first has to do with the label ‘qualitative’ itself; I have argued that it may
23 separate us from the rest of psychology, creating a false impression of homogeneity
24 within the field and a similarly incorrect polarity with quantitative methods. The
25 issue of diversity within qualitative methods has been argued many times before, but
26 as we are in the process of creating even more events and institutions with this
27 denomination, it may be worth also thinking about alternatives.
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37 The second issue has to do with experience as the target of qualitative inquiry;
38 together with the prevalence of interviews in qualitative research, this notion is
39 contributing to a portrait of qualitative psychology as naïve beyond its borders, and is
40 producing theoretically flawed research within them. I have proposed three ways to
41 formulate experience as an object of research without losing sight of the facts that it
42 can be never be captured first hand or in its raw state, that it is not exclusively
43 individual and that it is phenomenologically forward looking. These are 1) experience
44 as experience of the researcher, 2) experience as situated intersubjectivity, and 3)
45 experience as expression. I have attempted to show how embracing these definitions
46 of experience in qualitative research would entail building intimacy with and
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1 recognition of the research participants, while acknowledging and creatively deploy
2 the subjectivity of the researcher as well. I have argued that the practices mentioned
3 would safeguard the integrity of both researcher and participants, during the research
4 process as well as in the final write-up.
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9 I wish that the extremely fruitful discussion that was opened with the previous
10 issue of JPBS by Carolin Demuth and the workshop contributors will keep going,
11 with even more voices joining in the debate. I would have liked to elaborate more on
12 the question of writing, which retrospectively influences so many of the decisions we
13 take in our research, but I have been lingering too much already. I look forward then
14 to a next event in which we can bring together our views again, focusing on how to
15 write about the qualities of human life.
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