

Commentary for QRP special issue

When Brendan Gough and I first pitched the idea for *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (QRP) to publishers back in the early 2000s, we envisaged it as a largely UK-based publication. Our impression was that, outside English-speaking parts of the globe, there was relatively little qualitative research being undertaken by psychologists and that Britain was the only European country that could sustain enough copy to keep a quarterly journal going. A perusal of the submission statistics would seem to support our belief – during the two years up to 2019, UK authors had submitted almost as many papers ( $n = 61$ ) as the rest of Europe put together ( $n = 62$ ). However, over the journal's first ten years (2004-13), the former figure was more than double the latter. Of course, this doesn't tell us much; it could be that qualitative research is dwindling in UK psychology, or, on the contrary, that there are more outlets that accept qualitative papers from UK authors. What is notable is that the acceptance rates have changed. UK-origin papers submitted in the last two years are much more likely to be accepted (46% compared to 28% during the previous period; 22% is the overall acceptance rate). Perhaps UK authors have finally worked out what sort of papers to send us?

Submissions from continental European countries display a surprising consistency. We receive roughly one paper a year from Denmark, and over half of these have been published (58%). We have only ever received four papers from the Netherlands, and are yet to publish one. The only discernible trend is a slight swing from Scandinavia to Southern Europe. In the first ten years, most of our European submissions from outside the UK came from Sweden (10) and Norway (9). Now it is Spain and Italy who send the most. In the Italian case, this may reflect a period during which we published several papers, but despite sending us a total of 16, we have failed to publish any sent from Spain.

Of course, as qualitative researchers we would do well not to spend too much time fixating on the numbers. There are many reasons why papers are rejected. The usual one is that the authors have simply not grasped the aims of the journal and are desperately seeking any publication outlet willing

to consider qualitative data (often these are bits simply chipped off a large quantitative study). Many unsuccessful submissions are perfectly respectable reports of substantive findings using routine qualitative methods (like thematic analysis or IPA). We usually recommend specialist alternative outlets for these papers. Why these constraints should favour the work of some countries rather than others is not clear.

The impression given in the eight papers in this issue is that there has been a gradual uptake of qualitative methods by psychologists across Europe in recent decades. Various reasons for this are put forward by the authors, not least the appearance of more and more publications – both journals like QRP and textbooks – about qualitative research in Psychology, and how to do it. At the same time various constraints are identified that limit their growth, such as the notorious ‘REF’ exercise now shaping UK psychology research (see the contributions by Riley et al and Branney et al). In this commentary, I have tried to identify some of the factors that authors have suggested in terms of both hindering and promoting qualitative research in Psychology across Europe. All author names refer to papers published in the special issue except where a date is cited.

#### Translation/language

One of the main reasons qualitative methods have been slower to influence (continental) European psychology than UK psychology is because, unlike quantitative methods, they have language at their very core. Since most qualitative methodology has been developed in English-speaking countries, it has required bilingual scholars or translations for it to be picked up in continental Europe.

Gemignani, Ferrari and Benitez Baena suggest this might result in a time-lapse problem, citing a putative ‘20-year delay’ for English-language literature to make an impact in any given field, so it is perhaps not surprising that it is only in recent years that qualitative methods have begun to be taken seriously across the continent.

Another issue concerns the selective nature of translation of English-language work. One reason that quantitative methods dominated Psychology in the former Czechoslovakia, according to Masaryk et al. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY on 22 May 2019, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2019.1605478>.

al, is the popularity of a particular 1970s textbook (Kerlinger's *Foundations of Behavioural Research*) that became adopted across the sector once published into Czech. Only after the fall of communism did the discipline open up to a wider range of research topics and methods, with a wider range of foreign texts translated into local languages.

One non-English speaking European country with an established qualitative research tradition in Psychology is France, where the tradition of social representations theory (SRT) dates back to Serge Moscovici's work in the 1970s (Moscovici, 1984). Caillaud et al provide an historical overview of SRT and discuss the benefits of triangulation for solving the methodological puzzle posed by SRT. They point out that triangulation need not simply consist of aggregating several discrete methods but can also be used to generate knowledge through a multidisciplinary approach and illustrate this with descriptions of several recent French studies.

If the only outlets for publication are journals like QRP, there is a risk that non-English language work is marginalised. Kovacs et al's thorough study of Eastern European countries is necessarily limited by its focus on those authors publishing in English, and it would have been interesting to hear from the Hungary-based authors what might be going on, at least in Hungarian-language Psychology. This seems less of an issue in the case of French Psychology where the qualitative tradition is more established, and Restivo and Apostolidis's work explores ways of building on the literature in social representations by incorporating it into a mixed-methods paradigm.

### Culture/politics

As Gemignani et al argue, 'science inevitably reflects the historical time and cultural characteristics of the society in which it is developed'. This is particularly true in countries which have undergone dramatic political shifts, such as the former Soviet Union nations and other Eastern European countries. Kovacs et al examine the current state of qualitative methods in this part of the continent, where communist authorities distrusted the version of Psychology that was sweeping the world

from the United States. Instead of rejecting the dominant quantitative position, however, the USSR

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and other nations took the discipline along the path of medical behavioural science, a process the authors refer to as 'Pavlovisation', in which qualitative method was no more welcome than in the West. Openness to Western influence has since seen an uptake of qualitative methods in these countries, and Kovacs et al's data indicate that the majority of authors in their survey take a broadly 'interpretive/constructivist' stance, particularly those in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Political issues at the level of academia are also an important factor in the uptake of qualitative method, as in Italy where professional demands for university staff to publish in high impact journals have made qualitative research less attractive than might otherwise be the case (Montali et al). This does not seem to have deterred them from submitting papers to QRP (only Spain, the US and UK submitted more between 2017 and 2019)!

#### Disciplinary issues

In English-speaking countries, qualitative methods have not always sprung forth from the discipline of Psychology itself but been imported from other social sciences, notably sociology (e.g. grounded theory) and linguistics/philosophy (discourse analysis). Likewise developments outside Psychology have acted as a catalyst for interest in, and eventually, adoption of qualitative methods within the discipline - as in the case of Italian sociology. Montali et al identify a specific conference, and the publication of two methods textbooks in the 1980s, as triggers for generating a parallel interest in Italian psychology during the following decade.

Likewise, Masaryk et al trace the gradual adoption of qualitative methods to Czech and Slovak psychology through its acceptance in sociology, followed by a succession of key publications in Psychology journals. These were followed by the emergence of 'courses' (presumably equivalent to 'modules') in qualitative methods on Psychology degree programmes and translations of prominent American textbooks on qualitative methods.

#### Specific methods

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As with social representations in France, other European countries have adopted specific methods depending partly on the psychological field that has attracted most qualitative psychologists. In Italy, for example, most of these cluster in health psychology, where the interview predominates, although, as Montali et al note, there has not been a corresponding interest in phenomenological method as has been the case in British health psychology.

Several of the articles in the special issue describe the development of innovative methods, such as photodialogue that has been used in community psychology in Italy to explore the experience of city living, and 'interview to the double', a technique used in Italian organisational psychology research that involves an interviewee describing a job to a colleague who is expecting to perform it subsequently (see Montali et al).

Although not an innovative method per se, Branney et al's discussion of open data studies illustrates new developments in research practice that have implications for qualitative psychologists both in the UK and the rest of Europe, where academic researchers generally are coming under more pressure to share both their research findings and their raw data. As ever, qualitative researchers have been the last to be consulted on the best ways of handling this obligation, and Branney et al's paper represents a positive step towards thinking of how best to address the ethical and theoretical challenges of public access to data which have been collected, usually, in a specific context to address a substantive research question (unlike, say, the British Crime Survey, a regular large-scale database that purports to represent the current state of affairs).

#### The way forward?

Both Masaryk et al and Riley et al sketch out a progression that qualitative research has undergone in Psychology in the Czech/Slovakia nations and the UK respectively. The pattern in each region is similar: qualitative methods were first adopted in specific subdisciplines (notably health and social psychology) for largely radical reasons. In the UK they formed part of the development of a critical psychology that was set up in opposition to a mainstream that was seen as elitist and

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unrepresentative; in the Czech republic and Slovakia they formed part of an 'anti-science' movement that offered alternative paths for progress in the wake of the Velvet Revolution.

The present century has seen a gradual trend towards acceptance of qualitative methodology in Psychology in both parts of Europe, with dedicated publication outlets (such as this journal), conferences and courses giving it an unavoidable presence, as well as more formal recognition such as the establishment of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMIP) section of the British Psychological Society. It is interesting that, as Riley et al state, this is now the most heavily subscribed-to section of the Society: a clear statement that mainstream Psychology has failed to represent the interests of its constituents by ignoring qualitative research for so long. The acceptance by Czech/Slovak psychology is not quite as emphatic but it could be argued that the progress of qualitative adoption here has been about a decade behind that of the UK so far.

However, as Riley et al point out in their article, there are substantial hurdles that qualitative researchers still have to overcome, even in a Psychology culture where they are the best-represented body (in numerical terms at least). The notorious Research Excellence Framework (REF) is one such hurdle facing qualitative psychologists in the UK. More than ever, we need to find ways of promoting our research beyond the narrow limits imposed by our institutions. Building national and international networks of qualitative researchers is an important step forward in this respect.

No doubt hoping to emulate the success of QMiP in the UK, Gemignani et al state that they hope their paper will assist their efforts to build a Spanish network of qualitative psychologists. Such a body gives confidence to its members, creates a critical mass for organising conferences and publication activity (special issues like this one, books, or even dedicated journals), and gives qualitative psychologists an outlet for building professional esteem that is often difficult within institutions or mainstream Psychology organisations.

## Reference

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