

Research Space

Journal article

Telling complex stories: A review of the QMiP conference at De Montfort University

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Telling complex stories: A review of the QMiP conference at De Montfort University

We are two psychologists working in the same department. Jo is a doctoral student and instructor; Dennis is a senior lecturer. Both of us attended the QMiP conference at Leicester's De Montfort University, and both of us have an interest in phenomenological approaches. So we thought it would be fun to review the conference, each from our own unique perspective. These perspectives may or may not reflect early-career and mid-career perspectives more widely in some ways, but they certainly offer some convergence and divergence in what stood out to us, what we enjoyed the most, and what the conference has contributed to our plans for the future. There is a clear superordinate theme: It was a pleasant, well-organised and thought-provoking conference.

Jo writes:

I was very excited to attend an in-person QMiP conference at De Montfort University 13-15th July 2022, themed "A Holistic Approach to Inclusion". As an early career researcher and a first year PhD student, I went with a poster delineating the proposal for my thesis which focuses on the underprivileged working mums. Currently at the stage of debating the research paradigm, I was hoping for some guidance from experts, established authors and researchers as well as to discuss my PhD ideas with fellow students who are on or have just finished their doctoral journey. The conference exceeded my expectations and provided excellent opportunities to converse with the delegates, during my poster presentation, planned sessions, as well as refreshment breaks and of course, the barbeque! I received meaningful and thought-provoking feedback as well as reading list recommendations, ample inspiration and directions for the next few months.

Furthermore, there was an abundance of insightful and enjoyable talks and presentations. From Nikki Moore from University of Bradford presenting a fascinating systematic review

on behaviours of male perpetrators, and emphasising the dangers of “charm syndrome”, Simon Goodman’s (Goodman, Tafi & Coyle, 2022) social media study on Black Lives Matter alternatives, highlighting how All Lives Matter and White Lives Matter campaigns deny social injustice and undermine the need for egalitarian, fair society; to Max Schaefer’s from University of Edinburgh research on incels who utilise social media echo chambers to promote their harmful worldview.

As well as learning about the new research, I was thrilled to hear about innovative qualitative methods. Jonathan Moss, from Leeds Beckett University presented descriptive experience sampling approach (Moss, Whalley & Elsmore, 2020) which he used to capture immediate living experience of festival goers. A prompting message sent to participants allowed them to focus and record a particular experience in real time. Another fascinating method was employing poetry in phenomenology. Katharine Slade from Aston University revisited studies with parents who care for severely disabled young people. She extracted lines from the participants in a form of poems which told very compelling, personal stories.

I felt particularly engaged with the talks and workshops which appeared relevant to my current research directions and dilemmas. In the very first session of the conference, Michael Larkin’s Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) workshop provided an ideal space to confer about IPA characteristics, opportunities, and challenges. We covered similarities and differences between IPA and Thematic Analysis as well as Discourse Analysis. There were quite a few discursive psychologists in the room which led to a lively debate between the two methodologies. Michael referred to the new edition of the IPA book (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) which had updated essential IPA terminology, for instance personal experiential themes replaced superordinate themes. Finally, it was particularly useful for me to obtain practical tips empowering participants: “walk and talk interview”, where chatting during an outdoor walk would hopefully remove the sense of being interrogated (e.g.,

D'Errico & Hunt, 2019), “an interview menu” where participants can choose how they would like the interview to be conducted and even calling the interview “a conversation with a purpose” (e.g., Shedlin, Decena, Mangadu & Martinez, 2011) to address the negative associations the participants might have with the term.

I also attended a symposium with a workshop titled: Combining Participatory Photography and Phenomenology in the Study of Health and Illness: Opportunities and Challenges run by Ian Williamson, Ben Lond and Kerry Quincey from De Montfort University. I really appreciated how the participants of discussed studies were given additional opportunities to express their realities and intimate experiences via photography. Photo elicitation interviews added extra layers to the data. The symposium inspired me to employ participatory photography in my research. I feel it will help build rapport with the participants as well as allow them to capture and enrich the story they want to tell me.

I learnt so much from all the sessions but the most memorable and inspiring for me was the keynote speech by Professor Michelle Fine from the City University of New York. She joined us virtually with a very persuasive talk entitled “Epistemic justice: narrative doulas in revolting times”. She is a passionate advocate for participatory research. Her work with the disadvantaged, under- resourced or those demonised by the culture, such as imprisoned women (e.g., Fine & Torre, 2006) and LGBTQ+ community (e.g., Fine & Torre, 2019) illustrated how Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) “creates space for complexity”. Michelle Fine claimed that CPAR is not “just” a methodology; it is an epistemology, a philosophical standpoint assuming knowledge is embedded in social relations and created in collaboration and in action.

Recognising the value in collaborative knowledge production, Michelle emphasised our accountability as researchers. The researcher, a narrative doula, must allow “theory ruptures”

and must not “clean up a complicated story”. For instance, when evaluating the impact of prison colleges, Michelle was reminded by the co-researchers, the female inmates, not to romanticise them in her write-up. Despite the transformation brought by in-prison education, the women wanted to document their criminal past to take responsibility for what they did. As Sergio Silverio from King's College London discussed earlier that day, researchers must abstain from *academic ventriloquism* and relay the complete story (Silverio, Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2021).

To conclude, QMiP conference presented an invaluable opportunity to get to know wonderful academics and researchers, to ask questions and exchange contact details for future collaborations. I really appreciated the stimulating comments on my work to-date, they have really helped me refine the ideas as well as evaluate my methodological approach. As well as the experts, I loved meeting fellow researchers at a similar stage of their careers, who could empathise with challenges of a first year PhD. I truly enjoyed being able to join the friendly, and inspiring QMiP community, and look forward to the next conference already. Did we say Milan??

Dennis writes:

This was my first in-person conference after an absence of three years marked by the pandemic. It was also my first time at QMiP, partly because not all of my research is qualitative and partly because deadlines, timings and budgets had always prevented me from attending so far. I had heard good things about QMiP from social psychology colleagues and was not disappointed. The Queen's Building at De Montfort offered the perfect space for a conference of this size, the atmosphere was friendly and welcoming, the conference programme was rich in content but not overloaded, and Simon Goodman and Sarah Seymour-Smith expertly guided us delegates through this interesting schedule. The organisers had

obviously taken care to make this event as Covid-safe as possible, with good ventilation, plenty of space, and ample opportunity to go outdoors to eat, talk, and relax. From an environmentalist point of view, I also appreciated the decision to re-use lanyards and do without printed books of abstracts or conference souvenirs. In future, though, it would be good to encourage delegates to bring their own reusable coffee cups if only paper cups are available on site. (Anecdote: I made a point of using the same paper cup throughout the three days.) The whole conference was accompanied by engaging and amusing Twitter coverage, which enabled some new connections and also led to this conference review!

Personally, I like online conferences. They can bring together researchers from all over the world without having to worry about travel or accommodation. But, compared with in-person events, they are short on informal conversation. So, although it may sound trite, my personal conference highlight was the opportunity to chat with friendly colleagues whom I had not seen in some time, had only met online before, or had not previously met at all. Among others, I was able to say thank you to Abigail Locke for stoking my interest in qualitative methods and QMiP back in the day when we both served on the social psychology section committee, to talk to Michael Larkin about IPA and some of the challenges facing IPA researchers, and to meet Anastasia Rousaki who may end up joining the research team for one of my projects. These kinds of conversations are one of my favourite things about conferences, and I appreciate how QMiP created a space where they were possible and natural.

The conference programme offered numerous highlights, too. My favourite was probably the advanced IPA workshop with Michael Larkin, which reassured me that I teach my students the right things and enabled delegates to share many ideas and examples of good practice in using and teaching IPA. There were some very interesting and universally well-presented posters and individual presentations reflecting the breadth and depth of qualitative

research, including talks by Sarah Seymour-Smith and Anastasia Rousaki about parents' discourses around adolescent "sexting", an insightful and entertaining presentation by Philippa Carr about the involvement of gender in representations of public toilet facilities, Jonathan Moss's work with experience sampling methods to examine lived experiences of festival attendance, Mohammed Malik's thematic analysis of how middle-aged men reflected on their body image at different life stages, and many others. The keynotes were all fascinating, too, which is not the case at all conferences! Brendan Gough told us about his experimentation with "post-qualitative" approaches, which remained beyond my understanding in many ways but made me think about the links between history, society, epistemology and methodology. Michelle Fine gave a very successful online keynote presentation about her critical participatory action research with imprisoned women, and Dawn Edge shared a brilliant account of her projects to address racism in psychological diagnosis and care. I came away still feeling unable to do this kind of long-form and high-impact work myself, but with a strong sense of admiration and a clear impression of what is possible when research, action, sharp minds and strong personalities meet.

The conference also provided some more direct and practical benefits for my work, which highlights the learning opportunities provided by such events. In addition to the IPA workshop and informal meetings already mentioned above, the presentation by Peter Blundell and Lisa Oakley about the use of single pen portrait analysis was quite instructive. Having experienced myself the tension between IPA's idiographic commitment and the practical need to present the finished analysis in a tightly limited word count, I wonder whether these brief textual case summaries could be part of a solution. Moreover, the interesting EQuiP (European Qualitative Researchers in Psychology) panel – with presentations including Radomír Masaryk's memorable analysis of how women made sense of high heels as somewhat impractical formal attire rather than the "mating strategy" proposed by other recent

publications – offered an opportunity to think beyond British borders and consider ways to connect qualitative researchers and promote qualitative methods throughout Europe. I joined EQuIP there and then, and I look forward to getting involved.

Overall, I enjoyed this conference very much and appreciate how QMiP and the conference organisers brought together qualitative researchers at various career stages, enabled us all to mix and talk in a friendly and supportive atmosphere, and put together such an interesting programme. My own presentation, on the meaning of “home” among EU citizens in the UK post-Brexit, went well enough to encourage me to complete and submit the manuscript soon, which is helpful. But, although the institutions who pay for our conference attendance do not always see it that way, taking part in a conference is about much more than disseminating your own work. It is about connecting with colleagues, becoming aware of new research, enjoying the time and space to think individually and collectively about research rather than other duties, learning lessons for future practice, and returning to the everyday routine feeling energised and enriched both intellectually and spiritually. The QMiP conference fulfilled all of these purposes, and I feel grateful to have been there.

Notes

The references are provided where the presentations have been published or relate to already published work.

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