Imaging new futures while reengaging with the past: QMiP at the European Congress of Psychology

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The 18th European Congress of Psychology (ECP) began with rows of pristinely coordinated shiny pink waistcoats cutting through a darkened auditorium. This was the Brighton Gay Men's Chorus taking their place, stage right, to welcome us to the ECP opening ceremony. Effortlessly harmonising through a selection of camp classics, as the Chorus reached the Pet Shop Boy's *It's a Sin*, I was hit by the poignant connection to psychology's harmful tendencies. Thinking of Pauline Collier's (2023) harrowing account of aversion therapy, the affective qualities of the song's opening lyrics took up a pointed meaning:

> *When I look back upon my life*
> *It's always with a sense of shame*
> *I've always been the one to blame*
> *For everything I long to do*

> (Lowe & Tennant, 1987)

In that moment, the song as sung, infused with both a sense of melancholy and defiance, seemed to (re)foreground the role that psychology had played in pathologising sexual diversity and the horrors of dehumanisation. Acknowledging and holding these feelings as we – a room filled with colleagues from all manner of psychological contexts sat, looking forward to an invigorating congress – felt necessary.

To briefly collapse the chronology of this review, the *rehumanising* antidote of qualitative enquiry served as a hope-filled centre to Hannah Frith's invited address. Delivered as the

penultimate talk in the Qualitative Methods in Psychology's (QMiP) symposium, the address was a wonderfully freewheeling take on a keynote. Hannah told a celebratory story of how qualitative storytelling has contributed to *social* sustainability through a focussing on experiences of mental ill-health and distress. After an opening meta-narrative about the writing of the talk currently being presented, Hannah first looked to historical accounts of marginalised persons' (Fanon, Szasz, Chesler) experiences of 're-storying' mental distress. That by doing so, the social determinants of health are brought to life through storytelling. What was 'illness' instead recast as revealing the problems of living under conditions of inequality. Looking to more recent examples of creative qualitative research (Boden et al., 2019; Seymour-Smith et al., 2021; Jannesari et al., 2022), Hannah illustrated how playful approaches to research can create opportunities for different narrators. However, we – as qualitative researchers – need to appreciate the ways in which collecting data will change us; being attentive to the labours of listening that sometimes become minimised by our shared technical turns of phrase. What does, for example, "building rapport" *really* mean? Are we not, in that moment, attempting to build *authentic* connections? Doesn't that sound so much more demanding? As I was still holding the contrast between psychology's past (evoked through the ECP's opening ceremony) and our more recent present, this felt like a worthy trade: that we as researchers would gladly take on these burdens, rather than rushing back to being proponents of prejudices.

By way of re-establishing some temporal order, Hannah's invited address took place on the first day of ECP, Tuesday 4th July 2023 in Brighton, UK. As a result of the diligent efforts made by incoming QMiP co-chair, Laura Kilby, QMiP was successful in its application to host a nested event at the Congress. I was there as one of three early career academics, tasked with the responsibility of showcasing potential futures for qualitative research. To a filled

room, our symposium was opened by Professor Abigail Locke who gave an account of the continued development of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology section; the battles won and those challenges we still face. Despite the many achievements made by qualitative researchers, it was clear that – against the positivist dominance of the discipline – in some contexts, we still find ourselves on the margins. However, the growth of links between international research communities (such as SQiP and EQUiP) was heartening to hear; particularly given the European context of the ECP.

It was then my turn. Presenting a study from my PhD, I aimed to show how taking a pluralistic approach to analysis illuminates holistic understandings of health conditions and the stigma around claiming health-based welfare benefits. Data came from interviews with eight UK based individuals, all living with 'unseen' chronic health conditions, who had experiences of claiming welfare. Encouraged by the sense of opportunity, potentiality and bridge-building present in modern qualitative psychological research – captured in both Abigail and Hannah's talks – I made use of analytical methodologies pluralistically. Data was first explored through a phenomenological lens, before a 'honing in' on narrative elements identified as discursive important. Having the chance to present this work to such a receptive and inquisitive audience was a really worthwhile experience; as I come to the end of my PhD, it was reassuring to know I could have (some sort of) an answer to the insightful questions received.

Next up was Mohammed Malik who deftly considered how qualitative research adds to understandings of sustainability in fashion. Full of charm and humour, Malik's talk drew connections between psychological research and UN Sustainable Development goals. It became clear how further qualitative research is needed to help tackle the range of social

issues that can be exacerbated by the fashion industry, such as social inequality and mental ill-health. Malik outlined an upcoming module he has designed around the psychology of sustainable fashion: I found myself thinking how lucky the undergraduate students at Nottingham Trent University are.

Anastasi Rousaki's talk explored a fantastical rich analysis of how parents and carers of adolescents' construct 'sexting' and position adolescents in relation to gender. Delving into an intimidatingly large dataset (15 dyadic interviews with 30 parents and carers of adolescents), Anastasi deployed a critical discursive approach to deconstruct the ways in which heteronormative norms have been preserved or reconstructed within the modern phenomenon of sexting. Most notably in the discussion around non-heteronormative contexts, Anastasi expertly showed how through her use of critical theory, new discursive affordances 'opened up' the potential for new, liberatory futures.

Due to some fortuitous scheduling by the ECP scientific committee, after a short break, we reconvened to hear Laura Kilby speak about her work around UK media representations of Muslim women who become labelled in the media as 'Jihadi brides'. Laura's analysis concentrated on the British woman Shamima Begum and engaged with Galtung's typology of violence (1990) to show how intersecting discourses of gender and Islamophobia converge within media reporting. Being classified as a 'Jihadi bride' entailed a number of discursive positions such as being seen as a traitor to their 'gendered kin'; or a non-citizen other, someone lacking in political agency. By exploring these 'villainous' narratives, it became worrying clear that, through their reporting around Shamima Begum, the UK media actively stokes all three of Galtung's conceptualisations of violence: direct, structural and cultural (1990).

Following Hannah Frith's invited address, we came to the finale of the QMiP nested event. In a panel discussion hosted by Laura, Hannah and Abigail were joined by Professor Elizabeth Peel to reflect on where qualitative research in psychology found itself presently. The panel drew upon their own careers and expertise to demonstrate the value psychological research can bring to interdisciplinary work; Liz highlighting how our methodological specificity and precision in research is often appreciated by large, cross-discipline, research teams. Technological advances, such as the current 'boogeyman' of academia ChatGPT, were approached with a refreshing cautious optimism. Advances in how qualitative work had been appraised by the REF were noted, as was the potential for greater future recognition of qualitative research, given REF 2028's tentative appreciation of public engagement. A mood of community was felt in the room and through the audience's questions and comments, new potentials for collaborations and research opportunities materialised. Cumulatively, the panel's discussion points 'brought home' the robust health qualitative psychological research is in. As an early career researcher, I found myself reflecting on the opportunities I have been afforded; the encouragements to be playful and creative in my research. These incremental advances have only been made possible through the actions, battles and efforts made by those qualitative researchers that have gone before – and by those that are still leading the way. It was a privilege to be able to share my work alongside such supportive colleagues and, with Anastasia and Malik, to play a small role in representing possible new futures for qualitative research in psychology.

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