

# The time has come for psychology to stop treating qualitative data as an embarrassing secret

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## Abstract

Despite the sustained flourishing—both in terms of quantity and quality—of qualitative research in psychology, psychology's establishment 'gatekeepers' seem to still be wedded to the dogma that only experimental research and quantitative data are sufficiently robust to be taken seriously. In this paper we make the case against this contempt and call for qualitative research and data to be recognized as valid and epistemologically sound in its own right. Given that its ontology is based upon constructionist assumptions about the nature of the social world, its power to provide nuanced insight into the complexity of humankind is not a problem, but its greatest strength. Our paper therefore starts with a brief review of the ontological and epistemological differences between the two approaches to demonstrate that they are complementary rather than competition. We then make our case, based on two key strategies: first by shedding light on the fact that many (perhaps even most) of psychology's classic experimental studies actually collected qualitative data (in the form of debriefing interviews and the like) and used it to understand what was going on; and then by recent studies that have expressly sought feedback about the hypothesis being purportedly tested. We then recognize the extent to which contemporary researchers are expressing their frustration at the way that they are being forced into a methodological straight jacket, by carrying out their

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research in ways they view as inauthentic. We end with a call to curb the methodological dogma that has taken hold of psychology, and to move to a more inclusive approach.

#### KEYWORDS

critical psychology, history and methods, critical social psychology, psychology, methods in psychology

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 | Should psychology be treated solely as a scientific endeavour?

Certainly, this case was being made by many of the early psychologists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Edward Thorndike, for example, was keen to embrace the motto “*Whatever exists at all exists in some amount*” (1918), which tends to be interpreted in the way that ‘We must measure what is measurable and make measurable what cannot be measured’. More specifically, William McDougall (1919) was a vigorous proponent for social psychology in its early days, arguing that it was a discipline that needed to be reclaimed from the clutches of sociology and anthropology. Instead, he said that it should be recognised as the rightful domain in which to study ‘the springs of human action, the impulses and motives that sustain mental and bodily activity and regulate conduct’ (McDougall, 1919, p. 3). He argued stridently for taking an entirely scientific approach to psychology and, crucially, for studying the impact of social processes, such as the means by which societies move from ‘primeval’ to ‘civilised’. He saw human nature as the product of a set of ‘primitive’ built-in urges which, while they may be modified by the civilising force of social and ethical mores, are nonetheless the primary basis of human behaviour.

This reductionist mindset soon came to dominate the discipline. This is clearly documented in books such as the 1966 collection *New Horizons in Psychology*. Its editor, Brian Foss, billed it as ‘a progress report on the first 100 years of psychology as a science of observation and experiment—and a guide to exciting developments to come’ (Foss, 1966). True—the edition is full of the results of scientific studies in psychology—and is redolent with an optimism that this approach would enable psychologists to soon reach the goal of understanding human behaviour.

However from about the 1970s this optimism started to dwindle. A number of psychologists began to seriously challenge the experimental approach as incapable of achieving this lofty ambition. Ken Gergen’s 1973 article ‘Social Psychology as History’ is often regarded as the first incursion. And yet Serge Moscovici’s 1961 doctoral thesis *La psychanalyse: Son image et son public* (Translated into English as *Psychoanalysis: its image and its public*, 2008) was arguing along similar lines. He described ‘social representations’ as the way in which knowledge gets constructed collectively—generating common wisdom; that is, knowledge that gets taken for granted as ‘what everybody knows’. Both approaches shift from a focus on individual cognition to stress the importance of social processes in collective meaning-making.

This theoretical paradigm shift led inevitably to a call for methodological change. By the 80s Ian Parker identified what was going on as something of a ‘crisis’, and offered some solutions of how to resolve it (Parker, 1989). Jonathan Smith, Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove, however, regarded the prospect of methodological innovation as positively ‘exciting’. Their book, *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, did indeed bring together a refreshing range of new, refurbished and realigned research methods that were being created and borrowed from other fields (like anthropology, sociology, market research and political science) at a time of a ‘changing discipline’.

A number of methodologies consonant with a shift to a post-positivist, non-experimental paradigm are now emerging and they are beginning to be used in a wide range of empirical studies. As these

studies proliferate and are published, there will be a real chance of fundamentally changing the discipline of psychology, of radically redrawing its boundaries to include a whole new set of questions, asked and answered in new ways.

Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove, 1995, p. 1

## 2 | PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

In order to understand what was involved we need to examine the philosophical assumptions on which psychological theories and methods are based. It needs to be acknowledged that knowledge can take different forms, and that there are alternative ways of conceiving humanity's place in the world of material things and events. This involves recognising that in psychology there are a number of alternative theoretical positions that reject positivism, such as social constructionism (which we will concentrate on here) as well as others such as new materialism (Glassman, 2010). There are two fundamental philosophical concepts—ontology and epistemology, which enable us to understand the difference.

### 2.1 | Ontology—What there is to know?

In psychology this is a matter of our understanding of the nature of the world in which we live—what being human means and signifies; and, at a psychological level, how people operate and belong within their own particular life-worlds. The German philosopher, Heidegger, called it '*da-sein*' which translates as 'being-in-the-world'. Ontology is concerned with the nature of the worldly objects and social events that make up our human experience. It addresses what things are, how they function and how they interact with each other. Ontology is about the assumptions that psychologists make about the nature of people's social worlds—the everyday and exceptional worlds of people's lived experience and actions. It is about what is going on their roles and relationships with others, the way they attribute and blame, their worldviews, mind-sets, opinions and attitudes, and the social influences upon all of these. A good way to understand what ontology means is to consider the difference in philosophical terms between deontological ethics based on clear rules (often God-given) of what is right or wrong; as opposed to pragmatic or utilitarian ethics which is more concerned with consequences.

#### 2.1.1 | Positivist ontology

The positivist version of the social world is that it exists 'out there' in nature, separate from human action. It consists of discrete and observable social events and phenomena that are lawfully related. It is a social world where:

- People are seen to live their lives and interact with each other, separated from the social world, like creatures swimming *in* the sea;
- People's actions are (at least partially) determined by the constraints set by the social world in which they live;
- The social world in which they live functions as a predictable system, operating through 'the laws of (human) nature'.

At this point it is worth noting that in contemporary, mainstream psychology, the term 'ontology' has sometimes been given a different meaning, more like a taxonomy (such as a lexicon of 'health behaviours').

#### 2.1.2 | Constructionist ontology

By contrast this version of ontology is one that regards social worlds as crafted by people seeking to understand what phenomena and events mean and signify. It 'works' by the way people interpret those meanings and act in response.

This is not just about simply *describing* alternative social realities—different points of view or different worldviews. Constructionist ontology is about gaining insight into and understanding of the *means* by which ‘social realities’ get constructed and the uses for which they are deployed. Vivienne Burr neatly describes this in her excellent book *Introducing Social Constructionism*:

It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated. Therefore social interaction of all kinds, and particularly language, is of great interest to social constructionists. The goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed, sustained and shared.

Burr, 2015, p. 4

Under a constructionist ontology, our social realities are the realities that we all construct in what we think and say and do, mainly when we act *collectively*. Social realities are convincingly constructed *for* us through institutions like religion, the law and schooling as well as through social media, all of which offers us versions of reality and make them real for us by drawing us into their rituals and practices. Another way of putting this is that social phenomena (such as a birthday party or an election) are ‘knowledged into being’ (Curt, 1994). They are made real by what goes on in soaps and movies, on *Facebook*, *TikTok* and *Masterchef*, at Church, in the temple, at morning prayers, brownie camps, school open days and protest marches. We are drawing on our own 21<sup>st</sup> Century WEIRD culture (cf. Henrich et al., 2010) here: different realities are constructed at different times and in different locations within different regimes and other imperatives, other constraints and other opportunities. However, in our, ever-more globalised world, social worlds are increasingly diffusing into each other. It is a social world where:

- The social world is seen as a product of human meaning-making—like the making of music by a choir, band or an orchestra;
- So it is people's actions and inactions that *make* the human world, but being a person is also made (and made meaningful) by the interpretations and actions of others;
- To the extent that the human world operates as a predictable system, it is through people enacting, resisting or disobeying the laws, conventions, customs, taboos, prejudices and perversities of the culture in which they live.

## 2.2 | Epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that considers the *nature* of knowledge—what counts as valid knowledge and how it can be gained. In psychology epistemology is seen to be about the assumptions made by psychologists about what constitutes well-founded knowledge about the social world (as opposed to beliefs or opinions) and how psychologists should go about gaining it.

### 2.2.1 | A positivist epistemology

Experimental psychology is broadly based upon the epistemological position of positivism. At its purest and most simple, positivism holds that there is a straightforward one-to-one relationship between things and events in the outside world and people's knowledge of them. The goal of experimental psychology is to get as close as possible to this ideal—to discover reliable, factual knowledge about the world-as-it-really-is. Few scientists today would claim that this is ever entirely possible; since human perception and understanding are fallible, people will always be biased by their preconceptions (Chalmers, 1999). However, most scientists nowadays assume that by using scientific

method they can progressively pin down 'the facts' and get close enough to reality to develop working models of how psychological processes and phenomena 'work'. Positivism comes in two forms: empiricism, based on induction, where patterns and regularities are observed; and rationalism, based on deduction, where hypotheses are generated and tested.

## 2.2.2 | A constructionist epistemology

This is based on the assumption that knowledge gets constructed by the way people think and interact. The key text was Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. Applying social constructionism to psychology was part of a more general movement in the 70 and 80s among the arts, humanities and social sciences towards an interpretative approach, where scholars sought to gain insight into why people experience the world as they do, and seek to 'make sense' of it, rather than establish the underlying mechanisms involved.

Norman Blaikie describes it as: 'uncovering the largely tacit, mutual knowledge, the symbolic meanings, motives and rules, which provide the orientations for their actions' (Blaikie, 2000, p. 115). This kind of knowledge is only really visible by observing what people *do* with it; how they interact with each other; the ideas about what it means, say, to be kind; what you wear to look right in particular situations; what to eat and how to eat it, where, when and with whom. It is, as Moscovici proposed, the knowledge that 'everybody knows' but, because it is so familiar, nobody explicitly puts it into words. It is what, in a particular time and place, gets 'taken for granted'—it is this that researchers need to uncover and then expose to scrutiny and to ask 'what is going on?' Constructionist research aims to 'trouble the taken-for-granted' (Curt, 1994)—to shake it up, question it and pull it to pieces to gain insight into how power is being exercised and by whom. Good words for this approach include being cynical, sceptical and suspicious.

## 2.3 | The big disappearing trick—The clever concealment of qualitative data

We have only to look in depth at some of the classical research projects to see there has been a good deal of chicanery going on. The impression artfully managed is of a psychology that is a squeaky clean, robustly objective and thoroughgoing scientific endeavour, unsullied by any hint of subjectivity. The illusion is created and maintained by the way that students' textbooks only ever provide the most basic description of classical studies (cf. Manning et al., 2006; Masaryk, 2022; Stainton Rogers and Willig, 2017; Vybiral, 2017). And yet, just a cursory examination of the of the original research reports themselves soon reveals all manner of qualitative data.

A good example is the notorious case of the Kitty Genovese murder (Manning et al., 2006; Masaryk, 2007; Rosenthal, 1964; Skoller, 2008). It is a prime example how social psychology textbooks tend to oversimplify in order to demonstrate the phenomenon in question—here of bystander non-intervention. Most textbooks repeat the claim that 37 (or 38) people witnessed the murder and did not act—a claim that was originally (and incorrectly) reported in the press (Gansberg, 1964; Stainton Rogers, 2011). The actual number of witnesses was far lower, and only a handful of them had any reason to suspect something violent was happening. Not one witness actually saw the attack at its entirety, yet two of them did call the police, based on the evidence in court transcripts and interviews with eyewitnesses (Skoller, 2008).

Let us now look at the studies on the 'bystander effect' that were inspired by the Kitty Genovese murder. Papers by Darley and Latané, 1968; Latané and Darley, 1968, both included substantial amounts of qualitative data—in particular what was said and observed during debriefing interviews. The Darley and Latané study got subjects to apparently join in a 'discussion', conducted over headphones to 'avoid the embarrassment of being face-to-face'. The narrative was actually pre-recorded, and on it subjects heard the sounds of somebody having 'a very serious nervous seizure similar to epilepsy'. The experimenter measured the time taken for the subject to report the emergency. The major independent variable was the number of people the subject thought to be in the discussion group.

Within this paper, we find the following account of what happened in the study:

“Subjects who failed to report the emergency showed few signs of the apathy and indifference thought to characterize ‘unresponsive bystanders’.

When the experimenter entered the room to terminate the situation, the subject often asked if the victim was ‘all right. “Is he being taken care of?” “He’s all right, isn’t he?” Many of the subjects showed physical signs of nervousness; they often had trembling hands and sweating palms. If anything, they seemed more emotionally aroused than did the subjects who reported the emergency”.

Darley and Latané, 1968: 381

What is really interesting is the way these observations fed directly into the interpretation given by Darley and Latané:

“Why, then, didn’t they respond? It is our impression that non-intervening subjects had not decided to respond. Rather they were still in a state of indecision and conflict concerning whether to respond or not. The emotional behaviour of these non-responding subjects was a sign of their continuing conflict that other subjects resolved by responding”.

Darley and Latané, 1968: 381

However, these qualitative data are never mentioned at all in standard textbooks. The study gets neatly and conveniently ‘tidied up’ and simplified to give students a straightforward (but distorted) story of what happened. Reviewing over 20 textbooks from different times and different places, it was found out that all of them reported the quantitative data, none of them report this additional qualitative data (Stainton Rogers et al., 2017).

This study is by no means the only instance. So-called ‘classic studies’ are riddled with covert inclusions of qualitative data. Indeed, in some areas—such as forensic psychology—it is almost commonplace:

“The contribution of qualitative methods is far more widespread within forensic psychology than the casual perusal of recent journals would indicate. Often such work is unacknowledged but is nevertheless an important part of the research process. An example of this is that quite a number of journal articles published involve working directly with criminal populations ... [where] such participants may have literacy and other such problems. This means that test and questionnaire administration can only be carried out at times via verbal administration or some form of interviewing, including semi-structured interviewing. Such results may apparently be interpreted within a more quantitative framework, but inevitably the interviewing process will have produced material that influences the subsequent analysis of the findings”.

Banister, 2017.

## 2.4 | Not just making mischief—Making harmful claims

As a case in point, Philip Zimbardo's *Stanford Prison Experiment* (Zimbardo, 2007) purportedly demonstrated that certain circumstances (such as in a prison) can bring out the worst in people and encourage them to misbehave. Also, when some people are made powerful and others are stripped of it and made vulnerable, the outcome will inevitably be vicious and nasty. This is the conclusion drawn by Zimbardo from his study—and it is what gets dutifully parroted in the summaries included in textbooks.

Subsequently the ‘experiment’ has become heavily criticized because the whole enterprise was seen to be ‘staged’. An investigative journalist, Brian Resnick (2018), among others, has written a detailed exposé of the experiment—

with participants encouraged to 'act tough' and some of them saying that's what he thought was expected of him. It was based on detailed interviews with people involved in the project including those who ran it and those who took part. More recently Resnick has interviewed Zimbardo himself, directly challenging the conclusion he promulgated, calling the experiment 'a fraud' (Resnick, 2018).

Our concern is that the study was not just a 'a cover-up' in order to make it appear more 'scientific', it is much more dangerous because it has ended up reifying social stereotypes and offering a crudely simplistic 'explanation' for why people can be 'turned evil'. In 2002 a re-run of the experiment was carried out by Steve Reicher and Alex Haslam (Reicher & Haslam, 2006), but with, this time, much more care taken over ethical concerns and managing the process more safely. Its results and conclusions were very different from the original.

## 2.5 | Direct challenge—Seeking qualitative data to expose theoretical dogma

This final approach is demonstrated by a study contesting the claim that wearing high heels was a 'female mating strategy', driven by women's inherited propensity to seek out as sexual partners men who are healthy and capable to be good fathers to their children. This contention was originally made by evolutionary biologists Pavel Prokop and Jana Švancárová (Prokop & Švancárová, 2020). It was spotted by the *Daily Mail* and heralded by the headline:

Women are less likely to wear high heels if they are going on a date with an ugly man because they don't want to have sex with them.

Matthews, 2019.

The story referred to the study entitled *Wearing high heels as female mating strategy* by Pavel Prokop and Jana Švancárová (2020). The newspaper claimed that when women imagined intercourse with an attractive man, their penchant for high heels increased steeply, as compared with such a scenario with an unattractive male. High heels were seen as a form of sexual signalling by women looking for a 'fit' father for their children. The theoretical foundation of the paper is based on the premises that 'human females invest in offspring more than males' and 'human males, on the other hand, spend more time caring for their offspring than males of virtually all other mammals' (Bjorklund & Shackelford, 1999; Puts, 2010). Parental investment according to those sources constitutes a basis for female competition over a potential sexual partner. One of the ways for females to achieve this according to Prokop and Švancárová (2020) is by allurements—actively seeking to make themselves look alluring as exemplified by wearing high heels. A total of 321 Caucasian students, attending a mid-sized university in Slovakia, participated in the study. A total of 321 students with mean age of 21, attending a mid-sized university in Slovakia, participated in the study. They observed that when female participants imagined an interaction with an attractive male on a photograph, their preference for high heels steeply increased.

In response Masaryk, Synak and Belišová (2022) conducted a focus group study with a sample closely resembling the one used in the original study: 50 participants aged 19–24 years. Ten focus group discussions were each led by the two female co-authors. These focus groups were accompanied with the technique of solicited photography—we asked our participants to photograph their current shoe collection for later discussion. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts of the data obtained and the photographs. The resulting themes could be summarized as follows:

1. Young women mainly see 'dates' as social events, not by any means inevitably leading to sex. Most of the young women in our sample said they needed much more social interaction to feel safe enough to engage in physical intimacy. Rather they saw dating as a social 'getting to know you' activity rather than a mating ritual.
2. In any case, young women in this age group did not necessarily see high-heel shoes as about attracting men. Rather, they said they would be much more likely to wear high-heeled footwear to look 'smart' and 'well turned out' at social events such as going to Church or at family functions.

3. When dressing up for a date, young women mainly consider practical matters such as the location of the *rendez-vous*, expected weather conditions, or coordination with the partner—such as compensating for height differences.
4. Young women use allurements with caution; although evolutionary approaches suggest women would tend to maximize their attractiveness around potential partners in order to lure them into intercourse, today's young women often do the very opposite. They try to dress-down on dates for strategic reasons—for example, to indicate interest in long-term commitment rather than a short-term affair, or to conform to cultural or sub-cultural norms which may frown upon drawing attention to one's physical attractiveness.

When we introduced a hypothetical scenario with a matter of choosing between two different young men, it was met with great hesitation when young women were asked to select one as the preferred sexual partner.

Greater sophistication is needed beyond accepting simplistic assumptions about the way that women are driven to seek the most attractive partner to increase their reproductive chances. People clearly do not engage in sex solely (or even mainly) to reproduce, and they do not go on dates with the primary objective of engaging in sexual intercourse. Research into human behaviour should respect the diversity of social and cultural mores that influence the subtle choices being made rather than to reify harmful social stereotypes.

## 2.6 | Shaking off the methodological straightjacket

It is becoming evident that there is a growing unease about the way psychology's gatekeepers are constraining the research that is getting done. At a time in which psychological researchers are being encouraged to become more aware of diversity and more respectful towards the participants in their studies, alongside a greater recognition that we need both to decolonise our assumptions and introduce reflexivity into what we do, pressures to remain 'methodologically pure' are getting increasingly irksome. This has recently been well expressed by early career researchers, when they recently took over the editing of *The Psychologist*, the magazine of the British Psychological Society (BPS):

I quickly developed the view that to do 'good science' I needed to be free from bias, it needed to be objective, and it needed to be empiricist. It comes down to what the research community views as 'good science' and who has the power to decide what knowledge gets shared and what doesn't.

As early career researchers, it is our goal to be accepted into academia and to be viewed as successful ... so we need to publish, we need to get funding and we need to present our work at conferences. This means that ultimately our careers are in the hands of those with the power to decide what is accepted and what is not.

It is concerning that, despite finding an approach that would best answer [my research] questions ... the research will ultimately be carried out using different methods because that is what the journal editors dictate.

Charlotte Davis, *The Psychologist*, Jan/Feb 2023.

## 3 | CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, many (maybe even most) of psychology's early attempts to formulate fundamental or universally valid 'laws of human nature' have not passed the test of time. The over-reliance on the natural sciences to provide nice, elegant and simple explanations of human behaviour, can, with hindsight, be seen mainly as an attempt to release the discipline (particularly social psychology) from the clutches of philosophy and theology. Or, to be meaner, we can just



see it as 'physics envy'. The growing cynicism in psychology (as evidenced by the current 'OPEN SCIENCE' movement (Open science collaboration, 2015) and its scrutiny of the so-called 'replication crisis' should, we believe, be seen as a very positive signal that the message is at last getting through—interpreting human behaviour and experience out of context, and over-simplifying highly complex situations into variables is not good enough. When we reinterpret such studies through examining the hidden qualitative data, and/or using more sophisticated forms of analysis and interpretation, they do generally start to make much more sense.

It is worth noting that the major problem with the state of psychology just now is not so much to do with the methods we use or the way we collect data, in and of itself—but rather the massively over-simplifying approach used to interpret the data. It is reductionist, lacking the nuance and subtlety that are so much the core of social life. Although the critique of essentialism had been very much present since the beginnings of our discipline (see, e.g., Thilly, 1906), and has been a significant part of the development of other social sciences such as anthropology (cf. Kanovský, 2007), it still haunts today's psychology.

The Czech psychologist, Zbyněk Vybíral, speaks of psychology as 'having been in the state of repair' for the last several decades. He sums up some of the most recent discussions about the state of our discipline and concludes that modern psychology should be ethical; prudent when it comes to generalizations; avoid universal claims; cater to the needs of individuals rather than institutions; should attempt to constantly self-repair based on new research; and it should cultivate pop-psychology (Vybíral, 2017).

Psychology needs to admit that finding universal and essential laws of human behaviour is a way backwards rather than forwards. We believe that it would be better for us to become a lot more humble in our ambitions, more adventurous and inventive, and simply more willing to take advantage of the innovative ways of collecting, processing and, above all, interpreting data that can now be found in qualitative methods and the interpretation of meaning-making going on. In this way we can begin to lift the metaphorical curse from psychology and make it a discipline that has the potential to transform lives for the better—our own and those of others. In this text we started with the notorious quote— '*Whatever exists at all exists in some amount*'. However, the very next sentence in the chapter which starts with this claim is followed by the sentence '*To know it thoroughly involved knowing its quantity as well as its quality*'. We should truly value and appreciate all the complicated human motley that cannot be measured.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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