'Why did I spend years learning all that rubbish, when I could have been doing *this*?' Student experiences of discourse analysis and feminist research

Jemma Tosh, Amy Brodie, Emma Small & Kerrie Sprigings

T-TESTS, correlations, objectivity, validity, reliability, control groups – typical contents of an accredited undergraduate psychology research methods module at university. Despite the popularity of qualitative methodologies within the profession (such as the success of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section), the predominant focus on statistical analysis and experimental design remains a barrier for students who wish to pursue qualitative research in their undergraduate dissertation. Upon asking students what method they would like to use and how confident they feel in applying it, a stream of uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion unfolds. Reflecting on the brief snippets of qualitative experience and research they have come across sporadically within a field that assumes a 'norm' of 'hard science', students are left confused. How can I support a hypothesis by using an interview? How can I analyse a transcript without letting my bias make the results less valid? What is it that I am actually supposed to *do*? Current psychology training does not well prepare the student for such unhelpful answers as – 'there is no hypothesis' and 'your "bias" (or subjectivity) is a key part of the research process that you should examine rather than deny'. So how do students experience this change in focus from statistics, significance, and hypotheses to social constructionism, discourse analysis and feminism? After years of being taught to be 'objective' how do they feel about becoming political in their study?

Amy Brodie
Feminist psychology is fundamentally critical in its outlook as it attempts to question the (sometimes damaging) beliefs that are held in mainstream culture. As a third-year student, one of the core skills I should be able to demonstrate is to be critical of the information and journals I read, therefore, it seems logical to me that areas of feminist psychology should be introduced more widely within the profession. Third wave feminism especially is concerned with inclusivity and intersectionality: that no oppression stands alone and they must be tackled together. Feminism has enabled me as a student to think critically about my personally held beliefs and experiences and to view them through many lenses.

Learning more widely about feminist psychology has also introduced to me the idea of being reflexive in my work. Being open about my research and my standpoint feels more honest to me. Reflexivity also opens up wider discussions and further research possibilities as people from other standpoints will relate or elaborate on my findings – and I find this fascinating. To be able to see my work as part of a bigger picture is very valuable. Feminist psychology and discourse analysis has shown me the importance of validating the experiences of others as well as being open and honest throughout the process of my research – which I believe are important skills for everyone.

For me, learning about discourse analysis was an incredibly important time. I felt I had finally found a way to analyse issues that interested me but had never been able to fit into other methods of investigation. Sometimes the quantitative research we are presented with never really feels like it grasps the wider issues in society, or that the answers don't reveal the complexity of the situation. Discourse analysis enables us to analyse issues and 'things', not as they are but as we feel they are represented in society. To be given the freedom to investigate the symbols that surround us in life (that are sometimes oppressive, subtle or meaningful) is an incredibly liberating experience. The ability to investigate the different implications of the words we use through discourse analysis is an exciting field of research, especially as our current world has so much to offer with its advances in technological communication.

Emma Small

Whilst I am still in the process of learning about and applying discourse analysis for the first time, it is an experience I am thoroughly enjoying. As a third-year student, the primary experience I have had of research has come in the form of statistical analysis. While this is effective in certain situations, it cannot provide a wider perspective on particular ideas and concepts in the way that qualitative research can.

Within the profession of psychology we are told that discourse analysis is very complicated and not as reliable as statistical approaches. We are dissuaded from choosing discourse analysis as a method, and there is generally more recognition for those carrying out statistical work. However, now that I have had more information on the subject and have begun to utilise it for my dissertation, I have found that it is an enjoyable process and can reveal more about certain issues than statistics ever could.

We are encouraged to critically evaluate research and so the lack of discourse analysis as a method seems strange. Discourse analysis offers researchers a much fuller appreciation of certain problems that they may not have been aware of before. For example, in my dissertation I intend to draw on feminist psychology. Whilst feminism was something I had come across before, it wasn't until researching discourse analysis that I became aware of the issues within it, such as the exclusion of certain groups of women, or those who identify as women. Feminism was something that I had only ever really thought about before from my own personal perspective. Therefore, on a personal level, this is something that I feel has educated me in a way that numbers could not.

Although I have only just recently started using discourse analysis, I do not think that as a method it is too complicated for undergraduate students to undertake. It is perhaps more suited to certain students over others, but so are statistical approaches. In addition, the benefits of a deeper understanding of the issue being studied is far more satisfying and beneficial to the individual student in the long run, as opposed to understanding certain problems from only one perspective.

Kerrie Sprigings

I have identified as a feminist for quite a few years now but I was not aware of feminist and discursive psychology until my final year at university, despite being a psychology student for over four years. The only method of qualitative research I had been taught up until that point was content analysis, a methodology I had employed as part of a group. Within psychology content analysis can be dismissed as not valid, or sometimes openly mocked. This can result in a poor opinion of qualitative research more generally; something that can be quite aggravating for those undertaking qualitative research as their work can be considered 'not psychology' or 'not scientific' enough.

Some of the terms used within discursive psychology – such as structuralism and social constructionism – were concepts I was familiar with due to undertaking a philo-

sophy A-level and so perhaps I had an easier time grasping discourse analysis than my peers would have. I do wish, however, that there would be less of an undertone of ridicule regarding qualitative research within the profession of psychology. As I have been learning about discourse analysis and its place in psychology I have found myself struggling to explain to others what exactly it is, not necessarily because I don't understand it myself (I do, now), but because I am so desperate for them to see that it is psychologically sound, it does matter and it is actually quite difficult.

I appreciate the importance placed on recognising that meanings are created via communication; they change, they adapt and they have power. What we create, we can change and so there is almost an element of hope that comes with discursive psychology. I enjoy how discourse analysis is not research that seeks to create facts and does not remove an issue from its rather complex social context. I often felt uncomfortable reading quantitative research because I could not understand how it was possible for researchers to believe they had taken a step back and out of their own history and culture. At first there was almost a barrier to my understanding of discursive psychology, in the shape of all my psychology knowledge that I had accumulated previously. It was like I had been prepped in a way to reject the type of thinking that is required of discourse analysis. But once I knew the buzzwords and the manner in which they interacted, everything just felt much more comfortable.

I have often gone through the motions of conducting quantitative research and running statistical tests without actually knowing what I was doing or why. With discourse analysis I know why, and perhaps more importantly, I like the why.

Conclusions

Despite the barriers and negative assumptions regarding qualitative research, students can find the application of discourse analysis beneficial, exciting, and informative. Not only are students finding a renewed interest and enthusiasm for the profession of psychology, they are recognising the development of numerous transferable skills such as critical evaluation, viewing issues from many perspectives, and how to manage conflicting accounts. This is despite the predominance of positivistic and quantitative methods and theory. They acknowledge the complexity of discourse analysis, but also the possibility of achieving a good understanding of a method that is considered on par with the complex statistics that undergraduate students are also expected to learn. With a short amount of time to learn a new skill, and one that contrasts with much that they have understood about research up until this point, students' enthusiasm and enjoyment of discourse analysis and feminist research can make up for lost time.

About the Contributors

Jemma Tosh is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Chester. She teaches qualitative methods, with a particular focus on discourse analysis and feminist research.

Amy Brodie is completing her undergraduate dissertation on feminist psychology, sexuality and 'slut shaming'.

Emma Small is researching gender stereotypes, fairy tales and Disney films, focusing on the recent film *Brave* (2012).

Kerrie Sprigings is using discourse analysis in an examination of media coverage of the Steubenville rape case, with a particular examination of the construction of 'rape apologists'.

Correspondence

Jemma Tosh
j.tosh@chester.ac.uk