

## Qualitative Research in Canadian Psychology<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In response to the first author's e-mailed depiction of his situation as a qualitative researcher in a large Canadian department of psychology, Canadian qualitative researchers in several disciplines were invited to respond to questions about their situations. A thematic analysis of the replies revealed that psychologists in departments affiliated with the faculties of arts and science operate in greater isolation than do those with affiliated with a faculty of education. The analysis also indicated that the use of qualitative research in psychology lags behind its uptake in the other disciplines with which it was compared. Themes in terms of responsiveness to the needs of graduate students, departmental and institutional support, funding and scholarship are presented and discussed.

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## 1. Qualitative Research in Canadian Psychology

There has been an explosion of qualitative research in during the past two decades (RENNIE, WATSON & MONTEIRO, 2000). But to what extent has this uptake taken place in psychology? More narrowly, what is the situation in Canadian psychology? As a discipline, Canadian psychology has taken on the character of American psychology.<sup>2</sup> As in the United States, university psychology departments are usually affiliated with either a Faculty of Arts (often in conjunction with a Faculty of Science) or a Faculty of Education. Although there are exceptions, a suitable doctorate is necessary for registration as a psychologist. The graduate programmes leading to such degrees entail coursework, examinations and/or mandatory papers and a dissertation. In the case of clinical programmes, field placements attached to course work and an

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2 This may be truer of Canadian anglophone psychology than of francophone psychology. Quebec francophone educational institutions are, of course, situated in their French origins. We lack sufficient familiarity with the Quebec francophone university scene to be able to tell whether or not the picture given here is typical of departments of psychology there. Nevertheless, the francophone research articles published in bilingual, Canadian psychology journals are based on the same kind of research methods seen in American journals.

internship are required as well. On the way to the doctorate, students in most graduate programmes must do a Masters degree involving a thesis or research project. Courses in statistics and experimental design are required in most, if not all, departments of psychology in this country. [1]

Thus, Canadian psychology has followed the American way of making psychology both scientific and professional. Among the social sciences, it is especially ardent about its adoption of positivism and the natural scientific method going with it. Correspondingly, it can be expected to be resistant to radical departures from accustomed research practice, such as the use of qualitative research methods. This is truer of psychology in general than of educational psychology, however, and within the latter, of counselling psychology in particular. In any case, the tension created by the two approaches to enquiry makes for an interesting sociology of knowledge. A number of questions are raised: How isolated are psychologists using qualitative research? What types of qualitative research do they use? What about grant support for qualitative research? How easy is it to publish qualitative research? What are the faculty resources for meeting students' demands for qualitative research? [2]

In an attempt to get answers to these and related questions, we surveyed Canadian psychologists doing qualitative research. Moreover, to provide a context for the situation in psychology, we approached qualitative researchers in a number of other disciplines as well. As will be seen, we got more responses from the aggregate of sister disciplines than we got from psychology itself. Nevertheless, in keeping with the theme of this issue of the Journal, we shall focus mainly on psychology. [3]

In conducting our enquiry, we were open to learning of qualitative research being conducted in applied settings as well as in the academy. As it turned out, however, almost all of the investigators we found in the literature or through the network were located in academic settings. Accordingly, academic concerns were often reflected in their reports, as will become evident in what follows. [4]

## 2. Method

As part of the larger study of the rise of English-language qualitative research since 1950 (RENNIE, WATSON & MONTEIRO, 2000), we used the PsycINFO electronic database to search the key words, 'qualitative research', 'grounded theory', 'phenomenological psychology', and 'discourse analysis'. From this output we located authors of qualitative research books, chapters, and articles. For the present study, we isolated 44 Canadian contributors from several disciplines. The first author drafted a letter giving a case history of his involvement with the grounded theory form of qualitative research, describing his situation of being one of the few qualitative researchers in a large department of psychology affiliated with the Faculties of Arts and Science. This description addressed matters pertaining to collegial, departmental, and funding support of his work; students' pressure for qualitative research and responsiveness to it; and departmental attitudes to qualitative research as expressed in hiring practices. This description

set the framework for the kind of information we were interested in. Nevertheless, to simplify the participants' task, he ended the letter with the request that they reply to three questions: What approach to qualitative research do they use? To what extent do they use it as opposed to more traditional approaches to research? And to what extent do their settings support and express qualitative research? As it turned out, many participants not only answered these questions, they did so within the framework of their case histories. All correspondence was conducted by e-mail. [5]

Some participants from disciplines other than psychology disputed a comment in the prologue to the letter suggesting that the number of qualitative researchers were "few in number". They remarked that this might be the case in psychology but it certainly is not so in their disciplines. They suggested other databases to supplement PsycINFO and additional people to contact. We took up a number of these leads and eventually wrote to another 48 individuals. Overall, we received replies from 8 qualitative researchers in arts/science psychology, 7 in educational psychology<sup>3</sup>, 15 in nursing, 5 in education, 6 in sociology, 4 in medicine-related appointments/settings, 3 in social work, 2 in environmental studies, and 1 each in women's studies and nursing, medicine and psychology, and family studies and applied nutrition, giving a total of 53. One of the replies was from a member of a faculty of nursing in a Quebec university: A colleague had forwarded RENNIE's letter, prefaced with a brief introduction written in French, to a number of her francophone colleagues in Quebec who do qualitative research. This reply, given to us in French, was the only one to come from this group of qualitative researchers. Thus, again, this study is limited to anglophone qualitative research in Canada (see endnote 1). Exclusive of the Quebec group, then, the return rate was 57%. [6]

Once the returns were in, MONTEIRO summarised each reply in terms of a number of categories: research (area, and amount done), type of method used, support (institutional, departmental), classroom presence (coursework offered by the department), student involvement (theses, dissertations, supervision), and funding (internal and external sources). Alternatively, WATSON divided the replies into arts/science + educational psychology vs. those from the other disciplines, then quoted responses in terms of the approaches used; extent of use (personal and departmental); internal support (colleagues, courses, funding); and students (theses, dissertations). With these analyses in hand to aid his own interpretation of the replies, RENNIE drafted a write-up, which was conjointly revised and sent to the participants via e-mail for commentary. The comments received were then taken into consideration in the writing of the final manuscript. [7]

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3 We have a sense that the sub-discipline of community psychology is more open to qualitative research than in most other sub-disciplines in psychology and, indeed, the one community psychologist writing in supported this impression. Nevertheless, we are naturally reluctant to generalise from that one report, and have pooled it into those from educational psychology.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Psychology

The present study has led us to believe that the majority of arts/science graduate programmes in psychology in this country do not have any qualitative researchers on faculty and that, for those that do, the numbers are small. Moreover, in Canada there are proportionately more graduate programmes in arts/science psychology than in educational psychology. As for the latter (and particularly in the speciality of counselling psychology), it would appear that almost all of them have qualitative researchers on staff, and in considerable numbers in some places. [8]

##### *Arts/science psychology*

There is a pattern among the replies by the psychologists in the arts/science departments. These academics generally began their careers expressing the traditional or 'quantitative' approach to enquiry in which they had been trained, then gradually turned to the alternative approach. Usually, this turn was made only after securing tenure. Whether in response to it, or contributory to it, the turn was intricately involved in students' wishes. Students have often been ahead of their professors in recognising the potential of qualitative research. This situation has created a dilemma for faculty members making the turn. On the one hand, they are gratified by students' demands and want to accommodate them. On the other hand, given that students typically have 3-person supervisory committees for their theses and dissertations, those faculty members doing qualitative research may be hard pressed to find colleagues who can understand and support the methodology. As one psychologist in this kind of department remarked, "I pick internal readers for theses carefully". [9]

Most of these participants indicated that, over time, some of their colleagues have developed an interest in qualitative research, again, usually in response to pressure from their students. Once this 'spread effect' occurs, it is easier to get appropriate committee members for students' theses and dissertations. But this development itself is two-edged. Although the lives of the students wanting to do qualitative research are made easier, ironically the lives of the faculty members who do qualitative research can be more difficult because their colleagues who have been awakened to the approach may not consider themselves competent to supervise it. Thus, they agree to allow their students to do a qualitative research study so long as a qualitative researcher sits on the committee. This state of affairs can easily dramatically increase the supervisory load of the qualitative researchers. Meanwhile, of course, qualitative research and its supervision are both labour-intensive. Thus, qualitative researchers in arts/science psychology departments work very hard. [10]

In terms of the methods used, two participants do phenomenology, although not exclusively. One of these phenomenologists supplements the qualitative method with quantitative analyses while the other uses quantitative methods as well as

phenomenology depending on the study undertaken. Another participant described her approach as a kind of theme analysis involving both description and interpretation that takes into account immediate and larger contexts, commenting that it is probably a form of discourse analysis. A third depicted his approach as the use of interview material to generate thick and thin descriptions. A fourth indicated that she works within a social constructionist epistemological framework, drawing mainly on discourse analysis and grounded theory. Finally, one person writing in indicated that he is using a discourse analytic approach along the lines developed in the United Kingdom, especially the work of POTTER and WETHERELL (1987). [11]

The members of arts/science psychology departments reported that qualitative research is supported passively by their departments and that, in a way, this is good enough. The security of tenure and the norm of academic freedom allow them to do what they want to do and they can even flourish. None indicated that his or her department championed the cause of qualitative research, however. Many reported having successfully gotten qualitative research methodology into the graduate student curriculum but only as an elective course. As for the hiring of new faculty, it has happened that a new member has been hired precisely because he or she is a qualitative researcher, but only rarely. More typically, new appointments are made in terms of the area of specialisation that the department wishes to fill, rather than in terms of the approach to research used by the applicant. Applicants using the conventional approaches to enquiry, and publishing in mainstream journals as a result, build more impressive curriculum vitae than their qualitative research brethren, and usually win the contests. [12]

None of the psychologists in this first group reported any difficulties publishing. Indeed some gave lengthy lists of their relevant publications (and the same was true of many participants in the other disciplines surveyed as well). Few of these publications are in regular issues of flagship mainstream journals, however, although some have appeared in Special Issues/Sections on qualitative research published by such journals. There was relatively more commentary on funding. Most reported that they have received satisfactory support from their home institutions, subject to the limitation that such funding is always of a minor nature. Major grant proposals must be directed to external agencies. In Canada, there are three federal granting agencies, among which social scientists apply mainly to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). (These agencies are currently undergoing reorganisation and a re-naming). This agency is organised into a number of committees addressing the various social science disciplines. All of the participants who had dealt with the Psychology Committee gave a tale of woe. A number opined that the members of the committee usually do not know anything about qualitative research methodology and so evaluate proposals according to the conventional criteria. Finally seeing the light, some have switched to SSHRC's Interdisciplinary Committee, with greater success. [13]

### *Educational psychology*

Educational psychology is a broad discipline that covers a number of specialities, such as early childhood education, learning disabilities, and counselling psychology. The replies of the participants from this discipline were also quite consistent but in a different direction than those of the arts/science psychologists. The former reported comparatively much greater departmental support for qualitative research. One participant indicated that practically all of her colleagues in her department are qualitative researchers. Another revealed that her work is about 40% qualitative and that this proportion was in keeping with the use of qualitative research in her department as a whole. [14]

Like the other psychologists we contacted, this group collectively uses a broad array of methods. Only one appears to use a single approach (grounded theory). Others draw on different methods, whether phenomenology and narrative analysis, or critical incident, narrative, hermeneutic and action theory approaches, or (unspecified) qualitative and quantitative approaches. [15]

Overall, these psychologists did not convey the struggle, to find a place for themselves as qualitative researchers within their academic communities, seen in the replies of the psychologists located in art/science departments. Two of the educational psychology settings figuring in the reports have taken initiatives to form interdisciplinary interest groups to facilitate communication among qualitative researchers and to serve as resource pools. Indeed, some of these participants took pains to point out that the kind of situation depicted in RENNIE's letter is certainly not typical of their situation. Still, the norm of positivism affects these educational psychologists as well. One worried that allowing graduate students to work solely within qualitative research could jeopardise their careers. Another indicated that she has had difficulty publishing in mainstream counselling psychology journals because their editors and reviewers often impose conventional criteria on her works. [16]

As for funding, although one participant reported getting good support from external granting agencies for her qualitative research proposals, another indicated that building a quantitative component into her proposals seemed to be needed. These participants were, of course, reporting mainly on applications to agencies and adjudicating committees that are pertinent to their own discipline. [17]

### **3.2 The other disciplines**

Prior to this study, the frequency of 'hits' for our search terms directed to [PsycINFO](http://www.psycinfo.com) had alerted us to some unexpected differences among disciplines other than psychology in terms of the uptake of qualitative research. We found the uptake by sociology to be less than expected and the adoption by many health disciplines—especially nursing—to be greater than expected. These trends are played out in the replies from our participants in disciplines other than psychology. [18]

More than in psychology, sociology's tradition of doing field work as well as its kinship with anthropology have prepared the ground for acceptance of qualitative research. In Canada, an international conference on qualitative research was instituted by a Canadian sociologist more than a decade ago and continues to have wide appeal. Qualitative research is reported to have a good presence at mainstream sociology conferences as well. Nevertheless, one participant from this discipline gave the opinion that the uptake of the approach in sociology departments across the country is spotty, and tends to be present in the newer universities that are comparatively less bound by tradition. In a similar vein, another participant estimated that only 30 of the 1000 or so sociologists in the country do qualitative research although, he added, this work has weight. Meanwhile, we received mixed messages from the sociologists responding to our survey regarding the extent to which the two main Canadian sociology journals seem to be resistant to publishing qualitative research. [19]

As for method, one sociologist reported that, although he is "completely inductive and discovery-oriented", there are, in his discipline, enormous variations in what people consider to be qualitative research, ranging from open-ended questions on survey questionnaires to "generally solid qualitative researchers". He indicated that, in his own department, most of his colleagues who believe they are doing qualitative research rely on quantification and are actually doing content analysis. Another respondent reported that she is just one of two members of her department who are qualitative researchers and that, among the two, she is the only one doing empirical work. She reported difficulty publishing in both mainstream sociology journals and in qualitative research journals—in the first instance because the work is qualitative, in the second because it is not postmodern (!). Among those responding to our survey, most indicated that they draw on symbolic interactionism and related grounded theory and ethnographic approaches, although one indicated that she feels more secure when supporting her qualitative research with quantified analyses. [20]

Overall, it has been difficult to get a clear picture of the situation in this discipline. From what we can see, it appears that qualitative research in sociology is somewhat more established than in arts/science psychology. [21]

As for the other disciplines represented by our respondents, those in education seem to be in settings that are quite comfortable with qualitative research. Certainly, some of them are engaging in highly imaginative, creative methods, such as performative works of various sorts, that would have difficulty finding a place in even the most liberal of departments of psychology. Then there is York University's inter-disciplinary Faculty of Environmental Studies, in which most of its members are qualitative researchers doing and inspiring their students to do imaginative projects. An example coming from the work of one of the respondents from there is her use of photography of environments as part of participatory action research to reduce the opportunities for urban crime. [22]

Dominant in the field of qualitative research in Canada, however, is the discipline of nursing. More than any other group, it was the nurses among our respondents

who expressed an uproar in response to our observation that the qualitative researchers in this country are few in number. This mode of enquiry has been taken up in this discipline to the point where it is, at a minimum in most settings, on par with positivistic approaches. The reasons given for the popularity of qualitative research methods in nursing have to do with the discipline's interest in developing knowledge that is usable for clinical practice. In particular, there is an interest in understanding patients' experiences of undergoing various medical procedures in order to increase clinical wisdom and make a positive impact on the conduct of those same procedures. One participant observed nursing is unlike the social sciences in this regard, which she considered to be unduly theory-driven and reductionistic. [23]

Two of the participants from nursing are editors of qualitative health research journals. These journals lead all others by a large margin as sources of the 'hits' in our search terms—especially grounded theory—in the PsycINFO data base. Also, an institute of qualitative research has been founded at the University of Alberta, and has a number of international sites. This institute serves as an interdisciplinary training and resources centre. [24]

In summary, the status of qualitative research in Canada is uneven. Of those disciplines represented in our responses, arts/science psychology is most resistant to the uptake of the approach. The number of departments that have qualitative researchers among their faculty is small, and such faculty members constitute an extreme minority within their departments. Their impact on their departments outweighs their minority status, however, by virtue of hard work in response to students' demands for the approach. Moreover, interest in it has spread to other colleagues, although not to the point where it has become a broad movement within such departments. Also, although difficulty securing external funding is experienced, most of the respondents appear satisfied with their career progress: They are allowed locally to do what they want to do, and they appear to be publishing to their satisfaction albeit not, by and large in "top" mainstream journal outlets. The discipline of education and its sub-discipline, educational psychology, are comparatively much more sanguine about qualitative research, as reflected in much larger complements of qualitative research faculty members in university departments, and active research groups. Sociology seems to be between arts/science psychology and education. The discipline of nursing has exceeded the other disciplines addressed in the survey in terms of its application of qualitative research. Finally, we heard from a scattering of interdisciplinary respondents, often associated in some way with a health discipline, who also reported subscription to the approach. [25]



## 4. Conclusion

Once knowledge is defined by method, then institutions of power (university curricula and hiring practices, criteria used by granting agencies, editorial policies of journals, etc.) are organised to materialise the definition. From then on, claims to knowledge based on alternative methods are either ignored or dismissed. For whatever reason, it is apparent that positivism has held the disciplines of education and nursing in a looser grip than it has held arts/science psychology and sociology. Correspondingly, it is easier for the former to claim that the returns from a methodological challenge to positivism—qualitative research—constitute knowledge. In the same token, institutional support, although not total by any means, has come into being in these disciplines more than has been the case in arts/science psychology. [26]

It is also the case, however, that the situation within arts/science psychology is mixed as well. Although resistances to their approach are encountered both inside and outside these academic departments, by virtue of being protected by tenure, qualitative researchers are at least tolerated by departmental colleagues. Moreover, the interest in the approach shown not only by students but also by some colleagues as well means that qualitative researchers are spreading an uptake of the approach that should accumulate over time. Nevertheless, the situation is such that we do not foresee a pronounced shift in the way arts/science Canadian psychology as a whole prefers to do enquiry—certainly not in the near future. [27]

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