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Making Love to Your Data: On Post-qualitative Research and Therapy

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Abstract

Despite their considerable differences, both quantitative and qualitative research now operate within the positivist paradigm which now governs the world of psychotherapy. Both methods fall short in capturing and embodying the intricacies, complexities and multiplicities of organismic human experience. This article explores a third, nascent (non)modality: post-qualitative research, a mode of inquiry which draws on post-structuralism and Critical Theory and applies some of these ideas to psychotherapy, in particular to person-centred and experiential therapies.

Key Words: post-qualitative; humanistic therapy; post-structuralism; axiology

Introduction

From the 1990s onwards, the social sciences have witnessed the gradual emergence of new ways of conducting research (e.g. Spivak, 1993; Scheurich, 1995; St Pierre, 1997; St Pierre & Pillow, 2000), adopting the names of 'post-inquiry' and/or 'post-qualitative research'. Here I will use the second descriptor because of its immediate link to qualitative research.

It would be inaccurate to describe post-qualitative research as a new methodology, because at the heart of its ethos is the difficult and laudable aspiration to free the researcher as much as possible from the inevitable constraints of methodology. For that reason, post-qualitative research is animated by a creative tension: on the one hand, challenging the limitations of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies; and on the other, holding the new emerging ideas lightly enough so that they do not become new formulae and/or constraints.

This up-and-coming *non*-methodology has yet to reach the world of psychotherapy. My attempt here is to communicate some of the ontological and epistemological aspects of post-qualitative research with colleagues, trainers and trainees in the hope that the latter may be included in person-centred and experiential psychotherapy trainings, and that it may begin to inform some of our thinking as clinicians.

Paradigm Wars (and Treaties)

As a rule, psychotherapy research within most theoretical orientations tends to outline clear differences between quantitative and qualitative methodologies (often, but not always, privileging the latter). While the former has a long history, dating back to the early years of the twentieth century and the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, the latter is relatively new, with the first volume of the journal *Qualitative Inquiry* being published in the mid-1990s. There are crucial distinctions between the two modalities, the most obvious being *primary* and *secondary* distinctions:

- *Primary* distinction relates to the production of data and the nature of indicators: numbers in the case of quantitative research; words in the case of qualitative research. A research is then labelled 'mixed-methods' research when it succeeds in presenting and discussing both quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (words) indicators.
- *Secondary* distinction relates to epistemological assumptions, i.e. with the style of propositions by which a researcher formulates their understanding of what constitutes knowledge, usually in relation to existing theories. How do we know what we know? How do we articulate it? Do we, for instance, devise or rely on *causal* explanations, apportioning origins, finding certitude in ascribing purpose, unity and reason to the phenomena we study? Do we perceive them as external, solid objects from an imaginary vantage-point? Do we, in other words, apply a *positivist* explanation?

  Or do we instead approach phenomena through empathic attunement, our 'garment' becoming so thoroughly 'invisible' (Mearns & Thorne, 2103, p. 6) that we may ourselves forget we are wearing it? Do we, in other words, apply a *hermeneutical* explanation?

If we adhere to the above distinctions, the two modes of enquiry appear to be incompatible, with the quantitative and qualitative divider becoming all the more marked, positing objectivity against subjectivity, being against becoming, static against flowing and so forth. This has vital implications for psychotherapy. Consider, for instance, Carl Rogers' well-known definition of the 'person' as a 'fluid process [rather than] a fixed and static entity; [as a] a flowing river of change, not a block of solid material; [as] a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits' (Rogers, 1961, p. 122). This fluid perspective is seemingly incompatible with a positivistic, quantitative stance, and more in step with an empathically attuned, qualitative stance. Understood in this way, the marked difference between the two modalities goes a long way towards explaining the vigorous 'paradigm wars' (Gage, 1989, p. 135) of a few decades ago, whose effects are arguably still present today. Various attempts have been made in recent years within the person-centred approach (PCA) to bridge the two modalities, with several practitioners leaning, surprisingly, in favour of quantitative methods. However, what these stances may ignore is the *political* element implicit in quantitative methodologies. Positivistic, quantitative ontologies and epistemologies have historically provided the ideological backdrop for, and have enjoyed full patronage from, institutional power (whose agendas are altogether at variance, to put it mildly, with the exploratory and emancipatory enterprise of therapy), justifying the label of 'quantitative imperialism' (Brady & Collier, 2004, p. 15) that some authors attributed to it.

The empathetic stance found in qualitative research has been forcibly quashed in recent years through the impositions of fixed rules and standards, something which may be understood (Lather, 2013) as a reflection of the turn, at the beginning of the 1980s, from the managed market economy and rational micro-economic level actions of Keynesian liberalism (1945–1980) to neoliberalism, a mode first implemented by General Augusto Pinochet in Chile before becoming common currency the world over, and characterised by unbridled individualism and the rhetoric of 'natural' free markets.

Waiting for Rogers at the Wrong Station

The ideological pull of logical positivism which took hold first in Europe and then in the USA when members of the Vienna Circle fled Germany is not to be underestimated; it has been called the epistemological unconscious (Lather, 2014; Steinmetz, 2005). To be uncritically sympathetic, as person-centred/experiential practitioners, to quantitative methods means to turn a blind eye on the political pressures on psychotherapy on behalf of an audit culture of 'accountability' to bend to positivist agendas. To promote basic empathy scales, authenticity scales and related attempts to measure, translate and subjugate the subtleties and vagaries of human life means overlooking that a *number* is a *signifier like any other* (Bazzano, 2020), rather than a privileged signifier. We would be operating under the influence of what Andrew Natsios (2010) calls 'Obsessive Measurement Disorder' – a 'pathology' that has invaded not only government policies but also the humanities, including the therapy world. We would be waiting for Carl Rogers at the wrong station.

In wanting to bridge essentially qualitative endeavours such as person-centred/experiential therapies to a quantitative modus operandi, we would nevertheless affirm, albeit by accident, something important. We would be saying that there may be *no fundamental distinction* between quantitative and qualitative methods. Could that be true? And in what way can one make that claim?

In a recent paper on psychotherapy research in relation to language and gesture, Julia Cayne (2020) wrote about 'approaches to qualitative phenomenological research... as stemming from the dominant discourse around a positivist paradigm' (Internet file). Cayne's is a surprising statement: qualitative methods may well be at heart positivistic, just as quantitative methods are, despite the differences in their respective languages. Why? Because they may be a way, she goes on to say, to 'manoeuvre us *around experience* rather than recognise how we are *subject to*, in this case, language and importantly language as bodily phenomena' (emphases added). Within qualitative methods, she goes on to add, 'primacy is still given to universal truths, rather than the contextual, temporal, cultural' dimensions (Cayne, 2020, ibid.).

A few years ago I would have balked at the very idea of fathoming a positivist continuum between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. My default had always been to instinctively defend the qualitative ethos against the onslaught of what I consider as mind-numbing and dehumanising metrics. However, after years of learning and subsequently teaching research methods, I began to feel disillusioned with conventional humanistic qualitative methods, and increasingly unhappy about my own need to justify them. Part of the problem, I now realise with hindsight, was that I had

studied post-structuralism long *before* embarking on a person-centred psychotherapy training whose tenets relied on a set of philosophical assumptions harking back to modernism. It has been somewhat comforting to learn of others who had gone through a similar process (e.g. St Pierre, 2014).

My own experience as both a trainee and trainer, and that of many of my colleagues, suggests that the ethos reigning over therapy trainings (including person-centred ones) is the preservation and perpetuation of a set of existing canonical tenets rather than genuine questioning. In my view, to encourage the latter would shake the foundation of an edifice painstakingly built to appease the powers; it would also put future funding at risk. When so-called 'universal' and metaphysical truths (whether coated in numbers, words or images, relying on a formative tendency or the alleged friendliness of facts) take over the irredeemably *asymmetrical* and contingent aspects of, say, our case-study or particular topic of research. When the solidity, coherence and substantiality of the speaking subject (Foucault, 1970) is not scrutinised but leaves the self unscathed. When codes of belief and shibboleths are invariably confirmed, then the claim that conventional qualitative research is still in the grip of positivism begins to gain traction.

Is there a way out of the impasse? One possible way is moving the goal-posts by looking at post-qualitative research (Lather, 2013; St Pierre, 2014; Le Grange, 2016, 2018) and seeing what it may offer to the PCA and experiential therapies.

Post-qualitative Research

> Transformation [is] very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible. (Foucault, 1988, p. 155)

Upholding an overall sympathetic and supportive stance towards the conventional qualitative style of conducting research is a valid stance, but is that enough? To make our home there may well mean turning qualitative inquiry into another stale formula routinely recycled from one generation of practitioners to the next. The implicit promise of *post-qualitative* research is that in its current 'birthing state', it would allow for the openness and experimentation which psychotherapy training, practice and research all need in order to open new avenues of inquiry. In my view this is preferable to the present situation within the PCA, with two main tendencies arguably wrestling for ascendancy: on the one hand, precious upholding of the conventionally humanistic tenets of the approach; on the other, insistent calls for a renewal which relies on a positivist ethos at variance with the soul of the approach. I believe the first one looks to the past, the second looks not so much to the future as to *an upgrade*.

The added potential benefit of post-qualitative research is that it can provide not only an engaging critique of quantitative and qualitative methods, but it can also point the way towards a *new epistemology,* inviting us to think differently about knowledge. In so doing, it may renew the original purpose of qualitative research, while maintaining a refreshingly tentative, exploratory ambience.

A Note on Ontology and Epistemology in Post-qualitative Research

What would this new epistemology consist of? This is clearly work in progress, but a starting-point would be a trenchant critique of epistemology (or theory of knowledge) itself. Critical theory is very helpful here. For Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/2002), at the heart of human desire for knowledge is fear: 'Humans

believe themselves free of fear', they write, 'when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization.' (p. 11) Constructing a theory of knowledge is inevitably animated by our fear and anxiety of the unknown.

What is the alternative suggested by a post-qualitative stance? Not *abandoning* knowledge altogether, but seeing it as a useful fiction, in the positive sense of the term, i.e. as a creative human endeavour that helps us to a degree to make sense of an unfathomable world. This is a useful antidote against dogmatism, for then the tenets of a psychotherapeutic approach are seen as descriptors, hypotheses to be tested, rather than as articles of faith.

The notion of ontology would also be revised, for then this branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being (the literal meaning of ontology) would be submitted to closer scrutiny in post-qualitative thought and research. The inspiration here is Carl Rogers himself, if we take seriously his claim that a person is 'a fluid process, not a fixed static entity, a flowing river of change, not a block of solid material; a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits' (Rogers, 1961, p. 122). In other words, there is no such thing as *being* (what ontology is preoccupied with) but only *becoming.* An 'ontology' of becoming is possible: a fluid, 'musical' ontology that observes and is loyal to processes, and is animated by a process philosophy (Whitehead, 1978).

Post-structuralism and Critical Theory: Identity and Emancipation

There are different cultural and philosophical sources within the nascent post-qualitative 'movement'. The ones I personally draw from are post-structuralism and (aspects of) Critical Theory, in particular the work of Walter Benjamin (2002). Other sources on which post-qualitative practitioners tend to draw are posthumanism, speculative realism and the more fuzzy term 'postmodernism'. I find these links far less convincing and less useful to our purposes here. Unlike post-structuralism and Critical Theory (both emancipatory practices), postmodernism has effectively become the ideology of neoliberalism (Jameson, 2013, 2019). Here I will briefly sketch salient points in post-structuralism and Critical Theory, before going on to explore ways in which their insights may be applied to psychotherapy research.

Post-structuralism is the broad, expedient term given to a set of diverse philosophical practices emerging around the 1950s, mainly but not only in France, and reaching an extraordinary flowering in the 1960s and 1970s with the publication of pivotal works by authors such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, Blanchot, Lyotard, Cixous, Irigaray – to name just a few. Inscribed within a wider political project of emancipation and engaged in active and often critical dialogue within the historical Left, these writings influenced politics, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, philosophy, art and science. Looming in the background were figures like Nietzsche, an important influence on post-structuralism, but also writers such as Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir and Sartre, with whom post-structuralists engaged critically and creatively. Simply put, post-structuralist texts provide us, among other things, with a formidable *critique of identity.*

Critical Theory, from its heyday of the early Frankfurt School (particularly Adorno and Benjamin) to Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick,

provides us first of all with a useful correlate to the above, namely the tools needed to formulate an *ontology of actuality*. To see through the insubstantiality of the self is not enough. Foucault (1983) acknowledged that many theoretical blunders could have been avoided in post-structuralism by paying closer attention to the *ontology of actuality* that runs through the Frankfurt School (Dews, 1986). Interestingly, contemporary expressions of social change and direct action, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement, did not turn to humanistic thought for inspiration, but to Critical Theory (Jeffries, 2016). What does 'ontology of actuality' mean? Wedding our actions to history and the everyday alongside concrete others.

I have for some time now discussed the importance of Hegel's *Phenomenology* (1977) in relation to therapy trainings (e.g. Bazzano, 2012, 2016a, 2017), highlighting the realities of conflict and disparity which need to be acknowledged alongside more popular and romanticised notions of mutuality and symmetry in relational psychotherapy. This point was developed further in my recent book (Bazzano, 2019), where the notion of actuality is grounded in the primacy of the *deed* at the expense of a frequently glorified *doer*.

One important implication of this is a critique of intentionality – a staple ingredient in humanistic and phenomenological trainings – in favour of *expression*. This may be rightly construed as a call to *expressionism in psychotherapy*. Subjectivation in this context becomes *heterology*, or logic of the other (which also implies *primacy* of the other). My 'identity' – its 'imprint' – is clarified through expression and action (the domain of history, ethics, of finite, embodied existence) with others. It cannot be mere assertion of subjectivity. Emancipation then becomes political subjectivation, i.e. the formation of an identity that is not a 'self' but a concrete, conflictual/loving relation of self/others.

Applications

Person-centered, experiential and other psychotherapy trainings would benefit from exposure to post-structuralist and critical theory's texts as required reading. What would this mean in terms of research? What key points can be outlined? I will sketch a few, drawing mainly on Le Grange (2018).

● **DE-CENTERING OF THE 'I'**. In post-qualitative research, the human 'I' is 'ecological, embedded in the material flows of the earth/cosmos, constitutive of these flows' (Le Grange, 2016, p. 34). It is never isolated from the three ecologies – mental, social, environment (Guattari, 2000). A de-centring of the speaking subject is 'crucial in an organismic perspective such as the PCA' (Bazzano, 2012, p. 140). For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the human is not separate but on an immanent plane with a world of materiality which, far from being inert matter, is gifted with *agency* (Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010; Bazzano, 2012), i.e. with self-organising (self-actualising) capabilities.

● **RE-ENVISIONING EPISTEMOLOGY**. Excessive importance is given to knowledge in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The latter may at times criticise knowledge, but it still continues to attach great importance to it. Despite nominally critiquing the Cartesian *cogito* (the thinking 'I'), it still holds on to the knowledge gained by 'my' research. Also, not enough attention is paid to the close proximity and even complicity of knowledge to institutional power and, among other things, to the links 'between knowledge and ethics [and]

how knowledge produces reality' (St Pierre, 2013, p. 648).

● **NON-REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH**. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies rely on logocentrism, i.e. the view, central in Western science and philosophy, which assumes the existence of a fundamental unity between language and reality. They also tend to condense difference, fragmentation and subjectivity into a larger, all-encompassing whole that often relies on logic and reason, and the allegedly unifying structure of language. The post-qualitative researcher goes beyond this view, attempting a non-representational mode of research, which Ingold (2015, p. vii) explains as 'a *correspondence*, in the sense of not coming up with some exact match or simulacrum for what we find in the things and happenings going on around us, but of *answering* them with interventions, questions and responses of our own' (original italics).

● **PURE EXPERIENCE**. Here, the invitation is to go beyond the crushing dullness of codes and categories. In both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the researcher examines 'data' as an object out there, separated from them. This implies 'violence to thought' (Deleuze, 2000/1964, p. 97) and can be resisted in post-qualitative research. The inspiration here draws from radical empiricism. As Erin Manning (2015) explains,

> the challenge of radical empiricism is that it begins in the midst of relations not yet organised into terms such as 'subject' and 'object'. William James calls this field of relations 'pure experience', pure understood not in the sense of 'purity' but in the sense of immanent to actual relations. Pure experience is on the cusp of the virtual and the actual: in the experiential register of the not-quite yet. It is of experience in the sense that it affectively contributes to how experience settles into what James calls 'knower–known' relations. As with Deleuze's actual–virtual distinction, pure experience is the in-folding of potential that keeps actual experience open to its more-than. (p. 55)

An evocative way to articulate this 'anti-method' stance in relation to so-called 'data' is found in Lather (2013). We are invited to 'make love to' rather than analyse our data:

> Making love to one's data becomes thinkable as a kind of ethics, something quite different from 'better or smarter', something more akin to the in-between places of pleasure and pain. Struggling with and against, becoming more and other, 'in a field of production of desire', analysis moves way beyond interpretation. (Lather, 2013, p. 639)

● **AXIOLOGY**. I believe this is central to psychotherapy (Bazzano, 2019), and as such it merits a brief explication here. Axiology (from *axioein*, to 'hold worthy') is the science of ascribing *values* to phenomena: in the context of therapy, this means determining the balance of *active* and *reactive* forces in the organism. A force is active when it is allowed to do what it can do. A force becomes reactive when, diverted by extraneous (usually normative) concerns, it turns against itself. An example of an active force is of any micro-disposition – emotion, feeling, instinct, affect etc. – which is trusted enough to be allowed to 'do its thing' and reveal the inherent wisdom and innocence within an overall tendency to act itself out – or *actualise*. Conversely, a reactive force is that very same micro-disposition mistrusted, judged and turned against its own natural momentum (in the name, for example, of a strong and unchallenged external locus of evaluation). The task of psychotherapy is then to work in the service of

active forces, facilitating (organismic) actualisation, and further advancing Rogers' central recognition of 'life [as] an *active* process, not a passive one', a recognition that 'the behaviors of an organism move in the direction of maintaining, enhancing and reproducing itself' (Rogers, 1963, quoted in Levitt, 2008, p. 18). 'Enhancing' is the key word here; when working in the service of active forces, we affirm the life of the organism as an expansive force revelling in the sheer pleasure of knowing itself different through its individualised expression. Arguably, this is wholly different from attempts to measure, regulate and ultimately control the life force of an organism in the service of the dominant ideologies and the market.

As for drawing from Critical Theory, the other influence behind the present article, I will limit myself to sketch a few key ideas drawn from Walter Benjamin (2002), the first of which draws, interestingly, from mediaeval theology. A brief précis will be in order here.

My own experience as a writer taught me that it is only *after* the deed, as it were – with the book written, the paper assembled, the article done and a stumbling but eager *corpus* growing in the psychical shed – that I found more direct resonance, or rather reverberation, with the work of Walter Benjamin and his own bungling attempts at research. The finding was accidental. I had turned to Benjamin for entirely different reasons – for reasons similar to those of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who was looking for an 'antidote' that would allow him 'to survive Heidegger' (de la Durantaye, 2009, p. 53).

On a spring day in 1940, Benjamin handed to librarian Georges Bataille at the *Biblioteque Nationale* in Paris a gigantic manuscript on Baudelaire. In it he comments on topics as many and varied as allegory, alienation, philosophy, poetry in the age of advanced capitalism and some intriguing notions such as 'the now of knowability' and 'love at last sight', the fleeting nature of love in the modern metropolis. His friend Theodor Adorno, after reading the manuscript, criticised what he judged to be a wide-eyed presentation of mere facticity. Benjamin took that as a compliment, saying something to the effect of 'you are describing the proper philological attitude'.

● **FORMA FLUENS**. What, then, is 'Benjamin's method'? And why do I find it so congenial? In Benjamin (2002), inspiration comes from a notion already present in mediaeval theology, according to which *forma fluens*, the flowing shape of matter, is organised by the force of divine intellect. Adorno had been rightly concerned that the view expounded by his friend was too mystical and non-dialectical. In their correspondence of twelve years (1928–1940), Benjamin (2002) explains that it is not divine intellect that does the organising, but 'our own historical experience'.

And here is the crucial point: matter itself – what contemporary thought calls 'materiality', i.e. beyond inert 'matter' (Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010; Bazzano, 2012) – assembles and 'actualises' without the intervention of either a demiurge or its shadows and surrogates, whether 'Being' or a 'Truth' that one expects to unveil. This process of autonomous construction also belongs to what we call, in our psych trade, 'research'. Construction is not imposed in the aftermath of data analyses; it emerges from its own intimate/immanent movement, which is how Benjamin conducted his own bungling and inspired research. Interested in just about everything, looking at every corner for

emancipatory possibilities, he personified the distant travels of philosophy outside its arbitrary borders and fences.

Could this way of conducting research be what phenomenology is in its purest sense? Probably not, if we consider that phenomenology is inevitably mired in subjectivism, despite the best efforts of Merleau-Ponty to at least posit a '*body*-subject' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1989).

Lather and Kitchens (2017) have brilliantly outlined other key points which draw on Benjamin, and which can be useful to post-qualitative research. I will summarise and adapt some of them below, in no particular order, adding some of my own:

- *Reading ('data') against ourselves*. This is akin to what in Zen we call 'beginner's mind', and what I have myself called the stance of the 'therapist as idiot' (Bazzano, 2016b). It implies resisting the compulsion to mastery and reduction to one point of view in favour of contradiction, movement and uncertainty (Lather & Kitchens, 2017).
- *Giving primacy to 'becoming'*: focusing on surprises, incongruities, novelties, repetitions. Paying great attention to cracks, contradictions, without turning the 'material' into linear, logical narratives.
- *Becoming an unreliable researcher*. This implies outright refusal of official knowledge and of the alleged power of the reporter/chronicler, alongside a resistance to what the 'truth' of our findings might be. This point acknowledges that the truth we tell ourselves and others at the most is expedient, utilitarian, and subject to change.
- *Paying attention to how we tell a story*. Whether writing a case-study, investigating racism in therapy trainings, or writing about dream-work, we could do well to notice how we put together a story, what we exclude and why, what we deem irrelevant, unacceptable, embarrassing etc.
- *Establishing a sacred-cow free zone.* This relates to engaging deeply with our sources, including and especially texts of our particular approach/tribe/parish, noticing how they speak to us, making room for critique. The latter is another word for freedom, which is essential in research.
- *'Weighing up' our sources.* As with the earlier discussion on axiology, here the question is: 'Does the source I'm drawing upon express an expansive, life-affirming, emancipatory ethos?'

Many things (virtually everything) can and should be deconstructed in post-qualitative research. For example: the *interview* (Scheurich, 1995), *authenticity*, and *empathy* (Lather, 2000) and reflexivity (Pillow, 2003) can all be ousted and re-thought, thus making space for the new.

A Guide to Getting Lost

Keeping psychotherapy research alive and able to respond to ever-changing contingencies means in many ways *getting lost* (Solnit, 2006), rather than getting knowledgeable, unless one understands, with Plato, knowledge as love, in which case knowledge *is* getting lost – losing oneself, relinquishing the Cartesian 'I' and drowning happily in the waters of our so-called data, *making love to our data* and being forever changed by them beyond repair.

Emancipatory psychotherapies can no longer sheepishly rely on the tired and trite tenets of quantitative and conventional qualitative methods. The organism seeks greater actualisation. What the latter looks and feels like is not a given or a pre-existing idea, but is experienced/experimented in the crucible of

practice, in the midst of unpredictable contingencies. Post-qualitative research sketches a possible way out of our current impasse.

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