

## **A SPANNER IN THE WORKS OF THE FACTORY OF TRUTH: THE WITS QUALITATIVE METHODS CONFERENCE**

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One of the principal fault lines psychologists have come to accept as a natural feature of their discipline is that which runs between two distinct sources of knowledge about the person: Quantitative "scientific" research and qualitative "clinical" insight. This dichotomy is of course not unique to academic psychology, but reproduces common-sense perceptions of the person as knowable through either objective measurement or subjective experience. While apparently in opposition, the subjective and objective modes of knowing are two sides of the same coin, together constituting the modern, autonomous individual. The fantasy of objective knowledge encourages us to treat an historically specific form of selfhood (the autonomous individual) as if it were a natural fact, on a par with material reality, while the fantasy of subjective understanding reconfirms this individual as the ultimate guarantor and source of meaning. What is rendered invisible are the political and ideological struggles through which particular forms of subjectivity come into being in the first place.

The current vogue for qualitative methods in psychology may therefore be simply the latest oscillation between mutually reinforcing, complementary opposites which together maintain the status quo. However, because qualitative research is at least nominally more critical and reflexive than quantitative, it may also be possible that the current swing towards the qualitative pole could be used strategically to give impetus to a more fundamental reorientation in psychology's self-definition. It is in this context that a small group of staff and students at the Wits Department of Psychology organised a one-day conference on qualitative methods on 20 October 1995, with the theme: **"A SPANNER IN THE WORKS OF THE FACTORY OF TRUTH"**.

The purpose of the conference was to provide a forum for some of the most recent and technically advanced local and overseas work about, or making use of, qualitative methods while at the same time drawing attention to the political

processes involved in the fabrication of what passes for knowledge in psychology. We therefore encouraged unconventional papers, posters, presentations, "confessions" and workshops and in general tried to test the limits of what qualifies as suitable material for a research methodology conference.

Many of the presenters and delegates (of whom there were about 100) were the usual South African conference crowd (ie, white academics), but there was also a significant presence of students, trade-unionists, activists and sight-seers of all sorts. The opening address was by Golden Miles Bhudu, president of the prisoners' union SAPOHR, which has been at loggerheads with both the old and new regimes, and which is known for its unusual media tactics. Other presentations by those involved in human rights struggles included talks by Violet Senna of the Domestic Workers Union, Paul Serebro a freelance mental health activist, and "Casius" who is involved in campaigns around homelessness. In each case presenters were asked to reflect on the ways in which conflicts over validity and truth are managed in their field of interest. "Casius" for instance described a struggle between homeless people and their allies over control of **Homeless Talk**, the homeless people's newspaper sold in Gauteng (and at the conference), with homeless people claiming to speak with greater authenticity about their experience while their allies claim to have better editorial and literary skills.

The prominence of these activists at the conference helped to highlight the fundamentally political nature of social science enquiry, the bankruptcy of technicist solutions to problems of bias and partiality, and the complexities of the relationship between intellectuals and those whose lives they claim to interpret. It also ensured that from a humanist perspective the conference would give the appearance of having been progressive. However, such efforts to induce the "oppressed" and "marginalised" to "tell their own story" can also be seen as a quintessentially modernist strategy which pretends that power is absent simply because it has been neutralised as a repressive force.

On the positive side, a good number of papers explicitly played with notions of discipline and confession, with speakers giving sense to their personal experiences in the context of transpersonal discourses. Rather than assuming the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity to be a zero-sum game (where more of the one invariably leads to less of the other), these presenters sought to illuminate the ways in which the researcher is always already implicated in her or his research. Thus Vasi van Deventer (whose paper had the sensationalist title, "I am the spanner in the works of the factory of truth") told the "true story" of strained relationships between himself and his academic colleagues, and used this to work out some finely detailed puzzles in post-structuralist epistemology. In a similar vein Agnes Clarke and Angela Williams recounted their experiences with transsexual lifestyles as part of a critique of the chauvinist underpinnings of certain supposedly enlightened sexual attitudes. Other presentations which touched on the intimate relationship between personal transformation and scientific enquiry were a workshop on phenomenology by Jacki Watts and a paper on the person in methodology by Ineke Meulenberg-Buskens.

In addition to papers and workshops there was also a large number of posters and displays, including an exhibition of photographs and other material from the

Eldorado Park People's History Project. Neil Lightfoot mounted a particularly interesting display of photographs and artifacts entitled, "This is not a pipe" which used the conventions of an ethnographic enquiry into the world of street-corner exhaust pipe repair businesses to illustrate some basic semiological principles and to raise some troubling questions about the research process.

Apart from such high-flown philosophical, political and epistemological enquiries there were also practical "how-to" workshops (eg, on computer-assisted qualitative analysis by Catharine Payze), papers which dealt with pragmatic methodological issues (eg, on content analysis vs discourse analysis by Lindy Wilbraham) and papers which illustrated the use of qualitative methods (eg, on nurse counsellors' perceptions of AIDS counselling objectives by Joanne Stein).

The conference was intended to put a spanner in the works of the sinister machinery, the "dark Satanic mills", of scientific and clinical psychology and it did so through postmodernist tactics of spectacle, juxtaposition and play. As a transient manoeuvre in what may become a larger campaign this may have had some effect, but in the longer term we will probably have to give up such fantasies of intellectual terrorism and take on the macro and micro politics of truth production in a more serious and sustained engagement.

*A few copies of a booklet with abstracts of the conference papers are still available and a volume of conference proceedings is being compiled. If you are interested in these, please write to Martin Terre Blanche, Department of Psychology, UNISA, PO Box 392, Pretoria, 0001 or e-mail TERREMJ@ALPHA.UNISA.AC.ZA*

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A "follow-up" conference is planned for later this year.

#### **Second Annual South African Qualitative Methods Conference**

#### **THE BODY POLITIC**

3 & 4 September 1996, Johannesburg, South Africa

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