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Critical social psychology, qualitative research and on being a research butterfly/magpie: “Feel the fear and do it anyway”

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Hannah Frith is a critical social psychologist and is Associate Professor in Psychology and Research Director for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Surrey. Her work draws on interdisciplinary theory and research to examine the intersections of sexuality, gender and embodiment, using creative qualitative research methods. Hannah has published numerous research articles and texts, illustrating a wide range of topics and research methods, including her latest book ‘A Feminist Companion to Research Methods in Psychology’, with Rose Capdevila. The interview was conducted by one of our editors (Deborah Bailey-Rodriguez) together with a Psychology PhD student (Tilbe Nur Aslan) and centred on Hannah’s journey and work as a critical social psychologist, using qualitative and creative qualitative research methods, as well as pointers on how to branch out both in research topic and method. The interview was a thoroughly enjoyable, lively and vibrant experience!

D: Can you start by telling us a bit about being a critical social psychologist and your work, please?

H: I think being a critical social psychologist feels like an identity I’ve had for a long time, and probably started around the time that critical psychology was being developed as a kind of sub-discipline of psychology. So for me, it’s really thinking about inequality and injustices and how to address that through our work. And particularly for me, that has been around gender and particularly patriarchy and feminism, which has very much informed my work. But obviously over time, that has become much more about intersectional thinking than it perhaps was 25 years ago.

D: Okay, thank you. What was it like then? How do you feel things may have evolved or developed since when you first started and it was a new area?

H: I think things have changed a lot. It's been a very exciting time. When I first started in psychology, which was in the 1980s and then finished my PhD (Frith, 1997) at the end of the 1990s - so showing my age for sure there! -, I think qualitative approaches in psychology were definitely a kind of growth area, but it was still quite marginal at that point. So it wasn't, and to some extent still isn't, usual, for there to be much teaching around qualitative research on undergraduate programmes. However, there was teaching on that in my university, in Loughborough University, and it grabbed me big time. It was not just about qualitative methods, but it was the way in which the teaching of qualitative methods was embedded in a kind of critical thinking, and that was both from feminist influences; people like Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson, who were teaching at Loughborough University at the time, but also from the more discursive psychology angle as well. Loughborough University had a big discourse and rhetoric group at the time I was there as an undergraduate and postgraduate. So, there were lots of really exciting developments, lots of key thinkers in qualitative research and really different kinds of ways of thinking about what qualitative research was about, what qualitative data was, and what you could do with it. That was really exciting.

D: Excellent, thank you. That's really interesting, the evolution, but also from an undergraduate, that it seemed to grab you. And I'm interested in how you wanted to then move that forward through your PhD, and then your subsequent work.

H: I suppose one of the things that's really interested me about qualitative research is its ability to connect people, and I think that's still true today, but that was one of the things that kind of grabbed me. And I suppose that was me connecting to the stories that people were telling about their own lives as a student reading about qualitative research, and then moving into doing qualitative research myself. So, as an undergraduate, I did my dissertation around single mothers, and what it was like to be a single mother. That was, I think, not accidental. My parents had just separated, and my mum was a newly single mum. So it very much spoke to my own experience, but as I've just indicated, it was many years ago that I did these interviews. And yet, some of them I can remember, still very vividly; I remember my dissertation and I can remember the arguments that I made in my dissertation. It drew on social identity theory, and I was really curious about how, in the context of an overwhelmingly negative public discourse about single mums in the 80s and 90s, single mums were very much demonised and probably still are. How, in that context, could individual single mums maintain a positive sense of self, given everything that was being said about them? So, I suppose that speaks to both the critical psychology angle, about how do we speak back to discourses and stories that are out in culture, which are negative and disadvantage people? How do we use qualitative research to speak back to some of those broader social discourses? But also, that other angle of how do we as

researchers connect to people's experiences and the lives that they're living, to understand them? And then amplify those voices so that they get heard in those broader cultural spaces.

D: Thank you very much.

H: *(Laughing)* Isn't it funny that you don't know what you think until you get asked a question?

D: *(Laughs)*

H: Then you are like, oh this! This is what I think!

D: It sounds like it was really impactful on you, your undergraduate research, to remember it so vividly, given all the research that you've done since. You've spoken to this, but I'll ask in case you would like to add anything else, and the question was going to be around, what is it like to use qualitative methods as a critical social psychologist?

H: It's a whole lot of things. One of the things is that it can be a very moving and emotional experience as a qualitative researcher, and actually, I think that's probably one of the most powerful things about it. And as a researcher, that's what you want to capture and communicate, the kind of emotional impact of stories. But also, I think it can sometimes feel like banging your head against a brick wall, because the ability to move that qualitative research into something impactful that makes social change, which is often what critical researchers are driving for, can be very slow. And when you have spent time with people and begun to understand their lives, you feel an obligation to... I feel an obligation to do something with that research to try and make change. And sometimes, you don't or not very well, and that can be disheartening and frustrating. However, I would say that is one of the things that has changed enormously over the last couple of decades, with much more focus on the impact of research in all kinds of different places. Sometimes, for some very neoliberal reasons, but nonetheless it opens up some doors and creates some opportunities for social change.

D: Thank you. And I know that was framed a bit weird, instead of how do you use it, but the what? That's exactly what I was after, that experience of the doing.

T: Can you also tell us a bit about the creative qualitative methods you use?

H: I've used a range of different things, but I think more now I'm supervising other people using creative methods. Things that I have used or have supervised people to use include other kinds of text-based messages, like story completion methods (e.g. Clarke et al., 2019; Frith, 2012, 2018) where you're engaging people's imaginations and creativity, and providing an end to a story. I've used photo-elicitation methods (e.g. Frith, 2020; Frith & Harcourt, 2007), drawing methods and mapping methods. I'm particularly interested in timelines (e.g. Barras & Frith, 2023; Barras et al., 2021). I've got a bit of a thing about trying to capture people's life stories over time, or something that has changed for somebody over a period of time, and helping people to visualise that as a way of exploring ebbs and flows in experiences over time. Those are some of the things that I'm interested in at the minute. But I'll have a go at anything!

H, D & T: *(Laugh)*

T: And what have been some of the benefits and some of the challenges in using creative qualitative methods, as a critical social psychologist?

H: I think some of the benefits of using these kinds of methods are that they can be fun, and participants can find them fun. Particularly around experiences that might be quite difficult to communicate, such as sensitive topics or difficult personal circumstances, etc. I think sometimes having a creative method that is fun and playful can help balance out the things that are really difficult for people to talk about. Not always, but they can be quite fun, and I think it makes a different kind of experience for both researchers and participants. There's something about getting messy together or doing something together which changes the relationship. It feels less formal, it feels less staid, and I think it does mess a little bit with some of those power dynamics, particularly because I am a rubbish drawer. So if there's any drawing going on, I can illustrate my poor expertise in this area, and participants can laugh at me, and that's okay.

H, D & T: *(Laugh)*

H: Those are some of the things I like about it. Other things are - so I do a lot of text-based methods, so discourse analysis. We do that a lot as qualitative researchers; we're working with words and one of the things I like about the creative methods is sometimes they unsettle our practised stories and allow us to think differently and see experiences differently that we might have thought about in one way. Sometimes we're surprised by things we discover about ourselves when we use methods that aren't just verbal. So I like that about it as well.

Challenges are that some people really hate anything that sounds remotely arty, no matter how much you tell them they don't have to be good at these methods. It's just not for them. Lots of people have been told as kids in school that their drawing is not good or they're not artistic, and people can really take that to heart. So it's not a method that's going to engage everybody; it is something you need to be a bit careful about in terms of who this is going to appeal to. But I think having a variety of different methods means that you might reach more people if they can pick and choose between different kinds of things. So that's one challenge. The other thing that's an interesting challenge, and actually, I think we as a collective of qualitative researchers have gotten better at, is thinking about what the creative products might mean. So often, I've done creative methods alongside an interview, and then you analyse the interview, and you might put up a picture of the thing that's produced, but you don't necessarily analyse the product of the creative method itself. And that was certainly the case when I started using creative methods. But I think things have really moved on, and there are different kinds of analytic approaches to thinking about visual material and the interaction of visual and verbal material, which I think has made our lives infinitely more complicated-slash-rich (*laughs*).

T: (*Laughs*). Thank you. So, where do you see the future for these methods and qualitative research in psychology?

H: Good question. I think they're going to continue to grow because they do things that “*just interviewing*” in inverted commas can't do. They are a lot more engaging for people. If you're thinking about public engagement activities, one of the reasons that creative methods, visual methods, etc, are being used much more is because they communicate really quick to a range of audiences, and you can read things into visuals in a way that's more difficult with people's words, because the language of visuals is much more multifaceted than the language of words. I'm saying that and then thinking, “That's not true. You can read words in lots of different ways as well”, but you get my point. Visuals communicate very quickly. This is why we're all being encouraged to produce infographics of our research, which is just one kind of thing that summarises the terribly complicated and exciting things we've been doing in just one image. So I think they're going to continue to grow because I think the public engagement agenda, the user engagement, the public patient involvement (PPI) and coproduction of research will continue to grow. And so, using a range of different techniques and methods will grow. I wonder if it will also get more technological.

So the other thing, of course, that's happening is around technologies and communication methods, AI, etc. I'm intrigued to think about what's going to happen to qualitative research with all

those kinds of developments happening. I don't have an answer to that, but I'm kind of intrigued to watch it. I've just been in a talk before I came here, about the development of apps to support people's mental health, and how apps need to get a lot cleverer about how they're using the technology so that it moves beyond just providing information. And I think that's a challenge for all of us. We know we need to reach a lot of people with our research, and with the insights from our research, particularly around mental health. There's an enormous gap in terms of accessibility of mental health services to need; most people who need help won't receive it, and won't put themselves forward to receive it for a start. So thinking about how we meet that challenge and how we translate our findings into action, I think technology will be a big part of that. It already is, but I think it will change and develop in ways that are hard to imagine. For me.

H, D & T: *(Laugh)*

H: *(Laughing)*. You may be all over it, but I'm thinking it's tough to see exactly where that's going to go.

T: Thank you.

H: What do you think is going to happen with the future of qualitative methods and creative methods?

D: I am with you. I absolutely think it's going to continue growing and taking up a bigger space. I think that's a positive thing, and I also echo your sentiments about the digitisation of visual methods. We are starting to see a lot of different types of methods that are used now, which are digital, on the computer, and AI as well. So, I think it is inevitable. It would be good to jump on the train while we're still at the learning curve stage.

H: Yes, I think some people are worried. Some researchers are worried that AI is going to make us all redundant. This is a general theme of AI as well, isn't it, that lots of people will be out of a job because AI will be able to do our jobs better than we can do them. I'm not sure I share that vision. I think there will be some challenges, and it may force us to work differently. But I trust in the infinite creativity of human beings, that we will find our way around this *(laughs)*.

D: Absolutely. Reflecting now on what you've said in the earlier part of the interview, I should have asked you to create a drawing of what it's like to be a critical social psychologist!

H, D & T: (*Laugh*)

H: That's a good challenge! (*Laughs*)

D: You've recently published *A Feminist Companion to Research Methods in Psychology*, with Rose Capdevila (Frith & Capdevila, 2022) as part of the *Feminist Companion* series (Open University Press) that both of you edit with Sarah Riley. What inspired you to write this very timely book on applying a feminist lens to viewing and using research methods?

H: Thank you. This book is part of a series of books that are all called *A Feminist Companion to ...*, and they map onto the BPS core curriculum. So, there's also *A Feminist Companion to Social Psychology* (Pownall & Stainton Rogers, 2021), etc. The idea of the overall series is that we felt it was a really timely moment, given that there was a kind of spike of activism, which I think is ongoing, including feminist activism. But also of activism around intersectional issues like Black Lives Matter, that we felt meant there was a real opportunity to speak more directly to undergraduate students about academic feminism, which is connected to activist feminism, and to make that connection a little bit clearer. But also, to insert or reinsert feminism into psychology, recognising that feminism may be there in some places and spaces, typically when there are staff who are pushing that agenda because they think it's important and it speaks to who they are as psychologists. But where there aren't people who take that position, a lot of undergraduates are left without much feminist content in their undergraduate programme. So, we thought *A Feminist Companion to* all the different areas on the BPS curriculum would be a good way of providing some input to keep that spike of activism alive and going. So, *The Feminist Companion to Research Methods in Psychology* (Frith & Capdevila, 2022) was designed to do exactly that.

One of the successes of qualitative research, including QMiP as a section of the BPS, has been that the curriculum now stipulates that qualitative research methods have to be taught as part of the curriculum. We know that's still quite patchy in terms of how much of the content of research methods focuses on qualitative methods and also non-positivist approaches to psychology more broadly. So, I guess that's what this research companion is designed to do. They are all quite chatty in style, so designed to be quite light touch, rather than a heavy textbook kind of tome, but they are meant to sit alongside, be a companion to the textbook that's being used on your undergraduate course to give you a different perspective on some of the key issues in those areas, from a feminist perspective, or feminist perspectives - plural - so that you have an opportunity to flex those critical muscles when you're thinking about the textbooks that you're using and the teaching that you're coming across. It's

also, of course, designed for teachers who may not have much knowledge about feminist methods or feminist critiques of psychological methods but want a bit of that in their course, and want to dip their toe in it, so it's a nice book to have alongside your usual textbook. So it doesn't do a lot of the heavy lifting, nitty-gritty teaching you about particular data collection or data analysis approaches. It's more conceptual than that. It's more about how do we think about how knowledge is produced? How does that link to the kinds of methods that we use, and why?

D: Thank you. What would be your key message if you had to give one, about incorporating feminist ways of thinking? What would that be, particularly to those teaching qualitative research methods?

H: Oh Deborah, that's a hard question!

D: (*Laughing*). I know! I had to change things up, keep the flow going.

H: (*Laughs*). So I'm thinking about power and thinking about that as being a key message to think about - how power infiltrates and is interwoven into all the elements of doing research and creating, producing knowledge. And I think critical qualitative researchers would recognise and understand what I'm talking about. But I think qualitative methods are also often used in a much more positivist way, in which the power gets washed out of understandings of qualitative research. So that's the difference between Big Q and small q qualitative methods, isn't it? And for me, and from a feminist point of view, that's essential to thinking about methods and knowledge production.

D: Thank you. And so, changing track a little bit, your recent publications are quite diverse in topics and methods. For example, you had the therapist constructions of shame, community-based trauma support, and the psychosocial impact of alopecia on men, and you've used a variety of methods in these. So you've used story completion with Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and semi-structured interviews with thematic analysis, systematic review and meta-analysis (see Drini et al., 2023; Frith & Jankowski, 2023; Henning-Pugh et al., 2023). It's quite impressive! All of this leads up to my question: can you tell us a bit about how you found branching out into a wide range of both research topics and methods?

H: Yes! Dizzying and disorientating perhaps!

D: (*Laughing*). And that was just the question!

H: (*Laughs*). I think I've always been a bit of a research butterfly or magpie, one of the two. I'm always a little bit attracted by the new and shiny, and have never managed to do one of those things that you're supposed to do if you want to be a professor by the time you're 30, which is to focus on **one** thing and do **one** thing really, really, really well. (*Laughs*). So this is not career advice for anybody.

H, D & T: (*Laugh*)

H: But one of the things that I absolutely adore about being an academic and a researcher is that you do have the autonomy to be able to follow your nose and follow your interests and be curious. I think one of the things that is underrated as a skill or attribute for any researcher is curiosity. I think doing all of those different things is not good for your career, but is definitely good for your soul if you are a curious person. I also really enjoy learning. I don't know any academic who doesn't, but the idea of being able to dip my toes into different topics and methods means that I am always kept fresh in what I'm doing. Sometimes it means you might revisit a method that you knew about a long time ago or didn't use and have then come back to. For example, I'm thinking again about Q-sort methods, which I haven't used or thought about for a long time, and also think-aloud methods, which I'm also enjoying and supervising. So I suppose that's the other thing about my research profile at the moment - a lot of the publications that you talked about are publications that are with clinical psychology trainees or with students or colleagues, so I'm doing a lot of partnership work or supervision work as well.

D: Thank you.

H: Talk about spreading yourself thin. I think that's probably my answer. Yes, I'm spread very thin at the moment! (*Laughs*). It feels that way.

H, D & T: (*Laugh*)

T: Finally, can you share with us any tips for qualitative researchers wishing to branch out into using different methods?

H: Yes, what's that phrase? Feel the fear and do it anyway. I think there's so much information and advice, sometimes too much information. But really, the only way that you learn how to do these things, and learn whether they will work for your question, your participants, and your own skills, is

to give them a go. And so, if you're cautious like me, I give them a go on a small scale where maybe it doesn't matter if it goes wrong. And then I might try it on a bigger scale. But also, to remember that you learn the most from the failures rather than the things that are successful. So, don't be afraid to get it wrong, and don't be afraid for it to crash and burn and not work. But do it anyway.

T: Thank you.

D: Those were all our questions. That's been really insightful, and playfully delightful as well! I really appreciate that.

H, D & T: (Laugh)

D: Thank you so much.

H: Thanks very much for your time, and your questions and your good humour.

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