Teaching Qualitative Inquiry to Ignite the Social Psychological Imagination

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In this article I discuss how incorporating a module of assignments requiring students to conduct qualitative inquiry in an undergraduate social psychology course fosters a greater understanding of diverse theoretical perspectives within social psychology, builds practical research skill competencies, and stimulates the growth of their *Social Psychological Imagination;* a concept I base on Mills's (1959) idea of the "Sociological Imagination" (1959). Through a series of field observations and low-stakes writing assignments (Elbow, 1997) that build toward a final report of findings about social behavior observed in public spaces, students learn how to observe, analyze, and write like a social psychologist. In this module, students are required to observe social behavior in a public place and generate a theory about a social norm that impacts behavior in the place they observed. Actively carrying out qualitative inquiry and writing about it is important for developing core competencies in social psychology. Qualitative inquiry affords the opportunity for students to indulge their Social Psychological Imagination and engage in reflexive, critical, historically informed and person-sensitive practices. Furthermore, the practice of communicating the process of qualitative inquiry develops academic and professional writing tools that are useful to students in multiple domains. By incorporating practice conducting qualitative inquiry into a content-based course like social psychology, students' understanding of course material is enriched as they come to learn how knowledge in the discipline is produced while providing real-life examples of social psychological theories in action.

Keywords: teaching, social psychology, qualitative inquiry, field observation, writing

In this article I describe how a module of qualitative inquiry exercises was incorporated into an undergraduate Social Psychology course in order to foster a greater understanding of social psychological concepts, build practical research skill competencies, and develop students' *Social Psychological Imagination.* My concept of the Social Psychological Imagination builds on Mills's (1959) idea of the "Sociological Imagination," but reorients analytic focus onto the "dynamic interdependence" (Lewin, 1939) of person and society that characterizes social psychological analysis. Through a series of field observations and low-stakes writing assignments (Elbow, 1997) that build toward a final report of findings about social

behavior observed in public spaces, students learn how to observe, analyze, and write like a social psychologist. I created this module of exercises to be used within a Social Psychology course in an urban environment, but the module may be adapted to other content-based courses within psychology or other social science disciplines such as anthropology or sociology, as well as courses taking place in other locales.

In the qualitative field observation module, students are required to observe social behavior in a public place of their choosing and generate a theory about a social norm that impacts behavior in the place they observed. In conversation with other students and the course readings, students learn diverse theoretical perspectives within social psychology that can make sense of the same observed phenomena in different ways. By incorporating qualitative inquiry as an experiential module into a content-based course like Social Psychology, students' understanding of course material is enriched as they come to

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learn through first-hand experience how knowledge in the discipline is produced as well as providing real-life examples of social psychological theories in action. The substantive content of the course is enlivened by engaging students in practicing qualitative inquiry analyzing the contours of their own social environment. These assignments also require students to exercise their Social Psychological Imagination, changing their perspective on often taken for granted social behavior to involve critical reflection into how both the person and the environment may be impacting that experience.

Context

While qualitative inquiry has played an important role in the field of psychology since its inception (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015), practicing and teaching these approaches continues to be a "contested" (Gibson & Sullivan, 2012, p. 2) area in relation to the dominance of quantitative methods. Eisenhart and Jurow (2011) describe the difficulty of designing curricular goals for teaching qualitative inquiry across social scientific disciplines, pointing out that "qualitative research communities . . . do not agree on research priorities. . . . do not face the same research problems or questions about their work . . ." and "do not share one approach" (p. 669). In addition, they note that very few practitioners of qualitative research have written about teaching, and even fewer have written in detail about curriculum design or pedagogical decisions. Within psychology, even fewer examples of qualitative research pedagogy exist. Furthermore, much of the pedagogical literature focuses on standalone qualitative research courses, graduate level courses, and apprenticeship style advising. Unfortunately, many psychology departments do not have dedicated qualitative methods courses (this is particularly true for undergraduate programs) and may not even cover qualitative methods within other courses. This article builds on and adds to existing pedagogical literature on teaching qualitative inquiry in psychology, providing an example of how a module focused on qualitative inquiry can be incorporated in an undergraduate content-based course like Social Psychology in order to introduce students to qualitative inquiry and enliven course content.

Even in the absence of a robust literature on the teaching of qualitative inquiry, the growing body of literature already exhibits some consistent insights, including a "consensus . . ." that ". . . experiential pedagogies" (Strayhorn, 2009, p. 701) are the most effective way to teach qualitative methods. This module of exercises builds on these insights from the literature on qualitative research pedagogy. The idea to have my students actively engage in a small research project was driven by findings on the importance of experiential activities in teaching qualitative methods in psychology (Fontes & Piercy, 2000), and the benefits of "learning by doing" (Preissle & deMarrais, 2011, p. 31) in teaching qualitative inquiry in other social science disciplines. Based on reviews and surveys of syllabi and publications covering qualitative research pedagogy, Eisenhart and Jurow (2011) argue that the student research project is a "'signature pedagogy' of qualitative research courses" (p. 701). The process of actually engaging in qualitative research is found to develop practical skills, root abstract concepts in real settings, improve confidence in carrying out a project, and enhance enjoyment of learning.

In addition, Preissle and deMarrais (2011) argue that responsiveness, or the interaction between the researcher and that being researched, is a core aspect of all forms of qualitative inquiry that must be taught in qualitative pedagogy. Some methods of generating qualitative data, such as clinical interviews, engender much more "responsiveness" (Preissle & deMarrais, 2011, p. 33) than field observations. However, the field observation module encourages students to attend to their affective and cognitive responses to the social spaces they observe in order to practice accessing their responses and using it as an analytic tool. Students were encouraged to reflect on their subjectivities, which Eisenhart and Jurow describe as "part and parcel of doing qualitative research" (Eisenhart and Jurow, 2011, p. 709). As I discuss in more depth later, assignment prompts and class discussions guide students toward examining how their social identities intersect with the qualities of the space the observe and how that may impact what they observe and how they interpret it.

Furthermore, the module attempts to avoid teaching qualitative inquiry as a "linear recipe-like process" (Preissle & Roulston, 2009), a problem found in many attempts to teach meth-

odological approaches. I use class discussions to troubleshoot problems or sticking points throughout the process, as well as to explore the many different analytic approaches that could be used to make sense of the data students have gathered. In doing so, I hope to build on the knowledge of different qualitative approaches described in our text, and foster the "pluralist orientation" (Gergen et al., 2015) that is one of the hallmarks of the qualitative movement within psychology.

In their introduction to a recent special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* focused on teaching qualitative research, Hsiung (2016) describes how teaching qualitative research is a necessarily context specific practice, and how educators, especially those in the global or disciplinary "periphery must make their teaching materials locally meaningful" (Hsiung, 2016, p. 60). In addition, the critically important nature of social context is the key insight that social psychology brings to the analysis of psychological phenomena. I created this series of assignments to fit as a module within the particular context of a semester-long Social Psychology course in an undergraduate psychology department at a 4-year college in New York City. In doing so, I strove to create exercises that would be locally meaningful to the particular context in which I was teaching. In the sections that follow, I describe in more depth how the particularity of this context shaped the exercise, and how it can be adapted to other contexts.

Departmental and Institutional Context

The Social Psychology course was an upper-division elective within the department's Social/Developmental concentration, so most students were junior or senior psychology majors. Prerequisites for the course are introduction to psychology, Statistics, and Experimental Psychology. The department did not have a dedicated qualitative methods course. However, all students enrolled in Social Psychology will have already taken Statistics and Experimental Psychology courses that introduced them to quantitative methods. Some will have encountered qualitative inquiry in other psychology courses, such as Developmental Psychology, Clinical Psychology, the Psychology of Women, or Human Sexuality, depending on the professor who taught it. They may also have

encountered qualitative inquiry in courses they have taken in other social scientific disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology, Women's and Gender Studies, or Education Studies. Most students, however, come into the course thinking of quantitative surveys and experiments as the main methods of producing knowledge in contemporary psychology. Through my choice of assignments, textbook, and examples of contemporary and historical research on social psychological phenomena, I aim to broaden their view of the methods used in social psychology.

The university is located in New York City. Most students live within the five boroughs that comprise the city and all students spend time there as a result of attending classes each week at the campus in Manhattan. When creating the assignments, I was inspired by some of Stanley Milgram's (1992) later work on the social environment of cities, undertaken after he completed his well-known obedience experiments and then moved to New York City to join the Psychology faculty at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

To emphasize to students the centrality of qualitative inquiry to psychological research, I explicitly situate the field observation exercise in relation to Milgram, a figure whom most are familiar with from their introductory psychology course, and about whom they have learned more during early weeks of this course. Most students readily recall his famous studies of obedience, so I introduce them to his later studies of social behavior in cities that he undertook when he moved to the City University of New York. We read excerpts from *The Individual in a Social World* (Milgram, 1992) that touch on the discussion of social norms on subways, how the social environment of New York City differs from that of Boston or Paris, and other topics that are usually perceived as immediately relatable by students who live in the city but have not been considered as norms that govern their and others' behavior every day.

While this may seem like a unique context, and that the assignment is particularly suited to analyzing the urban environment, this is not necessarily true. I also gained inspiration for the assignment from exercises used in other social science courses in which students are asked to analyze public locations such as laundromats, auctions, bingo halls, and sports leagues (Keen, 1996) in more suburban locales, and also an

assignment in which students investigated the social meanings of farm buildings (Snyder, 1995). Most universities themselves, regardless of location, will likely also provide ample places to conduct this sort of study, such as libraries, cafeterias, lecture halls, and social areas. Those who want to adapt these assignments to other locations may wish to find examples of other extant research that has examined the kinds of places their students live in. Providing examples of research conducted in relevant locations can establish the presence of an existing foundation of knowledge and ignite the creation of research questions and jumping off points for new avenues of investigation.

Context Within Course

Within the course itself, the knowledge required to carry out the assignments was scaffolded by using a social psychology textbook (Stainton Rogers, 2011) that incorporates discussions of ontology and epistemology in the first two chapters, and dedicates an entire chapter to qualitative methods. By the midpoint of the semester, students have a working understanding of many qualitative methods, and have seen examples of qualitative inquiry woven throughout the content-based chapters on various areas of social psychology. They are then ready to begin carrying out their own observational study in the qualitative research module.

Textbook choice.   In choosing the textbook I used for the course, I evaluated many options and chose Wendy Stainton Rogers's *Social Psychology* (2011) because of its coverage of both mainstream and critical perspectives in social psychology, as well as its introduction of both qualitative and quantitative research methods early on in the text. All of the mainstream social psychology texts I reviewed did not cover qualitative approaches, or covered them too thinly to be useful for my course without significant outside reading and supplementation. I aimed to find a text that would provide students with a foundation in traditional topics and approaches in social psychology, yet not introduce qualitative methods or critical perspectives as a footnote or afterthought. In recent years, a handful of textbooks have been published that are explicitly aimed at teaching critical social psychology, a growing field that includes critical perspectives on social psychology rooted in

feminist psychology, liberation psychology, action research, discursive psychology, and other critical perspectives. The critical social psychology textbooks I evaluated generally provided excellent coverage of qualitative methods and critical perspectives, but were oriented toward students who had already taken an introductory course on social psychology and thus did not cover traditional core topics that the department and I believed were crucial knowledge that should be transmitted in the introductory course. I also considered Jane Callaghan and Lisa Lazard's textbook *Social Psychology* (2011) because it too incorporates traditional and critical perspectives throughout the text. It could also be a successful choice for teaching a course on social psychology that includes a qualitative research module if the section covering methods was assigned nearer to the beginning of the course, as it is located in the penultimate chapter.

Instructors interested in teaching an experiential qualitative research module in a content based course such as social psychology should review current textbook options when designing their course, as qualitative methods and other critical perspectives are incorporated into more textbooks over time. They should also consider using a traditional textbook and assigning supplemental materials, or assigning textbook chapters out of sequential order if it will scaffold skills related to research methods, ethics, and analysis that are useful in carrying out the qualitative module. I found Stainton Rogers's (2011) textbook to be the best choice for my class, as it integrates traditional and critical perspectives on the field, introduces qualitative and quantitative methods in depth early on in the text, and is written in an engaging and charismatic manner that appealed to my students.

Data collection and analysis.   In the textbook and in class, we cover multiple sources of data used in qualitative research: ethnography, participant observation, field research, interviews, focus groups, case studies, archives/media, and action research. We also cover multiple modes of analysis: thematic analysis, grounded theory, discourse analysis, phenomenological analysis, and narrative analysis. In regard to the assignments that comprise the qualitative research module, we discuss in greater depth how students will conduct a short-term type of field research. I situate their field research in relation to the ways an ethnographer

would engage in observations that, in a larger study, might be accompanied with interviews, participation, and analysis of media relating to the phenomena of interest. Due to ethical and temporal constraints, students do not undertake interviews or engage in active participation in the social settings they analyze for their projects. However, we explore some of these other modes of inquiry with in-class activities in which students use narrative analysis to trace the development of an activist identity based on interview samples I provide, and use discourse analysis to examine representations of gender in advertising drawn from contemporary media. For the observational assignment module, we focus on practices of generating field notes that describe events and impressions that are not reducible to numbers. As described in more depth later in this paper, we address the difficulty in attempting to describe without interpreting, which reinforces the difference between data collection and data analysis as well as points out their interdependence.

Research ethics and project design. Furthermore, when we cover quantitative and qualitative methods in their respective textbook chapters we also detail contemporary and historical ideals of research ethics. Before beginning the observational assignment, students should have a firm grounding of how ideas of informed consent, anonymity, and harms versus benefits are built into the earliest stages of developing a research project. Students should have a working knowledge of core ethical principles in psychological research and understand why the assignment asks them to only participate in observation of public spaces and not engage in deception, intervene in the dynamics observed, or record personally identifiable information before they begin the module. While it may seem that covering methods and ethics in addition to core conceptual topics might push the introduction of a research assignment to the last few weeks of a semester-long course, it is crucial that students begin working on the assignments as early as possible in order to give them time to revise, discuss their work in class, and complete the separate stages without being faced with a final assignment integrating all of their skills and knowledge relevant to the course in final weeks. This can be accomplished by covering methods and ethics earliest, and then using the assignments to provide examples of

topic areas (e.g., identity, attitudes, cognition, communication, groups, prejudice) as the course continues. I use Milgram's obedience experiments as an example of questions regarding research ethics and a bridge into his work on the social climates of cities.

Learning Goals

I designed the observational assignment module with four desired objectives in mind: (a)Experience conducting field research, (b) Engaging actively in the course, (c) Theoretical diversity, and (d) Igniting the "Social Psychological Imagination."

1. Experience Conducting Field Research

Learning the skills necessary to successfully carry out a program of qualitative research depends upon experience actually conducting qualitative inquiry (Mason, 2002), so it is useful to engage students in actual research as soon as possible. This is challenging when trying to incorporate experience conducting qualitative inquiry as a module in a content-based course, especially given severe time constraints during the length of a single semester. To prepare students to enter the field during the midpoint of the semester, their learning must be scaffolded earlier on with coverage of research ethics, a variety of orientations toward research methods, as well as the content of the course.

Nonparticipant observation allows students to begin engaging in research quickly by minimizing issues of gaining access, informed consent, and locating research subjects. This series of assignments introduces students to a number of skills that are important to many different kinds of qualitative inquiry, such as note-taking, the difference between description and interpretation, reflexivity, and the challenge of writing up research findings.

2. Active Engagement in the Course

This exercise gives students experience actually conducting research, which imparts an understanding of the research process that is not attainable through reading about research or discussing it in class. As Fontes and Piercy (2000) discuss in regard to a series of different experiential class activities for engaging students in qualitative re-

search in psychology courses, research has shown these experiential activities to be particularly successful because "techniques that actively involve students facilitate learning" (p. 175). Engaging students in field research cannot only impart a greater knowledge of the research process and the skills it requires, but will also likely improve student engagement with the course and deepen their potential to learn.

3. Exploring Theoretical Diversity

During the class discussions in which students describe their field observations and initial interpretations of those phenomena, I encourage students to draw on the many different theoretical perspectives we have engaged in the class as a way of making sense of their data. Students often foreground different ways of interpreting the same data by recalling the different theories we have encountered in the content of the course. Thus, a student noticing a pattern of differences in the ways people perceived to be men and women behaved in a particular setting might interpret this as support for the idea that those people learned their behavior as described by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) or through the active organization of knowledge about gender differences in cognitive schemas as explained by Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) or that those differences reflect Gender Stereotypes (Brannon, 1996) or the enactment of patriarchal cultural biases and power dynamics (Weisstein, 1993). As we discuss students' observations and interpretations, I try to make room for as many perspectives as possible in the discussion. I try to hold space for both analytic and methodological differences, working toward the "pluralist orientation" (Gergen et al., 2015) that is one of the hallmarks of the qualitative movement within psychology. These assignments, and particularly their discussion during class time, can contribute to exploring theoretical diversity within the field of psychology.

4. Igniting the Social Psychological Imagination

Perhaps most importantly for a course on social psychology, the assignment asks students to think like a social psychologist, exploring the interplay between the person and society that defines the social psychological perspective on social reality. I periodically remind students of

Kurt Lewin's classic "formula" for social behavior, $b = f$ (PE; Deutsch, 1968), which represents the idea that any particular *b*ehavior is the *f*unction of the *p*erson in their *e*nvironment. What I aim to have students develop in the assignment and the course is a Social Psychological Imagination, which I define as a way of thinking that uses an interactive view of the person and the social environment when analyzing social behavior. I am drawing on C. Wright Mills's idea of the Sociological Imagination, which he described as "the vivid awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society" (Mills, 1959, p. 3). While Mills's concept of the Sociological Imagination is about telescoping out of personal experience to imagine how social forces impact the individual, my conception of the Social Psychological Imagination is about keeping the personal and the social in constant relation and investigating their "dynamic interdependence" (Lewin, 1939). While the Sociological Imagination imagines how an individual experience is related to a social force, the Social Psychological Imagination imagines how the individual psychology of a person engages dynamically with those social forces.

Thus, in our assignments and discussions we might cover how thinking about where a person seats themselves on a subway car does not only relate to their own personal propensity to sit in a particular place, but also relates to the social norms governing where one sits, and the messages conveyed by body language or other means while one is in the car that demonstrate the acceptability of sitting in one place or another. The Social Psychological Imagination depends not just on telescoping out to view the self in a wider picture, but to also zoom back in; using a "critical bifocality" (Weis & Fine, 2012) to move between positionalities and levels of analysis. Mills urges us to know the meaning of the individual within their sociological and historical time period, but as social psychologists I believe it imperative that we also take into consideration the psychological dynamics and individual histories of persons whom we relate to these larger historical flows. Mills's exhortation that we develop lenses for viewing our individual struggles as connected to broad changes in sociological dynamics is assisted in the Social Psychological Imagination by the individual

differences that shape how we respond differently to those larger forces.

Assignments

To scaffold the production of a qualitative research report I divided the process into four assignments: Descriptive Field Notes, Critical Reflection, Theory of a Social Norm; and the final Integrative Research Report. This final research report integrates all of the previous assignments and draws on students' experience writing an experimental research report in the prerequisite experimental psychology course. I created these assignments also thinking of our university's commitment to integrating writing across the curriculum, an initiative recognizing the importance of writing in all disciplines and aiming to integrate assignments focused on developing writing skills across all departments (Aries, 2010). In particular, I utilized the concept of "low-stakes writing" (Elbow, 1997) to build student competencies and confidence as they progressed through the series of assignments that required them to write in initially free-formed ways that were not graded harshly for style or structure. Low-stakes writing assignments aim to help students be more comfortable sharing their thinking through writing. By not assigning a lot of weight to the grade from the assignment, and putting value on student thought and expression over structure or grammar, students are encouraged to exercise putting their thoughts into words.

The order of the four assignments is structured to encourage greater refinement of writing with each assignment. In the first, almost any way of describing the place a student is observing is satisfactory. They are invited to let their thoughts and associations flow while describing the scene they are observing. In the second assignment, those observations are given more structure as the student reflects on their notes and experience in the space, utilizing some guiding prompts to encourage engagement with particular concepts in the course. In the third, their thoughts should be expressed in a more organized form, as they propose a way of organizing patterns in their observations into a possible social norm. Finally, they utilize the structure of a research report to organize their thinking around the space they observed into a

formal genre of writing with specific disciplinary conventions and norms of its own.

Assignment 1: Descriptive Field Notes

In this initial assignment, students submit a proposal for a public place in which they will conduct nonparticipant observation, and then carry out that observation. It involves two stages in order to create a mechanism by which the instructor can evaluate if the proposed site is ethically appropriate. Examples of places that students in my course have successfully observed include subway platforms, public parks, a museum lobby, a section of stands at a sports game, a hallway in a shopping mall, the elevator bank of a public building, the area surrounding a trash receptacle on a busy street-corner, and the steps outside the New York Public Library. Once approved, students record their observations in descriptive field notes. They are reminded not to record using means other than their written/drawn/typed notes, and to attempt to resist interpretation.

A robust discussion of the difference between description and interpretation is useful before the assignment is carried out. As Fontes and Piercy (2000) describe in their article regarding experiential class activities that engage students in qualitative research, it can at first be difficult to pause the cognitive process of transforming what we see into what it might mean in order to record the descriptive characteristics of a situation or person that cause us to infer social meaning. Thus, they give the example of two contrasting reports of the same observation, one of which focuses on interpretation and the other on description: "1. A rich man got onto the elevator. He looked like he was rushing to a job interview. 2. The first person to step into the elevator was a bearded brown-haired man who wore a dark blue suit, white shirt, and shiny shoes . . . he examined his reflection on the metal elevator wall and . . . shifted from foot to foot . . ." (Fontes & Piercy, 2000, p. 175). Discussing examples such as this are not only useful to encourage students to focus on description in their field notes, but they also reinforce the distinction between data collection and data analysis, and the socially constructed and variably interpretable nature of social categories. Qualitative inquiry employs many methods of data collection, each of which can be

analyzed with an even wider number of analytic paradigms. Attempting to disentangle description and interpretation in observation highlights the many ways qualitative data can be analyzed, holding open the possibility for analyzing the same data from different viewpoints. Furthermore, it drives home a core concept in social psychology, that the social categories and meanings we often take for granted are historically situated, context dependent, and socially constructed (Gergen, 1985). The reasons why someone might be interpreted as rich, or to be a man, or to be in a rush, is rich material from which to discuss social psychological concepts like the performance of social roles (Goffman, 1959), stereotypes (Fiske, 2000), and the power that significations of race, gender and class continue to hold in contemporary society.

For the text of the assignment that I provided to my students, please see Appendix A.

Assignment 2: Critical Reflection

In this assignment, students reflect on their field notes from the first assignment and write a critical reflection on their observations. They are encouraged to think about reflexivity, particularly engaging with the ways in which their social identities may have impacted how they experienced the site they studied. I also encourage them to reflect on how they affectively responded to the space, whereas the previous assignment focused more on spatial and visual components. They give slightly more structure to thinking about their observation of the space by reflecting on their field notes and writing the reflection as a series of impressions that are grouped into themes or topics. While the field notes can be appropriately written as stream of consciousness outpourings and unframed sparks, the critical reflection asks students to write in paragraph form a more organized set of thoughts about their initial observations.

In particular, students are encouraged to apply ideas from the course relating to groups and social identity (Tajfel, 2010), attributions (Kelley, 1967), and attitudes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). As discussed in the previous section, the meanings we apply to social phenomena that we perceive are highly dependent on our own past experiences, personal identities, and ways of seeing the world. In this assignment, I invite

students to think about how their own interpretation of social meaning is impacted by the specific constellation of social and historical attributes they hold within themselves. Students have explored topics including how their gender may have impacted what kinds of behaviors they noticed within groups of people shopping, how social meanings about race might influence their perceptions of passengers on public transportation, and how their sexual orientation inflected a social situation with feelings of desire, fear, and pride. Students have also drawn on their experiences inhabiting different neighborhoods and spaces throughout the city and world to think about how they differentially perceived the specific characteristics of the place they observed for the assignment.

For the text of the assignment I provided my students, see Appendix B.

Assignment 3: Theory of a Social Norm

In the third assignment, students are asked to create a theory of a social norm that existed in the space they studied. I refer them to one of the core concepts of the course, the idea of socially shared norms, defined as "the shared standards of conduct expected of group members" (Stainton Rogers, 2011, p. 412), and ask them to imagine what might be a norm governing behavior in the place they observed. In doing so, they are looking for patterns in the unstructured data they collected, using a qualitative form of pattern analysis to inductively create a theory that could be further examined by a wide variety of methods. In this assignment, they are asked to write in an essay format that outlines a thesis statement that defines the norm they propose and provide several examples of empirical evidence that supports this conclusion. In doing so, they engage in a more formal way of writing about their thoughts that corresponds to the results section of a social psychological research report and utilizes scholarly conventions of evidence and defending a theoretical claim.

For example, one student argued that subway riders in New York sit as far as possible from each other when they enter a subway car, maximizing personal space and distributing themselves widely across whatever space is available. To support this argument, she relied both on her field notes that had recorded people turning away from strangers and walking the

length of a car to sit at the opposite end, as well as her personal reflections in Assignment 2 that described growing up in a country where not introducing yourself and sitting near a fellow passenger would be seen as rude. In her assignment articulating her proposed social norm of New York subway spacing, she marshaled observational evidence from her field notes as well as knowledge of comparative social norms to support her argument. In the resulting class discussion, a native New Yorker exclaimed that what she proposed was not a social norm, but rather "just common sense!" which provided ample fodder for discussing the embeddedness of social norms and the ways in which they comprise the "routine grounds of everyday activity . . . which are neither made explicit nor codified" (Milgram, 1992, p. 34).

See Appendix C for the text of the assignment I provided my students.

Assignment 4: Integrative Research Report

In this final assignment, students compile parts of each of the previous assignments into a format they recognize from their prerequisite experimental psychology course, a research report. This report represents the completion of both the course as well as the overarching qualitative research module. Students draw on concepts relevant to their particular observation from our textbook to create a brief literature review, then describe the observational method, their empirical findings, their interpretation and analysis of that data into a proposed theory of a norm, and lastly a discussion of possible implications of their analysis for understanding social behavior. They follow the disciplinary convention of a four-part report that includes an introduction/literature review, methods section, findings section, and discussion. We discuss how the report differs in regard to the quantitative research report they have previously written by not having a hypothesis and requiring more writing about their interpretation and process of analysis of the raw observational data.

While other disciplines, such as sociology (e.g., Becker, 2008; Stoddart, 1991) have more established conventions for reporting qualitative research, psychology has offered relatively less guidance regarding the reporting of qualitative research findings. This can present challenges when instructors aim to develop the

skills of students in this area. Recent publications such as Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, and Ponterotto (2017) provide useful recommendations such as "fidelity to the subject matter . . ." and "utility in achieving research goals" (Levitt et al., 2017, p.2) in assessing the integrity of qualitative inquiry in psychology, and it is useful to discuss these concepts in relation to the observational report. Students should thus be encouraged to hew as closely as possible to the descriptive findings of their observations, and to link their analyses to the conceptual questions about public social behaviors they are investigating. Forthcoming developments in creating guidelines for reporting qualitative inquiry in psychology will be useful to complement existing conventions for writing up qualitative inquiry. It is also useful to provide students with successful examples of other qualitative research reports, which can be found in previous student examples (with appropriate permissions) from an instructor's (or department colleague's) course history as well as published exemplary reports in journals such as *Qualitative Psychology*, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, or others from the subdiscipline related to the particular course.

For the text of the assignment I provided to my students, see Appendix D.

Results and Outcomes

Although I did not collect data specifically about the qualitative module in the semesters I taught it, some references to the exercises did show up in comments included in overall course evaluations, and my observations of classroom behavior and performance on assignments provide additional evidence of student learning. The students who mentioned the exercises in their overall course evaluations wrote that engaging in the module "made elusive and complicated ideas more tangible," "helped me to understand the whole concept of social psychology in a way [other courses] did not," "made complicated material extremely accessible," and added to their enjoyment of the class.

In general, more students participated in class discussion on days that we workshopped the field notes, critical reflection, and theory of social norms assignments than during other class sessions. In these discussions, students seemed more engaged than usual. They contributed dif-

ferent interpretations of observational data, offered suggestions for making sense of contradictory or conflicted evidence, and shared concerns or difficult questions they encountered while completing the exercises. They raised questions, often grounded in their recent experience in the field, that became jumping off points for class discussions that touched on core debates in both the field of social psychology and the practice of qualitative inquiry. Several discussions covered questions of how social identity could be known or interpreted by an observer, and the implications for the nature of social categories as well as different methodological approaches that researchers could use to make sense of social groups and individual identity. Another discussion dug deep into ethical questions about expectations of privacy, the nature of public space, and the social norms that govern interactions in the city. Principles such as "informed consent" and "causing no harm" were made more real to students as we discussed the nature of our research design, and potential future studies that could follow-up on their interests.

As students worked through the series of assignments that comprise the module, the clarity of their writing, the complexity of their engagement with course concepts, and their familiarity with qualitative inquiry generally improved. While performance on each assignment varied throughout the class, taking a chronological view to an individual's growth over the assignments generally showed a gradual increase in grasp of course concepts and ability to communicate their ideas. Even in students who entered the course exhibiting fewer skills in written communication, an increasing progression could be seen across the assignments. In addition, speaking with students during the process and facilitating class discussions gave evidence that the module made students more comfortable with the idea of using qualitative inquiry in the future, and increased their familiarity and understanding of a qualitative approach. Some students who were interested in attending graduate school mentioned they were now interested in joining a program that encouraged the use of qualitative inquiry. Many expressed surprise that qualitative inquiry was not taught more widely, and that it was not present in other coursework. Now, however, they were familiar with the core concepts and ideas, and would be aware if future courses only focused

on quantitative ways of knowing. In addition, many described seeing the city anew after engaging in the exercises, having developed a Social Psychological Imagination which unsettled the assumptions embedded in how they viewed everyday life.

Discussion

I have argued that actively carrying out qualitative inquiry and writing about the research process is important for developing core competencies in social psychology. Qualitative inquiry affords the opportunity for students to indulge their Social Psychological Imagination and engage in reflexive, critical, historically informed and person-sensitive practices. Furthermore, the practice of communicating the process of qualitative inquiry develops academic and professional writing tools that are useful to students in multiple domains. Through this series of assignments, students develop practical research skills, and learn how to observe, analyze, and write like a social psychologist. While these assignments focus on undertaking and reporting on qualitative inquiry, many of the skills developed, such as the Social Psychological Imagination, are crucial to a wide range of methodological approaches within and beyond social psychology.

The act of utilizing one's Social Psychological Imagination is exercised throughout the process of observing social behavior, analyzing it, and reporting results in these assignments. When students indulge their Social Psychological Imagination they engage in a process of critically examining the historical, social, and psychological determinants of a social phenomenon. The kind of reflexive, critical, historically informed and person-sensitive thinking practiced in this imaginative process is crucial to successful analysis in many disciplines, but is particularly important to qualitative inquiry in social psychology. The Social Psychological Imagination is necessary for doing work that dives deeply into the social, personal, and historical context of the multitudes of numbers, data points, and digital traces that accumulate around human lives in our historical moment.

Teaching qualitative inquiry in social psychology can cultivate a Social Psychological Imagination which provides *deep* insights to *big* data, and explicates the contexts surrounding

the masses of text and numbers accumulating in databases that record human activity today. As social scientific research, as well as other practices in government and business, come to rely more on large masses of quantitative and qualitative data, analytic perspectives that attend to the dynamic interplay of the personal and the social will become more crucial to providing deep understanding.

While the challenges such as time and coverage constraints within a semester, adaptation to different contexts, and the lack of established disciplinary guidelines for reporting qualitative inquiry may create hurdles for the successful incorporation of a module of assignments such as these into a content based course like social psychology, the potential successful outcomes show why instructors should consider undertaking the challenge. Several of my students have remarked that this series of assignments was the most enjoyable part of the course. The autonomy to choose a location of personal interest and analyze it from the student's own perspective has also seemed to reinvigorate engagement by students whose participation may have otherwise waned as the semester progressed. Furthermore, students often find that thinking about the places they inhabit in this manner provides them with a fresh perspective that sparks new insights into the nature of their social world and their relationship to it. The skills developed when exercising a Social Psychological Imagination and then writing about the research process in a formal research report are useful to students across disciplines. These exercises help prepare students to critically analyze a variety of data and communicate about their ideas in qualitative social psychology as well as other contexts.

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Appendix A

Assignment 1: Descriptive Field Notes

Part 1: The location of your proposed site for field observations.

- You must submit your proposed location and have it approved by me before you undertake any observations.
- For this assignment, you will go to any public place where you can unobtrusively observe the behavior of others. You will be engaging in (non) participant observation. You must spend two hours, at separate times, observing what occurs and recording your observations.
- Remember the ethical considerations we discussed—what spaces will allow you to observe the social environment without violating the privacy of others?
- Possible locations that students have utilized in the past include museum lobbies, subway platforms, university cafeterias, parks, public squares, and plazas.

Part 2: Your field notes, and a one-page summary of your notes.

- You can either hand write or type your field notes. If you handwrite them (which may be useful, so you can easily draw diagrams or sketch out people's movements) make a photocopy to turn in so you can keep your originals.
- This assignment asks you to record observations through writing and sketching—you should not video, audiotape, or otherwise record what you are observing.
- It will be useful in completing this assignment to read the textbook section on about induction and descriptive research, as well as the sections on data collection, ethnography, and descriptive research.
- The following questions may help in guiding your observations:
  - What does the space look like?
  - What kinds of people are here?
  - What are they doing?
- After spending your hours observing behavior in the field, look at your notes and reflect on what you saw. Are there patterns in how people behaved? Can you make any generalizations about how people usually behaved in that space? Based on your observations, create a 1-page summary of your notes.

Appendix B

Assignment 2: Critical Reflection

For this assignment, you will complete a 2-page critical reflection on your field notes, and your interpretations of them. You do not have to answer all of the guiding questions below, but they may be useful in developing a rich reflection on how you experienced the social environment and then began to interpret your observations. On the day we submit our assignments, we will share some of our reflections with the class and discuss.

- In discussing methodological issues present in analyzing the "atmosphere" of cities, Milgram points out that "the popular myths and expectations each visitor brings to the city will also affect the way in which he perceives it" (p. 22). How might your expectations about the space you observed affected the way you perceived it?
- How might your social position have impacted how you experienced the space you observed and the behaviors that occurred there? Were you familiar with the place?

(*Appendices continue*)

- Was it one that people who seem like you frequented? How were you similar or different to the people present there? What was the class composition of the space? What about race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, or citizenship status? Were different kinds of people engaged in different kinds of activities there?
- Recalling our discussion of the difference between description and interpretation, how did you "know" the class status, gender, etc. of people you observed?

What social cues denoted these different experiences?
- How did the space make you feel? Were you uncomfortable or anxious? Did it seem welcoming and friendly? Why might you have had the emotional reaction you did? What did you bring to the setting? How might that have influenced your interpretation of what was going on?
- What makes this place particular? In which ways might your observations not generalize to other places?

Appendix C

Assignment 3: Theory of Social Norms

Social norms are "the shared standards of conduct expected of group members" (Stainton Rogers, p. 412). They are usually not noticed until they are broken, and seem "common sense" because they are so ingrained into our lives. Recall Milgram's discussion of the social norms that govern behavior in cities—the "routine grounds of everyday activity . . . which are neither made explicit nor codified" (p. 34). In opposition to the explicit rules which govern the act of a crossing a street, Milgram describes the actual social norms particular to New York, "in which pedestrians stand at busy intersections, impatiently awaiting a change in traffic light,

making tentative excursions into the intersection, and frequently surging into the street even before the green light appears" (p. 24).

For this assignment, you will complete a three-page text proposing your theory of the social norms in the space you observed. You should write in an essay format that outlines a thesis statement that defines the norm you propose, and provide several examples of empirical evidence that supports this conclusion. Make sure to provide empirical evidence for your claims—describe how what you observed helped you build your theory and what specific observations support your conclusions.

(*Appendices continues*)

Appendix D

Assignment 4: Integrative Research Report

In the final assignment, you will compile pieces from the three previous assignments into relevant sections to construct a research report that relays the story of how you conducted your inquiry and the results you came to. In doing so, you should refer to the quantitative research report you prepared in your Experimental Psychology course. The main sections will remain the same, as the disciplinary conventions regarding reporting qualitative and quantitative research both require a literature review, description of methods, analysis of findings, and a concluding discussion. There are, of course, some differences between the two forms: you do not have a hypothesis to prove or disprove, and more attention will be paid to how you interpreted the meaning of your data by drawing on social psychological concepts instead of interpreting quantitative outcomes.

You should construct the report using official APA style guidelines, with four main sections:

An Introduction that specifies the story you are going to tell and the relevant background information drawn from our course readings;

A Method section that describes the observational process and your experience taking field notes;

A Results section that describes how you transformed your raw observational data into social psychologically meaningful phenomena and articulates your definition of the shared social norm present in the space;

And lastly a Discussion section that concludes the report by recounting a retrospective summary of what you have told the reader, and discusses possible future directions for research in this area, limitations of your study, and implications of your findings for the social psychological understanding of social behavior.