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Published paper

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A role for qualitative methods

As authors of the proposal for the recently inaugurated Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section, we would like to respond to Mark Shevlin's letter (May 2005). Despite the adversarial tone of the letter, he does draw our attention to aspects of our proposal which the new Section may wish to develop.

First, defining qualitative methods as the absence of statistical analysis allows us to capture this diverse field concisely, and we did want to encapsulate the variety of qualitative methods with their different approaches to data collection, analysis and epistemological positions. However, it may be useful to develop a more positive definition, perhaps building on the statement included in our proposal that in qualitative analysis results are expressed in words rather than numbers.

Second, it would be a mistake to downplay what statistical analysis can achieve. We hope that the new Section will work to develop mutual respect between psychologists specialising in different methodologies.

Third, our proposal could have been clearer in explaining the usefulness of qualitative methods in the hypothesis-development stage of psychological enquiry. Clarity in such matters is essential if the new Section is to work towards greater understanding of qualitative research.

Overwhelmingly, we have found our colleagues specialising in quantitative methods to have been open-minded and generous in their attitude towards the new Section, and many

have supported its inauguration. We are therefore optimistic that there is a general tolerance for diverse methods within British psychology and a motivation for genuine dialogue.

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