How women view their bodies

A ‘Showcasing Qualitative Psychology Event’ leaves Sheila Keegan in a confusion of admiration and frustration

Women and their bodies: a meaty subject. One that ignites the passions. This seminar, however, dealt with the issues of eating disorders, postnatal depression, sexuality, chronic illness and domestic abuse with academic temperance. The occasion was a December meeting of the Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society. Just slips off the tongue, doesn’t it?

The speakers, Professor Paula Nicolson and Dr Helen Malson, had each carried out extensive qualitative research among women diagnosed with social/psychological problems and were talking about their research methodologies and the implications of using these approaches.

Paula explored ‘the conundrum posed for psychologists interested in health by Cartesian dualism and the ‘scientific method’. ‘She observed that dualism was not just the preserve of scientists but that our culture is so steeped in this way of thinking that the young women she interviewed invariably ‘objectified’ their bodies. With prolonged illness - and even with increasing age - there was a growing tendency to dissociate body and mind. This led anorexic girls, for instance, to describe their (mental) ‘fight’ with their (physical) weight and their need to ‘control their appetites’.

Older women described how the ‘inner’ self did not recognise their ‘outer’ self ‘That’s not me, that’s an old woman’. I guess all of us can relate to these feelings at some level. Paula called for a return to the ‘big’ issues in psychology, such as holistic approaches to ‘self’ and a renewed interest in trying to understand ‘mind’.

Helen set out to ‘reflect upon the relationships between interview and experience that are (or might be) theorised in the process of analysis and to consider some of the methodological and political/ethical issues that can be seen as arising in the process of doing feminist post-structuralist research’. Phew! But it was interesting.

She highlighted the ‘information loss’ between the experience of interviewing and the data that results and how the relationship between ‘experience’ and ‘account’ is ultimately ‘unknowable’. She also talked about ‘discursive spillage’; how discrete experiences spill out into the general, so that when an interviewee is talking about the present, what they say is inevitably influenced by the past and the imagined future.

After the two talks I was left, as I often am having listened to academic researchers, in a confusion of admiration and frustration. The admiration comes from the forensic way in which academics tend to interrogate their research approaches. There is so much more focus in academia on the processes of research and what it all means in contrast to commercial researchers where the research is the means to an end.

On balance, I think commercial researchers could do with being more concerned with the ‘theory of research’. My frustration, however, stems from ‘research interruptus’. I want more. I find myself saying, ‘So..., and....what do you think we ought to do about it?’ Also, I sense a heaviness in much academic research that, I believe, stems from an over-cerebral approach; an obsession with the verbal and rational at the expense of emotion, intuition and humour.

Maybe they need to get out more. But I particularly want to know what they are going to do with their research. Research without application seems like mere foreplay. But then, I’m a commercial researcher.