INTRODUCTION

Speaking Back From the Margins: Participant *Marginalia* in Survey and Interview Research

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Marginalia is a term used to describe written notes or verbal comments spontaneously offered by participants over the course of a study. Although typically ignored, this unexpected form of data offers psychologists an opportunity to listen when participants "speak back" to the researcher. In this introduction to this special section on marginalia in *Qualitative Psychology*, I argue for recognizing marginalia as data. In addition, I discuss relevant research on marginalia in the social sciences and describe evidence for how marginalia offer an invaluable tool for researchers to examine their own assumptions about research design and data collection. The authors included in this special section describe their experiences with analyzing marginalia in studies using survey, interview, and participatory research methods. Each article discusses challenges the authors faced when thinking about marginalia. This involved shifting from thinking about marginalia as "noise" to thinking about marginalia as an important source of data. This special section on marginalia offers strategies that extend calls from feminist writers of color to recognize the margins as locations of political knowledge, a challenge to status quo assumptions, and critical spaces for knowledge production.

Keywords: critical psychology, feminist psychology, qualitative, quantitative, methods

Marginalia is a term used to describe written notes or verbal comments spontaneously offered by participants over the course of a study. These remarks are commonly disregarded in the course of analysis and are often seen as extraneous to the objectives of a study. The authors in this special section argue, however, that marginalia should be reimagined as an invaluable source of data and represent a unique way for researcher and participant to communicate. Different than other forms of communication in the research context, marginalia exist outside the bounds of what was asked. They may simultaneously indicate misunderstanding and miscommunication, friendly contribution, or an oppositional assertion of difference and disagreement on the part of the participant. Regardless of the form, marginalia are a form of labor, a gift, and a challenge from the participant—and they can be ignored by researchers or viewed as an invitation to understand more and understand better.

The term *marginalia* is borrowed from literary studies and refers to reader responses and authors' notes in the margins of books (see Olsen-Smith, Norberg, & Marnon, 2008). Marginalia have been long understood to be an essential form of information when analyzing texts and the reception of important texts, such as the Bible (e.g., Greaves, 1980). Literary scholars have examined marginalia produced in the books of writers such as Jane Austen (Krueger, 2015) and Walt Whitman (Gray, 2013) as a method to observe what these authors thought about as they read books and how these ideas affected their later writings. Studies of marginalia have been used to chart the intellectual engagement of readers while reading texts, development of collaborative exchanges between multiple readers, and interactions between writer and readers (Hoeniger, 1966; Jackson, 2001, 2008; Journey, 2007;

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Slights, 2001). Studies of marginalia have developed over several centuries and across several fields and disciplines. At the heart of this body of work, however, is a question that links research in the humanities and social sciences— that is, *what lies outside of the text and how does this "outside" perspective contribute something new to the text itself?*

With this question in mind, it becomes clearer how studies of marginalia can and should be extended to psychological research. Marginalia disrupt and challenge assumptions about research processes, conceptual definitions, and issues of measurement and analysis. This perspective is part of a long tradition in psychology, one that has argued to transfer assumptions of who is "expert" from researcher to participant (Fine & Torre, 2006; Fine et al., 2003, 2004; Fox, 2015; Lewin, 1946; Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012). Traditions such as participatory action research (PAR; Stoudt et al., 2012), feminist psychology (Fine, 1992; Gavey, 1989; Unger, 1998), and critical psychology (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009; Teo, 2014, 2015) have long argued that participants are experts on their own experiences and have encouraged researchers to listen more carefully to how participants interrupt or disrupt researchers' expectations. Analysis of marginalia, I argue, provides one (of the many) methodological tools to see this promise through.

Providing marginalia is one way that participants can make their voices heard, even if a researcher did not ask for their input (or more precisely, asked for input only in a specific format). This is what makes marginalia so remarkable and so troubling. Marginalia are data that "fall outside" of the parameters of a study's format and, therefore, require a set of decisions and strategies specifically developed for their analysis. A researcher must decide what is interpretable, what must be ignored, and what to do with feedback that can often be chaotic, challenging, and provocative. Transitioning the category of marginalia from an *informal* to a *formal* data source requires developing an analytic frame that can stretch to accommodate several sets of priorities, including participants' desires, the researcher's questions and goals of the study, and balancing between being knowledgeable about a phenomenon and being simultaneously naïve to the complexities and contours of that phenomenon.

Previous research has taken up the question of how to theoretically and empirically approach studies of marginalia. Smith (2008) argued, for example, that the participant conjures up an "imagined researcher" while filling out a survey, and if the participant leaves a comment, they imagine that the researcher can receive the participant's concern that the "tick in the box" may be insufficiently informative. Marginalia, in other words, allow a participant to say . . ., "'You won't know [the answer] by asking like this,' or 'I can't make my experience fit here' or 'This is what you need to know'" (Smith, 2008, p. 993). Marginalia are evidence that a participant believes there is someone (i.e., the researcher) who can metabolize the participant's comment on the margins and turn it into meaningful information. Smith's model of the imagined researcher is a useful image to dwell on because it reminds survey researchers that even when they may be physically absent during data collection, they remain present in the minds of participants who are not merely ticking boxes, but are in a conversation with an imagined researcher. In this way, marginalia do not fall outside of the scope of a research design, but are more akin to elaborated points in an already-existing dialogue.

In addition, there have been concerns about the strategies participants use when a questionnaire does not match their lived reality. Participants strive to be consistent when they answer survey questions and often prioritize logically consistent responses rather than those that reflect the often paradoxical or inconsistent nature of lived experience (Clarke & Schober, 1992). Galasiński and Kozłowska (2010), for example, found that participants often end up rejecting the survey, accommodating their experience to fit the questionnaire, or reformulating the questionnaire to accommodate their experience, when they are faced with survey questions that do not match their experiences. Without greater insight into these and other strategies used by participants in research settings, researchers risk not knowing what the effects of the design were on the participant or whether the data collected through the instrument accurately reflects the phenomenon being studied.

A distinction to further consider is the difference between marginalia collected spontaneously and marginalia collected more purposefully, such as using open-ended comments (e.g.,

"Please leave any comments here") or a question at the end of an interview (e.g., "Is there anything you would like to add?"). Smith's (2008) image of the imagined researcher prompts one to wonder about the differences between a participant who is "in conversation" with the imagined researcher and leaves marginalia as part of this exchange, versus a participant who, when asked, leaves feedback or makes a comment at the close of a study. It is not that one is better (or more truthful) than another, but it is important that we recognize the different ways that researchers are imagined as participants offer their thoughts, corrections, and challenges to the study. This also serves as a reminder that the move to online survey data collection, even when a comment box is offered, removes the potential for marginalia to be given over the course of the survey; comment boxes frame participant feedback differently than the unsolicited and spontaneous feedback that comments on a written page can provide.

Lastly, it is essential to consider the methods one might use when analyzing participant marginalia. Marginalia are most commonly offered in qualitative form and are potentially present in any research design, if the opportunity is provided. Developing a set of qualitative methods is required to interpret the range of forms marginalia can take, including side conversations during interviews, marks and graphical insertions on the page of a survey, comments made (textually or verbally) to the researcher, or even participants' physical gestures made during a study (Freedman, 1972; Freud, 1953; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Marginalia analysis makes clear how qualitatively derived insights can be applicable across different types of research, including survey, interview, and experimental designs.

Research on Marginalia

There is limited research on marginalia in the social sciences—most is in the health sciences, in which standardized questionnaires are examined for their use with patients diagnosed with a range of diseases. The few studies done have found that participants, when given the opportunity, will provide marginalia: Smith (2008) found that 44% of surveys had of additional information added by participants with fibromyalgia; Clayton, Rogers, and Stuifbergen

(1999) found that 25% of participants with multiple sclerosis added extensive qualitative comments to their survey; and Powel and Clark (2005) found that 71% of participants who had undergone radical prostatectomy offered an extended response when prompted with a single open-ended item, "Is there anything else related to your prostate cancer or its treatment that you would like to discuss?" (p. 829). Powel and Clark noted that, "when given a chance, respondents are likely to offer additions, elaborations, or qualifications in order to relate the essence of their own experience"; however, these data are often excluded from the data record (p. 828).

Studies of marginalia may be especially important for research that tries to focus on what has been called the "unspeakable" or "unsayable" aspects of human experiences, including pain and trauma, as well as those experiences that psychology regularly turns its gaze toward—the nuances of interior life and subjective evaluations. As Smith (2008) argued,

> Pain, and the results of pain in terms of daily restrictions and changed relationships—forms of suffering—are hard to communicate, and the data discussed here underscore their amorphous, nebulous and dominating presence, the particularity of individual experience, and constricted lives. (p. 1004)

It is important to note that there is disagreement about whether marginalia should be considered data. Morse (2005), for example, has argued that spontaneously offered information should not be considered data because it was not "deliberately solicited as a part of the study but, rather, written in the margin of the questionnaire by dissatisfied participants who felt the need to clarify certain points about an item" (p. 584). Morse argued that rather than treat these comments as data, the use value of marginalia is limited to indicating there is something wrong with the questionnaire and "that the researcher should begin again by conducting a solid, appropriate qualitative study" (p. 584). Many researchers, on the other hand, have found that participants' comments are not limited to information about the survey, but consistently allow participants to share details about themselves that provide insight into the psychological phenomenon being studied, rather than merely the instrument being used. The issue at the heart of this disagreement about marginalia might be restated this way: Is the goal of research to find

the method that does not invite commentary from participants or, conversely, is commentary from those being studied the point of research? How one answers this question likely determines the stance one takes on marginalia (in a single study or over the course of a career).

In considering this question, it might be important to offer a broader characterization of participants who leave marginalia other than Morse's (2005) description of simply being "dissatisfied." Looking at the rich range of examples provided by researchers both in this special section (Fahs, 2016, pp. ●●●–●●●; McClelland & Holland, 2016, pp. ●●●–●●●; Stoudt, 2016, pp. ●●●–●●●) and elsewhere (Adamson, Gooberman-Hill, Woolhead, & Donovan, 2004; Clayton et al., 1999; Galasiński & Kozłowska, 2010; Mallinson, 2002; McHatton & May, 2013; Powel & Clark, 2005; Smith, 2008), participants' motives for leaving marginalia are far more complex than simply being dissatisfied with the survey. For example, in their study of adults with multiple sclerosis, Clayton and colleagues (1999) offered examples of marginalia that signaled participants' investment in the research process and making their experiences clear and relevant to the researcher. Next to items about relationship status, comments such as "My husband resented my time spent at my work. The fatigue was unbearable. I was guilty of neglecting him. I have no partner or significant other. I am divorced and live alone. I do not date" (pp. 517–518) offered additional insight into participants' lives. In addition, researchers have found that participants' notes at the end of a questionnaire indicate how research benefits participants; the following example offers a useful example of Smith's (2008) "imagined researcher":

> I want to thank you for this survey. You cannot know how it has opened my eyes to how I truly feel. It has even given me some information I did not know. I had answered the questions as honestly as possible. I got quite a shock at some of my answers. I could even see inconsistency, confusion, and even denial. I hope I have helped you. You certainly helped me. I'm sorry I rattled on so much. I just had to explain why some questions were so difficult for me. Because things are not so cut and dried. Thank you so much for helping me to understand myself better. (Clayton et al., 1999, p. 519)

Data such as this, although spontaneously generated and outside the scope of the original research design, importantly characterize the experience of participants as much more than just dissatisfied with the survey. Psychological research methods must respond as best they can to shrink the gap between guessing and knowing, but all the while being modest about this enterprise. The definition of marginalia as data—and invaluable data—is a plea to handle our research with care and dignity because people were good enough to give us so much, and it is people, after all, that we are trying to understand.

There has been ongoing interest in using qualitative methods to capture written and verbal feedback offered by participants, especially to better understand cognitive processes used when responding to survey questions. There has been, however, no elaborated discussion of the concept of marginalia in psychological research, nor attention to the important role that qualitative methods play in this work. This special section aims to contribute to this effort.

Special Section: Three Articles

Each of the articles describes a different form of marginalia, including notes and cross-outs left on paper surveys and verbal comments made during interviews. Each article details how the researchers incorporated marginalia into their study so that the participant feedback—ranging from protest, disagreement, emphasis, and refusal—was rescued from the cutting room floor and turned into various forms of interpretable data. Reading these articles, readers will gain insight into a variety of interpretive strategies one might use in their own research.

In their contribution to the special section, Sara McClelland and Kathryn Holland (2016) examine comments left by participants next to and around survey items included in the Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI; Rosen et al., 2000). McClelland and Holland detail how their analysis of the FSFI changed as a result of using a modified scoring procedure, which they developed as a result of interpreting participant marginalia, specifically those instances in which participants indicated that survey questions were "not applicable." Their article provides a three-part classification system for researchers to use when considering marginalia in future studies, including: (a) marginalia that aim to clarify or explain their survey responses, (b) marginalia that aim to correct the survey or alter

response options, and (c) marginalia that communicate that an item is not applicable to the participant.

In his contribution to the special section, Brett Stoudt (2016) details a large PAR project in New York City, the Morris Justice Project. The study team collected 1,030 paper-and-pen surveys that detailed how residents interacted with police and policing practices in their neighborhood. When the team found that surveys contained over 1,500 instances of marginalia, they developed a set of collaborative practices that extended PAR methods to the often-ignored data-entry phase of the project. Rather than ignoring these data, Stoudt and the research team developed a set of systematic analysis strategies to include the marginalia in the study findings. Stoudt writes, "What we learned from the marginalia sometimes supported our hunches, other times they forced us to make new ones, but the entire process guided and nuanced our understanding of policing in the neighborhood" (p. ●●●). Through developing participatory data entry and analysis strategies, the Morris Justice Project was able to pursue a relational and flexible survey methodology that enabled the team to use the many forms of survey marginalia produced over the course of the study.

In her contribution to the special section, Breanne Fahs (2016) describes marginalia collected over the course of 20 semistructured interviews with women about their sexual experiences. Rather than written marginalia, as in the other two papers, Fahs makes an argument for marginalia that exist around the edges of interviews. Verbal forms of marginalia consist of mishearings of questions, as well as participants' comments, questions, and interpretations of the questions being asked of them. Fahs argues that these moments of disconnection call attention to assumptions about shared experiences between researcher and participants. Fahs reflects on interview data concerning women's first experiences with sexuality, experiences of oral sex, and experiences of sexual violence as a way to explore how researchers can use interview marginalia to understand when participants' meanings are opened and foreclosed in research settings.

Across the three articles, marginalia are conceptualized as an indication of when research methods create a misalignment between ques-

tion and answer. The three articles take up this moment of misalignment and describe using marginalia to reach toward alignment in some cases, and, for others, reach toward the recognition that alignment is not the goal, but rather a keen understanding of how much is left unknown or yet to be understood.

The three analyses of participant marginalia in this special section of *Qualitative Psychology* offer key methodological contributions to the fields of feminist and critical psychology, survey design, psychological methods, qualitative methods, and PAR methods. Margins of all types have always been key to resistance. Across the writings of critical feminists of color, including bell hooks (1984), Gayatri Spivak (1990a, 1990b), and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2006), scholars have challenged what constitutes the center and attention to the power of speaking back from the margins. Building on this premise, the articles in this special section aim to recognize when participants educate, speak back, challenge binaries, and resist being misread and misinterpreted.

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