



Jessica Fennell wins 2018 Young Professional Grant

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This post was written by Jessica Fennell, a 2018 QRCA Young Professionals Grant recipient. First launched in 2014, the Young Professionals Grant recognizes promising qualitative researchers aged 35 and younger with free passes to the QRCA's Annual Conference.

As a lucky recipient of the QRCA's Young Professionals Grant, I was extremely pleased to hear that the theme for this year's [Worldwide Conference](#) was 'Stay Curious'. This topic felt like it had a wide scope and, for me personally, harked back to the reason I first entered qualitative research — pure curiosity about people.

What to Expect

This was also my first international conference and I flew to Spain with a very open mindset on what I would discover over two-and-a-half jam-packed days. So, what can you expect when you attend your first AQR/QRCA Worldwide Conference?

Collaboration and Open Dialogues

One thing that immediately struck me about the Worldwide Conference was the level of collaboration among attendees. This was the first conference I had been to that specifically focused on agency-side researchers attending rather than clients. Perhaps it was this, coupled with an excellent structure (which allowed for ample opportunities to meet other attendees), that fostered a general culture of openness. I found myself networking with a whole range of practitioners, sharing our experiences on how we design our projects and swapping inspiration.

Networking Made Easy

Ah, networking! I will freely admit that walking into a roomful of 100 complete strangers with the aim of making contacts is not something that has ever filled me with joy. However, as a first-timer, the reception I

was given by AQR and QRCA made it easy to start conversations. For other conference first-timers, I would highly recommend stepping off the networking cliff and just giving it a go. Bring stacks of business cards and be prepared to start sharing your ideas and research practices with others. Do so and you'll get so much back in return.

The Findings

But what about the presentations themselves? They provided a myriad of different interpretations of the conference theme 'Stay Curious'. Standout presentations came from qual-at-scale platform [Remesh](#) and [Acacia Avenue](#) (both of which won the Sabena McLean Best Presentation Award). The speakers demonstrated a variety of approaches to the topic. These ranged from practical tips which I could see being implemented in my own research straight away, to more thought-provoking ideas and concepts.

Here are some of the standout ideas for me:

Borrowing from Surrounding Disciplines

Some of the most thought-provoking research ideas and approaches were borrowed from different disciplines. This is particularly true with regards to the communication and presentation of research ideas. [Relish Research](#) shared inspiring and practical tips about the principles of Method Acting. The technique, used by actors as diverse as Daniel Day-Lewis to James Dean, relies on the practitioner 'becoming' a character and completely immersing themselves in their emotions. Relish showed how adapting this method for research purposes could be used to bring clients closer to their audiences. First by setting clients a brief with the characteristics and practical limitations of their audience (budget, childcare etc.), they could be briefed to do anything from role play scenarios in workshops or shopping as their customer. The real benefit of this approach is that your clients can discover their own insights by becoming their target customer.

Prioritise Culture

Alex Gordon from [Sign Salad](#) called for cultural understanding to hold a more central role in research. To borrow the words of the writer Toni Morrison, the job of a culture expert is: "to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar." Culturally driven brand thinking allows researchers to identify and interpret where it will sit in the changing cultural future. Gordon highlighted Grant McCracken's book, *Chief Culture Officer*, which calls for big organisations to create a position for a "person who knows culture, both its fads and fashions, and its deep, enduring structures."

Roben Allong at [Lightbeam Communications](#) highlighted how cultural bias or blindness towards questions of identity and culture need to be addressed by researchers as a matter of urgency. Cases like [H&M's Monkey sweatshirt](#) PR disaster show how cultural blindness can have serious implications for both brand trust and profits. As researchers, we should always be considering the context and background of our interactions and analysis. For example, in the increasingly important new language of emojis, the Princess icon has a completely different meaning to African American women vs. Caucasian women. This is important because it is a qualitative researcher's task to gain an intimate understanding of the target audience's culture and language trends. Becoming culturally literate is of vital importance if we are to truly help our clients.

Thinking Critically about Your Biases

The age-old problem of avoiding bias in our fieldwork through the 'research effect' is still prevalent. In South Africa, Lesley Croskery of [In Focus Qualitative Research](#) talked about the potential negative implications of observing or moderating as a white researcher in black households. She advised being constantly aware of the effect your presence has on fieldwork. This could be as simple as minimising the number of observing clients to properly managing expectations about the research with participants. There are also extra considerations in a bilingual country like South Africa. Appraise not just whether conducting

fieldwork in English will make research easier but whether moderating in the language they use at home would make participants feel more comfortable and open to discussion.

Both in the structure of the conference and the range of topics covered, my experience in Valencia truly embodied the topic of Stay Curious. Come with an open mind and prepared to be inspired! Visit qrca.org/YPG to learn more about the Young Professionals Grant.

By Jess Fennell, Research Manager

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