



PRACTICAL ADVICE

**Editor's note:** *This is the fourth and last in a special series of articles prepared by these authors for our journal. We solicited this series with the intention of expanding the awareness, appreciation, and expertise of our readers in the important, but still minimally used, strategy of qualitative research. We welcome papers based on the appropriate use of this strategy.*

## Getting Qualitative Research Published

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**ABSTRACT** *Translating research findings in health education into a publishable manuscript is challenging regardless of whether qualitative or quantitative methods are used. In this paper, we offer practical advice about how to successfully prepare and guide manuscripts based on qualitative research methods, in particular through the peer-reviewed journal publication process. Researchers trying to publish qualitative findings may face some unique challenges, given the field's current knowledge of qualitative methods, evaluation criteria, and conventional manuscript styles and length.*

**KEYWORDS** *Qualitative research, methods—qualitative, dissemination, publication.*

### Introduction

Despite its critics (e.g. Poses & Isen, 1998), qualitative research (QR) in health care and health profession education is being published in the mainstream literature with increasing frequency. Some journals, such as the *British Medical Journal* and *Health Services Research* (Devers *et al.*, 1999), have devoted entire special issues or supplements to the topic. Other journals, such as the *Journal of*

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*the American Medical Association* (Giacomini & Cook, 2000a,b), have recently devoted multiple articles to evaluating the evidence from QR studies.

Qualitative research has a long and venerable intellectual history in such social science disciplines as anthropology, sociology, psychology and linguistics, with numerous 'how to' texts that describe general research principles and applications. Recently, comprehensive texts in QR that focus on specific clinical settings such as primary care medicine (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, 1999), and nursing (Morse, 1991) have appeared. They provide helpful advice on manuscript preparation for publication in the health professions literature. Such resources are particularly helpful because they are targeted to the specific needs and questions of researchers in these settings. They are welcome additions to a family of methods whose value in health care continues to grow, becoming better known and understood.

In this paper we focus on the publication process. In many ways, successful publication of QR is no different from publishing quantitative research. A clearly written manuscript, describing both the methods and results, based on having asked an important question, are essential components of all research reports. QR, however, does have some unique characteristics and standards of evidence that differ from quantitative research. Several treatments of the qualities of QR have appeared recently and are recommended (Devers, 1999; Frankel, 1999; Inui & Frankel, 1991).

## **The Review Process**

In a peer-reviewed journal, which we consider to be the standard of academic practice, the first step an editor or associate editor generally takes in deciding about a submission's eligibility for publication is determining the manuscript's fit with the journal's mission and areas of focus. If found appropriate, the manuscript will typically be sent to two or more peer reviewers for their critical comments and recommendations regarding publication. Some journals ask reviewers for two sets of comments: one for the authors and one for the editor. These can vary quite considerably. It can happen, for example, that generally positive comments are sent for the author, although the comments to the editor recommend rejection. This can happen when one or more reviewers feel that the paper has a significant or 'fatal' flaw, which they don't mention in their comments to the author. Many editors attempt to synthesize aspects of the reviewers' comments to the editor with their comments to the author in their letter to the author.

For each manuscript, reviewers are typically asked to recommend whether to 'accept as is,' 'accept with minor modifications,' 'reconsider after major modifications,' or 'reject.' Usually, 'accept as is' is the only condition carrying a commitment to publish. Other responses (except 'reject') imply an interest in

publishing but not a commitment. Seasoned authors (both qualitative and quantitative) have stories about protracted exchanges with journal editors who kept wanting further changes after several revisions were submitted.

There are a number of other steps between acceptance and publication, generally involving editing for clarity and brevity, preparing/revising graphs and tables, and improving the cited references. We won't deal with those issues here. We address issues in the research, writing, review and editing processes that can optimize the chances of getting qualitative research published.

### *Being Clear about the Research Question and Audience*

Central to all good research studies is a clearly asked question with well-described methods and results. Your research question(s) must be appropriate for your field and relevant for those you hope will read your report. As early in the research process as possible you should become familiar with the readership and editorial policies of the likely journals for your submission. Although it may seem only dimly relevant at the outset of a QR project, giving some early thought as to who the ultimate readers of your report are likely to be will be quite important. Is the study designed to increase awareness of a phenomenon (say, low self-esteem affecting learners' grades) or to provide feedback to improve performance (e.g. studying the effect of professional development on improving end-of-life care)? Most editors act as filters for their readers. For many, their first question is, 'How will this study add to the stock of knowledge that our readers seek to get from our journal?' Authors hoping to publish QR should familiarize themselves with the range of journals that publish such work, the audience(s) they target and their editorial policies. Reading one or several issues of your candidate journals will provide you with a flavor for the types of studies and research traditions supported by those journals. It may also pay to search the literature for articles that deal directly with the question of QR publication. If you are considering publishing in the area of health services research and management, a useful resource is a recent article by Hoff and Witt (2000) showing the rates of QR publication in a range of such journals. They found that about one in seven published research articles used qualitative methods and that two of the nine journals reviewed contributed 45% of the total number of articles using qualitative methods. Targeting journals that more frequently publish qualitative research is a good place to start. In the area of educational research, virtually all health professions education journals are now open to qualitative research.

Published papers don't reveal their prepublication history: the number of journals that may have rejected it previously or the number of rewrites it may have gone through prior to publication. A useful strategy, although by no means ensuring acceptance for publication, is contacting an author whose published work is similar to yours, to ask about her/his experience up to and including publication of the finished product. Using this strategy early can reduce the possibility of a mismatch among author(s), reviewer(s) and editor(s)

and can also provide something of a guide to the publication process. Knowing that a particular type of QR study was reviewed and accepted for publication on the first try, while another required five journal submissions and an equal number of rewrites, can help you set realistic expectations.

### *Describing Research Tradition and Methods*

As we pointed out in the first article in this series (Frankel & Devers, 2000), QR is a family of methods and traditions. When preparing an article for publication it is important to inform the reader (and the reviewer) which tradition or combination of traditions your study utilizes. Reviewers, in particular, may be put off by the use of a generic phrase like ‘qualitative research approach’ to describe methods that might more appropriately be labeled ‘ethnographic,’ or ‘participant observation.’ Several good ‘roadmaps’ to QR traditions are available (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, 1999; Cresswell, 1998).

When presenting QR, in addition to describing the tradition from which your research derives, you should ensure its trustworthiness by explaining the steps you took in securing your evidence. Reviewers who were schooled in one or more of the QR research traditions look for evidence that the researcher is familiar with the methods, canons of evidence and checks and balances for the material being analyzed. A description of methods that reads, for example, ‘Focus group analysis was used to identify various themes related to student perceptions of the educational program’s impact on their self-esteem’ is unlikely to be acceptable to a reviewer simply because it contains too little information about how the themes were identified and analyzed by the authors. A more useful statement would be, ‘Focus group conversations were (audio/video) recorded and transcribed. Two investigators, working independently, reviewed the transcripts using a highlighter to identify portions of text that appeared to describe a theme. Each highlighted section was labeled as a theme, and the results were then compared to discover areas of agreement and disagreement. Attempts were then made to reconcile disagreements through a process of iterative or repetitive consensus building.’ Such a description provides a sketch for the reviewer and ultimately the reader to follow in understanding the research process.

### *Preparing a Manuscript*

We consider four aspects of QR manuscript preparation especially important: audience, language, length, and peer review.

*Audience.* As already mentioned, those for whom the paper is prepared are important in determining a QR paper’s likelihood of getting published. In many respects the question of audience boils down to a matter of emphasis and degree. One of us, RMF, recently participated in a QR study of how physicians handle awkward movements when doing HIV assessments. That project was intended for publication in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (Epstein *et al.*, 1998). Since

that is a journal whose readership is composed largely of practicing physicians the study team decided to focus more on the results of the analysis and their implications for practice than on the fine details of the methods. A discussion of the details might have been of interest and relevance to methodologists but of limited use and interest to our intended audience, practicing physicians.

*Language.* This is perhaps the most important and most neglected aspect of publishing QR. The language you use to describe research findings should align with the language standards of the target audience. The anthropologist Horace Miner, in a paper entitled 'Body ritual among the Nacirema' (1956), made this point elegantly almost half a century ago. Miner describes the curious customs and habits of the Nacirema with descriptions such as the following: 'They [the Nacirema] are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tanahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Autilles... According to Nacirema mythology their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw... The most powerful [people] are the medicine men... who have an imposing temple, or latipso in every community of any size.'

Miner's language in describing this culture is deliberately obfuscating. In fact, it is a description of American culture. Nacirema is American spelled backwards! So, too, is the description of the culture hero, Notgnihsaw (Washington), and the imposing temple, 'latipso' ([h]ospital). In the context of teaching about the importance of language when describing events, persons and research results, approximately 75% of students who read and were asked to analyze the culture described by Miner do not recognize that it is a description of their own culture. Obviously, language counts.

In many types of qualitative research, the specific language of those studied is also very important because it is the 'data' from which conclusions are drawn. This raises the question of how to use quotes effectively in a manuscript, particularly given journal style conventions and potential space constraints. Quotes are best used to illustrate key points of the paper and to demonstrate careful management and analysis of transcripts and other types of qualitative data. For example, using quotes from medical students that illustrate how they feel about persons with HIV can be far more powerful than the author's description of those feelings. As has been frequently observed, some health professionals reveal their discomfort with some patients and conditions with the pejorative terms and humor they use when talking about them (as repeatedly illustrated in Shem's 1981 autobiographical novel).

*Length.* A significant challenge for QR publication is the restriction on length imposed by many mainstream health professions journals. Although length restrictions can be a challenge when publishing any type of research, it is especially so for QR, where large blocks of text illustrating themes or experiences are necessary and desirable. Some journals are making needed

adaptations. As noted by Giacomini and Cook (2000b), in their recent review of qualitative research in health care, ‘Because of the importance of detail in qualitative reports, some health research journals allow substantially longer page limits for qualitative studies.’

We have two suggestions for addressing the issue of length when submitting QR for publication. First, draw explicit attention to the issue of paper length (word count) in your letter of submission to the journal. If you need to educate an editor about the requirement for additional space, it is better to try doing so at the beginning, rather than at the end, of the review process. Second, consider making longer segments of text or entire transcripts available via the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, you can consider making streaming audio or video data samples available via the Internet to qualified researchers, while following human subjects protection protocols. This approach is growing in popularity as electronic media supported by the Internet become more widely disseminated throughout the world.

*Pre-submission Reviews.* A useful strategy for clarifying and sharpening QR is having colleagues read and comment on early manuscript drafts. Sending drafts to experienced researchers in a particular area, e.g. phenomenological studies, can be useful in some situations. Friendly reviews can reveal significant flaws in logic and description that could lead to rejection if the paper were under actual review.

### *Manuscript Submission*

Peer-reviewed journals vary widely in the amount of time they take from submission to publication. If you are in doubt or in a hurry, an accepted procedure is sending a copy of the manuscript to the editor requesting a judgment on the appropriateness of the paper for that journal. Editors are generally willing to accommodate such requests in one to three weeks. Note: a positive reply doesn’t ensure acceptance, only that you have found a journal that will put your paper through the review process.

Another useful strategy when submitting QR papers is including a list of suggested reviewers in the cover letter to the editor. Because QR is relatively new to many health professions journals, editors often appreciate the inclusion of a list suggesting four to six well-qualified reviewers. Limit your recommendation to reviewers who you believe will give yours and other qualitative researchers’ papers a fair and balanced reading.

Finally, once a manuscript has been submitted and accepted for review, it may be useful to track its progress. Manuscript review is generally done on a volunteer basis by colleagues who, like authors, are also very busy. Don’t assume that no news is good or bad. Assume rather that for one reason or another the editor has not received the reviews back in a timely way. Occasional, gentle prodding is unlikely to harm your chances of getting your manuscript published and it may help speed up the review process.

### *What to Do If Your Manuscript Is Rejected*

No one enjoys having a paper rejected, whether it is QR or not. When faced with a rejection, consider these options.

If you had your heart set on publishing in the journal that rejected your paper, you can ask for a re-review. Such requests should be accompanied by a carefully stated rationale: e.g. your suspicion that the reviewer(s) in question were not sufficiently knowledgeable about QR, the review was cursory and lacked substance or detail (if true), you disagree about the importance of the questions, method or theory proposed by the reviewer(s).

If you decide to submit to another journal, use the reviewers' critique(s) to guide your revision of your paper. Many authors have a list of journals prioritized from most to least important and influential for the study in question. A rejection from one journal is replaced by submission to the next journal on the list.

### *Provisional Acceptance*

As we've pointed out, provisional acceptance of any type of paper is not a commitment to publish. It is rather a statement of probability, high in the case of minor revisions and far less for major rewrites. Minor revisions should be done on a point-by-point basis, incorporating the reviewers' feedback, if helpful and relevant. Typically, a reviewer's call for minor revisions is not the place for major disagreements. It is like negotiating one or several details of an otherwise agreed-to contract.

More challenging is the situation where a reviewer has asked for major revisions in methods, data analysis, discussion or conclusions. In considering major revisions it is important to weigh the amount of time and effort the revisions will take against the time it will take for the paper to be reviewed for another journal. Occasionally, a reviewer will call for major revisions that the author fundamentally disagrees with, e.g. saying a participant observation framework should have been used instead of focus groups to study students' experiences in a rural community. It is possible to appeal such disagreements in a letter to the editor carefully laying out the rationale for the methods used. Since the category of major revisions represents virtually no commitment to publish on the journal's part, this might be considered a 'high risk/high gain' situation. As with any type of rewrite the paper should go through a pre-submission, friendly review process.

### *Resources*

As QR has continued to garner interest in health-related fields a number of resources that are directly and indirectly helpful in getting studies published have become available. For example, the national meetings of both the Society of General Internal Medicine (SGIM) and the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine (STFM) in the US offer workshops and symposia on QR, including offerings on how to publish QR results. In addition, the North American

Primary Care Research Group (NAPCRG) actively supports QR activities. The US Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), formerly known as the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, sponsors a yearly conference on methods of research in health care, including a focus on both qualitative and multi-method research. Additional extended courses and opportunities to learn about and publish QR are available via the International Institute for Qualitative Research at the University of Alberta, Canada <<http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/>>. In addition, Nova University maintains a list of websites that feature QR at: <<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/qualres.html>>. Undoubtedly, research and education societies in the health professions in many other countries now offer support for members interested in QR.

## **Conclusion**

We hope it is now clear that publishing QR demands many of the same strategies as publishing other forms of research. Core requirements are clear, concise writing, precise articulation of methods, and relevance of results, all presented in a way that fits the expectations of the reading audience.

Publishing QR presents some unique challenges as well. Space limitations, research traditions and variations in the quality and qualifications of reviewers can all be barriers to publication. Understanding the process a paper goes through in the review and editorial process can help minimize such barriers and make the process of moving from research in the field to publication of results more rational and satisfying in the short and long run.

## **Note**

1. In July 2001, our journal will publish a supplement to our regular issue, composed of the theme papers from the annual meeting of Community–Campus Partnerships for Health. Each of the original papers substantially exceeds our journal’s page limits. The authors are redoing their papers to conform to our limits and will be posting their original papers and many valuable, accompanying resources on their organization’s website.

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