

Criteria for Review of Reports of Qualitative Research

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**GENERALLY**

As required generally for any research report (e.g. adequately introduced; states the aim and/or objectives; provides a 'background'; justifies the study through a relevant literature review; has ethics approval; details adequately the sampling technique, processes, procedures and results; presents adequate discussion including implications and/or recommendations for clinical practice plus links to previous knowledge). However, in addition:

**1. Clarifies the context of the study**

As qualitative research is not 'generalisable' and is context-specific, authors should clearly present and explain relevant contextual factors that will enable the reader to evaluate applicability to the context in which they might apply the findings.

**2. Congruence**

***2.1 Regarding purpose and method***

- The purpose may be stated as an aim or aims, with possibly a number of objectives listed, with justification provided for the purpose of the study and method choice.
- The fit of the stated purpose with the method used for the study requires evaluation. These should also be congruent with the research question; however, with some qualitative research, the statement of a research question may not be necessary. For example, when applying 'grounded theory', a definite pre-determined research question may not direct the research but rather a broad 'sensitising question' might be commenced with and later altered as the key concern of participants is identified.

***2.2 Regarding paradigm of inquiry, method and claims made regarding results***

- A report of a qualitative research study should have a discernible consistent thread throughout regarding the paradigm of inquiry in which the study was embedded. For example, if constructivist, then methods applied and how these are described, plus what is claimed to be the product of the study, should all reflect a constructivist philosophy.

**3. Voice**

- Although the presence of voice in a report does not render the results credible, an effective report demonstrates an appropriate blend of the voice and analytic narration so that the reader can appropriately evaluate the nature and quality of the claims that are being made as the results of the study.
- The 'voice' of participants can be present as direct quotes from data that illuminate categories, subcategories of properties thereof. If results are provided as an 'alternative representation' (e.g. a semi-fictionalised short story, a poem, or a performance script), then the author(s) are required to explain how the direct voice of participants is evident in the representation.

**4. Mention of how rigour or trustworthiness was pursued, with succinct justification**

- There are various contemporary positions about what criteria should be used in the pursuit of the claim of rigour or trustworthiness for qualitative research, or even (as a postmodernist perspective) whether there should be such criteria.
- A growing opinion is that the researcher(s) should personally select, with justification, whatever criteria they consider suitable for a particular qualitative study.
- It is encouraged that mention is made of how rigour and trustworthiness were pursued, with some justification for this provided. However, it is more vital that rigour and trustworthiness is discernible and demonstrated in the report, as formulaic reporting of a list of criteria is not sufficient for credible findings.

## **5. Siting of discussion is flexible**

Within the manuscript, the discussion of results can be:

- integrated into the presentation of results;
- placed at the end of each section of results presentation (e.g. after each category);
- sequentially placed after all results have been presented, as is usual with a report of quantitative research.

## **OPTIONALLY**

### **Regarding ‘Data Saturation’**

Sample size might be determined by reaching the point of ‘data saturation’ (sometimes claimed to be ‘theoretical saturation’, for instance with grounded theory method), but is not necessarily an aim in all types of qualitative research, such as in:

- Case Study research (one or more cases), where there is focused interpretation of data through extensive and intensive engagement for data collection with limited numbers of participants.
- Phenomenology. This exemption is because ‘rich’ data are sought from a limited number of people where the data set is treated as a whole, often interpreted hermeneutically. Phenomenology is about possible meanings of experiences and often encompasses existential issues for which people may have many variations. The results are a tentative guide for practice and mostly for an empathy building affect.
- Pilot Projects. When a study is a pre-cursor to more extensive research that may be qualitative or quantitative, or perhaps part of a mixed methods design – for instance, to identify ‘grounded’ variables for a survey or questionnaire. However, data saturation is still a useful step with this design, although not necessarily required.
- When there is a limited or small population and all of those who can, or who are willing, do participate in the study and hence there is a limit to data availability.

It should be noted that the notion of ‘data saturation’ is challengeable in regard to:

- Being a point at which all that is to be found about a topic has been found (a positivist view), as rather this point could be that which is reached when the researcher(s) ability to interpret any new possible meanings on the topic has been mostly exhausted (a constructivist view);
- Being too easily and superficially claimed and rather it is preferable to acknowledge the extent and scope of variations and conditions that could be studied rather than claiming that there are no further variants.

## **SPECIFICALLY**

Specific qualitative research methods or approaches can require certain elements of research process. The reviewer should have a clear grasp of these pertaining to any qualitative research report being reviewed. For example:

### **Phenomenology**

- The study has primarily researched the meaning of human experience and includes an existential component in the results;
- The type of phenomenology used is clearly stated and succinctly explained;
- Interviews are unstructured or only sparingly structured;
- Data analysis processes are explained in adequate detail (as this can vary considerably and readers need to know how this was done);
- The results are in the form of a narrative within which themes are discernible – alternative representations are acceptable but with such, a list of the interpreted themes should also be provided.

### **Grounded Theory**

- Has resulted in a theory (usually a substantive theory) that actually is an explanatory scheme about the focus of the research, and moves beyond description and conceptual ordering;
- Although usually the theory centres on a basic social process or basic psycho-social process, these may be multiple, but in this era, are considered to not be absolutely essential; however, identification of a core category for the theory is necessary;
- The mode of grounded theory used is clearly stated and succinctly explained;
- Within the research process applied, there is inclusion of theoretical sampling, constant comparative data analysis, memoing and the pursuit of theoretical sensitivity;
- Clarifies that relevant situations and events were sampled – which involve participants (participants are not sampled per se, but are recruited for the study);
- If using a theoretical lens for interpretation of data, that this is stated, explained and justified – reviewers should not mandate that a theoretical framework or a theoretical lens has to be applied, and especially it should not be expected that an interactionist theory must be used (e.g. symbolic interactionism);
- Can have a quantitative element;
- That the claim to have used grounded theory is not spurious – for example, having only used some elements of the research processes required, or has not produced an explanatory scheme about the research focus. However, as is acceptable, some studies may state use of a ‘grounded theory approach’ or similar for the aim of thematic analysis or conceptual ordering; hence, not actually claiming to be grounded theory research.

### **Descriptive/Exploratory Qualitative Research**

- Is claimed to be this or some version of the title, and is not falsely claimed to be some other type of qualitative research, such as phenomenology or grounded theory;
- Data analysis includes conceptualisation and categorisation resulting in description of the research focus and providing conceptual ordering;
- Can have a quantitative element;
- Can include research process elements from other forms of qualitative research.

### **Case Study**

- Justifies the scope of the study (singular or multiple cases);
- Is in-depth research having prolonged engagement with the case(s);
- Is systematic in process;
- Collects multiple forms of data as relevant to the case(s);
- Can have a quantitative element;
- Is more than the citing of a case scenario to illustrate or justify opinion.

### **Ethnography**

- The research includes a focus on cultural determinants and emphasises cultural context – however, an ‘ethnographic approach’ can be claimed to have been used as a coherent ‘method’ for studies of systems outside of cultural context;
- Engages the setting and participants over a prolonged duration;
- Includes multiple methods of data collection in the field, including observation and interview;
- Justifies research process elements by reference to suitable texts that provide guidance for ethnographic studies;
- Clarifies the relationship and position of the researcher(s) in regard to the participants;
- Discusses emic and etic matters;
- Can have a quantitative element.

### **Discourse Analysis**

- Positions the study theoretically – if atheoretical, then states that this is so;
- Clearly explains the forms and scope of discourse analysed, justifying the boundaries;
- Presents in detail the distinct type of discourse analysis method and associated analysis processes, levels of analysis (including illustration from text) - with justification.

### **Historical/Biographical**

- Clarification of interpretive approaches;
- Justifies the extent and depth of sampling for oral histories;
- Clarifies the assessment of worthiness of data, including checking of veracity;
- Provides adequate detail about the sources of data;
- Can have a quantitative element;
- Provides sufficient detail of the chronology of events.

### **Content Analysis**

- Is linked to, or mentions, the origin of the method;
- Includes analysis of both manifest and latent content;
- Clarifies what are the qualitative elements of the study and what are quantitative in nature.

### **Delphi technique**

- Clarifies what are the qualitative elements of the study and what are quantitative in nature;
- Explains precisely how the qualitative element was analysed and how linkages were established with the quantitative element of the study;
- Has at least two rounds of data collection and analysis – ideally three or four;
- In each round, provides adequate feedback to participants about the responses of other participants in the previous round.