Criteria For The Evaluation Of Qualitative Research Papers

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At the 1995 Conference of the Medical Sociology Group at York a Workshop was held at which a preliminary draft outline of a document for Journal editors was offered for discussion. It was felt that medically-oriented journals and funders are expressing themselves as open to qualitative research nowadays, and had expressed a desire for some helpful document about how to judge it.

Subsequently, some 30 people took part in a revision of the draft document, and this was discussed at a Workshop at the 1996 Conference in Edinburgh.

It was generally agreed that different documents might be appropriate for editors/referees and for grant-giving bodies, and that the present criteria would be specifically for papers rather than research proposals. It was essential, it was thought, that such a document should be short - preferably, not more than two printed pages. The emphasis should be on demonstrating that methods with rigour and sophistication have developed in qualitative research, and that there is some consensus on how it should be evaluated. It should be made clear that

- the criteria offered are not exhaustive, but simply a set of guidelines
- they might not all apply to all qualitative research
- the choice of appropriate referees is crucial.

The Suggestion was originally made that a list of potential referees for qualitative work might be compiled. In the end, however, it was decided that this was impractical.

At the 1996 Conference the following formulation of the Guidelines was approved to go forward to the Medical Sociology Group Committee as an agreed document which they might endorse and promulgate.
Criteria For The Evaluation Of Qualitative Research Papers

1. Are the methods of the research appropriate to the nature of the question being asked?
   - i.e. does the research seek to understand processes or structures, or illuminate subjective experiences or meanings?
   - Are the categories or groups being examined of a type which cannot be preselected, or the possible outcomes cannot be specified in advance?
   - Could a quantitative approach have addressed the issue better?

2. Is the connection to an existing body of knowledge or theory clear?
   - i.e. is there adequate reference to the literature?
   - Does the work cohere with, or critically address, existing theory?

METHODS

3. Are there clear accounts of the criteria used for the selection of subjects for study, and of the data collection and analysis?

4. Is the selection of cases or participants theoretically justified?
   - The unit of research may be people, or events, institutions, samples of natural behaviour, conversations, written material, etc. in any case, while random sampling may not be appropriate, is it nevertheless clear what population the sample refers to?
   - Is consideration given to whether the units chosen were unusual in some important way?

5. Does the sensitivity of the methods match the needs of the research questions?
   - Does the method accept the implications of an approach which respects the perceptions of those being studied?
   - To what extent are any definitions or agendas taken for granted, rather than being critically examined or left open?
   - Are the limitations of any structured interview method considered?

6. Has the relationship between fieldworkers and subjects been considered, and is there evidence about the research was presented and explained to its subjects?
   - If more than one worker was involved, has comparability been considered?
   - Is there evidence about how the subjects perceived the research?
   - Is there evidence about how any group processes were conducted?

7. Was the data-collection and record keeping systematic?
   - e.g. were careful records kept?
   - Is the evidence available for independent examination?
   - Were full records or transcripts of conversations used if appropriate?

ANALYSIS

8. Is reference made to accepted procedures for analysis?
   - Is it clear how the analysis is done? (Detailed repetition of how to perform standard procedures ought not to be expected)
   - Has its reliability been considered, ideally by independent repetition?

9. How systematic is the analysis?
   - What steps were taken to guard against selectivity in the use of data?
• In research with individuals, is it clear that there has not been selection of some cases and ignoring of less-interesting ones? In group research, are all categories of opinion taken into account?

10. Is there adequate discussion of how themes, concepts and categories were derived from the data?
• It is sometimes inevitable that externally-given or predetermined descriptive categories are used, but have they been examined for their real meaning or any possible ambiguities?

11. Is there adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher’s arguments?
• Is negative data given? Has there been any search for cases which might refute the conclusions?

12. Have measures been taken to test the validity of the findings?
• Far instance, have methods such as feeding them back to the respondents, triangulation, or procedures such as grounded theory been used?

13. Have any steps been taken to see whether the analysis would be comprehensible to the participants, if this is possible and relevant?
• Has the meaning of their accounts been explored with respondents? Have apparent anomalies and contradictions been discussed with them, rather than assumptions being made?

PRESENTATION

14. Is the research clearly contextualised?
• Is all the relevant information about the setting and subjects supplied?
• Are the cases or variables which are being studied integrated in their social context, rather than being abstracted or decontextualised?

15. Are the data presented systematically?
• Are quotations, fieldnotes, etc. identified in a way which enables the reader to judge the range of evidence being used?

16. Is a clear distinction made between the data and its interpretation?
• Do the conclusions follow from the data? (It should be noted that the phases of research - data collection, analysis, discussion - are not usually separate and papers do not necessarily follow the quantitative pattern of methods, results, discussion.)

17. Is sufficient of the original evidence presented to satisfy the reader of the relationship between the evidence and the conclusions?
• Though the presentation of discursive data is always going to require more space than numerical data, is the paper as concise as possible?

18. Is the author’s own position clearly stated?
• Is the researcher’s perspective described?
• Has the researcher examined their own role, possible bias, and influence on the research?

19. Are the results credible and appropriate?
• Do they address the research question(s)?
• Are they plausible and coherent?
• Are they important, either theoretically or practically, or trivial?
ETHICS

20. Have ethical issues been adequately considered?

- Is the issue of confidentiality (often particularly difficult in qualitative work) been adequately dealt with?
- Have the consequences of the research - including establishing relationships with the subjects, raising expectations, changing behaviour, etc. - been considered?