

Publishing qualitative research in journals

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Plan

- Why is publishing qualitative research problematic?
 - Issues highlighted in the literature
 - Findings from some research
- Lessons learned as an Editor
- Lessons learned as an Author

Why is publishing qualitative research problematic?

Symon and Cassell (1999) suggest the following reasons:

- Getting research past epistemological gatekeepers (e.g. journal editors and reviewers).
- Conforming to journal editorial criteria and constraints of other presentation formats.
- Pressure to justify qualitative research according to “inappropriate” criteria.
- Lack of training in how to use qualitative techniques.

Some research about these issues

- Cassell, Buehring, Symon, Johnson, and Bishop (2005)
 - Project entitled ‘Benchmarking good practice in qualitative management research’
 - One of the issues considered was editors’ views about publishing qualitative research.
- Cassell (2006) study of all the articles published in AMJ, BJM and JMS during 2005.

Why is it harder to get qualitative research published?

- Difficulty with presenting rich datasets in journal format –
“Sometimes they have something wonderfully interesting, but... 25 pages later they haven’t gotten to the point... if you get to the data, they have really interesting things and they have a lot of insights, but they expect the readers to read 40 pages before they get to it and most people won’t waste their time”

Why is it harder to get qualitative research published?

- In qualitative work the author is a ‘bit more exposed’
“So I see qualitative research as much more a baring of the soul, much more exposure of the process of research and the analysis of the research. It’s much more bared and open to view than often a quantitative piece is and the reason for that is partly that quantitative research, of course, can be nicely encased in technique”

Why is it harder to get qualitative research published?

- 'Easier to find reasons to reject a qualitative study' –

"if you're going to do qualitative work, then it's got to be exemplary or it's never going to get through that door"

"in a sense it's so easy to find reasons to reject the qualitative study. If you have a quantitative study, which is complying with all the formats, even though it produces no exciting results, it's hard to find an argument why it shouldn't be published"

Why is it harder to get qualitative research published?

- Interesting that qualitative papers in this context are always discussed in relation to quantitative ones

"my own opinion of mediocre quantitative work, usually mediocre quantitative work addresses... It's solidly done meaning that there's no obvious flaws... but it addresses a completely trivial question or something that's completely narrow... But because it's solidly done it looks scientific"

Percentage of total articles published during 2005 (Cassell, 2006)

	Academy of Management Journal	British Journal of Management	Journal of Management Studies
Survey design	53.4%	31.8%	22.2%
Other quantitative approaches	37.9%	13.6%	28.8%
Qualitative case studies	8.6%	27.2%	22.2%
Other qualitative		27.2%	26.6%

Location of first authors

	AMJ	BJM	JMS
UK	3.17%	52.94%	28.78%
US	76.18%	17.64%	34.84%
N. Europe	11.11%	5.88%	19.69%
S. Europe	1.58%	5.88%	3.03%
Far East	7.93%	2.94%	7.57%
Austr./ NZ		14.7%	7.57%

So what enhances our chances of publishing our qualitative research?

Finding the 'right' journal

- Do your homework
- Some potential questions:
 - Am I informing debates in that field?
 - Do they publish my kind of methods?
 - Are they sympathetic to my theoretical approach?
 - Does my paper meet their aims and objectives?

What makes a good paper?

Contribution

Contribution

Contribution

What is a contribution?

- Is it new/ novel?
- Is it one of the following:
 - Methodological contribution
 - Theoretical contribution
 - Empirical contribution
- How do you progress debate within that field?
- Am I absolutely explicit about what the contribution of my paper is?

More aesthetic criteria

- Does it tell a good story?
- Is it intuitively appealing?
- Is it well written?

Crafting the contribution

- Put it up front!
- Tell and show (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997)
- Everything you include should be about highlighting your contribution
 - Introduction and conclusions to set the scenes
 - Literature review to show where your study fits
 - Data to develop your theoretical points
 - Discussion to highlight your theoretical contribution
 - Conclusions to summarise

Before submission ...

- Get feedback from as many people as possible who are supportive of qualitative research
- Check out journal notes for contributors
- OBEY what they say
- Ensure that some of the articles you cite in your paper are from that journal
- Ensure you cannot be identified from your paper

Experience as an Editor

- Initial decisions on manuscripts may be made very quickly
- Some things are irritating:
 - Anonymity
 - Not in the right format
 - Anything that means I have to do extra work
- I can't afford to upset my limited pool of reviewers by sending out things not good enough
- May be in a position of needing to include or exclude for all different kinds of reasons (for example special issues)
- I will make the final decision but will be strongly influenced by the reviewers' comments
- Am desperate for reviews to get done on time.

Common problems with qualitative research papers

- A focus upon what is 'interesting' to the author, rather than a focus on the contribution (I am often guilty of this)
- Failure to outline the theoretical contribution
- Failure to describe any processes of data analysis
- Findings section is a list of quotes without any commentary.

Common problems and challenges in qualitative submissions to AMJ

- Many submissions appear to be "one-off" rather than embedded in established research programmes
 - Introductions often lack adequate reviews of the important literature
 - Often fail to state explicit goals, objectives or research questions that frame to papers and guide analysis and research outcomes
 - Where questions are provided, the concepts underlying them are often not well defined
 - The methodology is underspecified
 - Discussion and concluding sections need to tie in with the original research questions.
- (Gephart, 2004, vol. 47., no.4, 454-462)

Tensions in the peer review process (AMJ editors, 2002)

- Reviewers look for reasons to reject papers; editors look for reasons to accept them
- It's easy for a reviewer to spot flaws in a piece of work, but harder for them to advise an editor of whether those flaws are terminal
- The incongruence between the tone of review (ideally positive) and the eventual editorial decision.

Experience as an author

- Writing good papers is hard and takes a long time
- It is worth reading some of the texts about how to write up qualitative research (e.g. Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997)
- Takes years of experience before we are ready to submit to an American Academy journal
- Everybody gets rejected sometime
- After rejection don't give up! Respond to the reviewers' comments and submit elsewhere
- The whole process takes a long time
- Always learning.

Useful reading

- Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997) *Composing qualitative research*, Beverly Hills (Sage) (New version due out in 2007)