

Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields

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We present a set of evolving guidelines for reviewing qualitative research, to serve four functions: to contribute to the process of legitimizing qualitative research; to ensure more appropriate and valid scientific reviews of qualitative manuscripts, theses, and dissertations; to encourage better quality control in qualitative research through better self- and other-monitoring; and to encourage further developments in approach and method. Building on a review of existing principles of good practice in qualitative research, we used an iterative process of revision and feedback from colleagues who engage in qualitative research, resulting in a set of seven guidelines common to both qualitative and quantitative research and seven guidelines especially pertinent to qualitative investigations in psychology and related social sciences. The Evolving Guidelines are subject to continuing revision and should not be used in a rigid manner, in order to avoid stifling creativity in this rapidly evolving, rich research tradition.

The past 5 years have seen a dramatic increase in the use of qualitative research methods. This has occurred in various disciplines and in several countries. The purpose of this article is to present a set of evolving guidelines for reviewing qualitative research in psychology. In doing this, we also hope to provide both editors and reviewers serving psychology journals (and their equivalents in other disciplines), as well as thesis and dissertation committees, with guidance on how to conduct appropriate reviews of qualitative research manuscripts. Along the way, we will provide a brief definition of qualitative research, give an overview of the philosophy of knowledge development upon which qualitative research is based,

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refer to some of the previous formulations of qualitative method quality that have appeared in the literature, describe the intended functions of these guidelines, and offer a set of caveats regarding their use.¹

Definition of qualitative research

The aim of qualitative research is to understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage, and live through situations. In qualitative research, the researcher attempts to develop understandings of the phenomena under study, based as much as possible on the perspective of those being studied. Qualitative researchers accept that it is impossible to set aside one's own perspective totally (and do not claim to). Nevertheless, they believe that their self-reflective attempts to 'bracket' existing theory and their own values allow them to understand and represent their informants' experiences and actions more adequately than would be otherwise possible.

Topics of qualitative research include feeling misunderstood in psychotherapy, forgiving another, facing unemployment, 'going off the wagon', receiving test feedback, using language to negotiate one's status as a moral being, recovery from severe mental illness, or being angry, fearful, depressed or joyful. Qualitative research includes such diverse approaches as empirical phenomenology, ethnography, qualitative discourse analysis, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry and social action research. These approaches have all developed their own, somewhat different, traditions of rigor and of communication with readers. They also work within differing explicit and implicit philosophies. One thing, however, that they all have in common is that their central purpose is to contribute to a process of revision and enrichment of understanding, rather than to verify earlier conclusions or theory.

In other words, it can be argued that qualitative research is carried out in order to answer scientific questions that differ from those of quantitative research. Although no hard and fast rules apply, Elliott (1995) has taken the position that qualitative research lends itself to understanding participants' perspectives, to defining phenomena in terms of experienced meanings and observed variations, and to developing theory from field work. By the same token, he argues that quantitative methods lend themselves to testing hypothesized relationships or causal explanations, evaluating the reliability, validity and underlying factor structure of psychological measures, and measuring degree of generalizability across samples. Ultimately, the value of any scientific method must be evaluated in the light of its ability to provide meaningful and useful answers to the questions that motivated the research in the first place. We believe that criteria more closely geared to evaluating how well those questions are addressed will provide more effective review of qualitative research reports.

¹ As will be evident in what follows, this paper is not intended to address in detail the complex philosophical issues involved or the scientific methods used in qualitative research, and about which the three authors of this paper do not necessarily agree either! The reader is referred, among others, to Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Giorgi, 1970, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1983; and Rennie, 1995*a*, 1995*b*.

The philosophy of science that supports qualitative research

The source of the dispute about the credibility of qualitative research can be traced to its being embedded in a philosophy of knowledge development that differs from the philosophy supporting the quantitative, or 'received', approach to knowledge development in the social sciences. The latter subscribes to positivism, in turn expressive of the epistemological enterprise of establishing objective knowledge represented as regularities, even laws (Polkinghorne, 1983). When this approach to knowledge development is used in the social sciences, in imitation of the natural sciences, the role of subject is reserved for the researcher while the entity being researched is treated as an object that can be universalized. Correspondingly, canons of research practice are developed and followed to maintain this subject-object dichotomy.

Alternatively, qualitative research is derived from various phenomenological, hermeneutic, pragmatic, critical, and postmodernist traditions, that challenge the appropriateness of this epistemological approach to knowledge development generally, and especially with respect to the social sciences. In turn, emphasis is placed on the particulars of human experience and social life (including discourse) by taking into account matters such as history, language and context that relativize the knowledge gained to the individuals and situations studied and to those doing the inquiry. At the same time, this relativism is not solipsistic in that pains are taken to ground understandings of the subject matter empirically, and to specify the researchers' conceptual frameworks. Nor are the research findings merely situational; commonalities may be drawn within and across situated studies. However, extensions are modest in their scope and nature, and are thoroughly grounded in the particulars of the informants and their situations. Accordingly, qualitative researchers attempt (if only tacitly) to reconcile the opposing perils of objectivism and relativism (Kvale, 1996; Rennie, 1998).²

Intended functions of the evolving guidelines

The guidelines described here have three main functions. First, we offer them because we believe that the existence of explicit methodological guidelines can help to legitimize qualitative research. Good qualitative research is demanding and time-consuming, often more so than good quantitative research. The existence of the proposed guidelines may serve to reassure traditional quantitative researchers that qualitative research is methodologically rigorous.

Second, we believe that the proposed evolving guidelines can foster more valid scientific reviews of qualitative research. It has been our experience that quantitative researchers (editors, journal and grant reviewers, and dissertation and masters thesis committee members) sometimes make the mistake of evaluating qualitative research reports using the standards of quantitative research (e.g. necessity of statistical tests and the conventions that go with them, random assignment to multiple research

² Although we have yet to do a careful study of the matter, it is our impression that this description applies to most forms of Discourse Analysis (e.g. van Dijk, 1997); furthermore, Potter (1996) describes methodological checks parallel to four of the qualitative guidelines presented here.

conditions, experimental controls, inter-rater reliability). In the same vein, reviewers unfamiliar with qualitative methods may fail to apply criteria that are central within the qualitative research tradition (e.g. owing one's perspective, coherence, resonating with readers). In short, we believe that the existence of an explicit, but not rigid, set of guidelines for reviewing qualitative research will help to establish a place for qualitative research in the social science community, first, by helping to persuade traditional quantitative researchers that qualitative research is far from being a 'no method' method (cf. Kvale, 1996), and, second, by giving reviewers and committee members guidance in the still relatively novel experience of offering constructive feedback on qualitative research projects.

Third, we are concerned that the rapid profusion of qualitative research is giving rise to problems of quality control, partly because student interest has, in some situations, run ahead of faculty expertise. The result, we fear, is that poorly executed qualitative research is increasing, some of it of the 'no method' type. We believe that presentation of integrated, itemized and evaluative guidelines which reflect the literature on qualitative research methods would serve qualitative researchers, by helping them to examine their research more reflectively at both design and writing stages.

Fourth, we want to foster the further development of qualitative research through offering a set of reference points from which researchers can define and describe their variations and advancements in approach and method. Thus, we hope that the proposed list will inspire qualitative researchers to search for new, creative ways of meeting each particular guideline, as well as identifying instances in which particular guidelines might be adapted or stretched in order to better represent new approaches or phenomena.

Previous formulations of quality standards for qualitative research

From the first emergence of systematic qualitative research in psychology, qualitative researchers have been involved in attempts to articulate what constitutes good qualitative research (e.g. Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Fischer, 1977; Giorgi, 1988; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Mishler, 1990; Packer & Addison, 1989; Rennie, 1995*a, b*; Stiles, 1993). We present only a sample of three out of the many formulations that have appeared in the social science literature; these are selected in order to illustrate differences in approach taken.

In an early formulation, Lincoln & Guba (1985) tried to describe and catalogue principles for achieving 'trustworthiness' by adapting traditional research evaluative criteria (after Cook & Campbell, 1979) for establishing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Packer & Addison (1989), on the other hand, borrowed a scheme from the philosophical literature on truth criteria to organize guidelines for evaluating 'interpretive accounts': coherence refers to the internal consistency or intelligibility of a data-based representation. External evidence requires confirming evidence from outside the data analysed (e.g. via a 'member check' or 'triangulation procedure'; cf. Hamlyn, 1970, on correspondence theory in epistemology). Consensus involves

researchers' attempts to communicate their understandings of a set of data, either within a research team (inter-judge consensus), or between research teams (through scientific presentation and review processes), or with readers. Finally, demonstrating practical implications, the fourth general criterion, refers to evidence that the interpretive account has shown utility or could prove to be useful in the future, through its ability to emancipate people from their difficulties, or to energize people to take needed action.

More recently, Stiles (1993) presented an attempt to organize quality standards under two main headings: First, standards of good practice refer to the trustworthiness of observations and data and approximate reliability in traditional quantitative research. These include disclosure of the researcher's orientation and preconceptions, explication of the social/cultural context of the research, description of the internal processes of the investigators, close engagement with the material, repeated cycling between interpretation and data, grounding of interpretations with examples, and asking for descriptions rather than explanations. Second, Stiles (1993) described standards of validity, which address the trustworthiness of the interpretations or conclusions drawn from the data. These include triangulation (i.e. convergence across data sources), apparent coherence of the interpretation, uncovering, or self-evidential quality for the reader, testimonial validity (participant feedback), evidence of the usefulness of the interpretation for fostering change in participants, consensus among researchers, and evidence that the research has changed how the researcher thinks about the phenomenon.

Development of the present evolving guidelines

The first author began the process of developing the present guidelines by assembling a list of some 40 different quality standards from the above-listed and other sources (i.e. Kirk & Miller, 1986; Patton, 1990; Rennie, Phillips & Quartaro, 1988; Wertz, 1986). The list was organized into clusters based on similarity and then modified for use in journal article reviewing. The resulting list consisted of 11 principles: method appropriateness (adapting method to research question), openness (regarding theoretical orientation or biases), theoretical sensitivity (relating findings to existing knowledge), bracketing of expectations, replicability (describing methods), saturation/generalizability (sampling adequacy for purpose), credibility checks, grounding (in examples), coherence, uncovering/self-evidence to reader and intelligibility (communicability).

The first author then presented this list at meetings of the Society for Psychotherapy Research, in a workshop (Elliott, Fischer, Rennie & Stiles, 1993) and at a subsequent informal discussion group, at which time the other two authors joined the project. A substantial further revision resulted and was sent to 23 of the original members of the discussion group for feedback and suggestions. The suggestions received were incorporated. Another revision of what was now entitled *Evolving Guidelines for Publication of Qualitative Research Studies in Psychology and Related Fields* was next sent to a wider range of individuals, consisting of a dozen well-known qualitative researchers of diverse theoretical persuasions, in order to elicit their suggestions. Soliciting further comment, Fischer presented the *Evolving Guidelines* to

a symposium on qualitative research sponsored by the Division of Counseling Psychology at the American Psychological Association annual meeting in 1994. Another set of revisions followed, resulting in the itemization listed in Table 1. As a result of this process, we believe that we have posed the *Evolving Guidelines* in a form that represents the practices and concerns of a broad range of social science qualitative researchers.

Table 1. Evolving Guidelines for Publication of Qualitative Research Studies in Psychology and Related Fields

A. Publishability Guidelines Shared by Both Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches
1. Explicit scientific context and purpose
2. Appropriate methods
3. Respect for participants
4. Specification of methods
5. Appropriate discussion
6. Clarity of presentation
7. Contribution to knowledge
B. Publishability Guidelines Especially Pertinent to Qualitative Research
1. Owning one’s perspective
2. Situating the sample
3. Grounding in examples
4. Providing credibility checks
5. Coherence
6. Accomplishing general vs. specific research tasks
7. Resonating with readers

These guidelines are intended to characterize the appropriate considerations involved in the conduct and publishability of all forms of qualitative research. They are offered provisionally with the expectation that they will be modified over time, in response to additional feedback. In formulating them, we found it helpful to distinguish between two different sets of guidelines: those clearly common to both quantitative and qualitative research, and those more specific to qualitative research.

A. Publishability guidelines shared by both qualitative and quantitative approaches

We believe that it is important to note the many commonalities between qualitative and quantitative research; thus, the first set of seven evaluation criteria addresses aspects of good research practice that are shared by qualitative and quantitative researchers. These include familiar canons addressing the relationship of the study to relevant literature, clarity of research questions, methodological appropriateness, informed consent and ethical research conduct, specification of methods, appropriately tentative discussion of implications of research data and understandings, clarity of writing and contribution to knowledge. In order to make them easier to use, each guideline has a summary heading.

B. Publishability guidelines especially pertinent to qualitative research

The items in the second set of seven guidelines are either specific to qualitative research, or are specifications of how more general scientific principles apply to qualitative research. These guidelines are not intended to be all-inclusive or definitive. Authors should be able to address how they meet the intentions of the guidelines for reporting qualitative research, or their rationales for meeting alternative standards. These specific guidelines include owning one's perspective, situating the sample, grounding in examples, providing credibility checks, coherence, accomplishing general vis. specific research tasks, and resonating with readers. We will now describe each of these seven specific qualitative research guidelines in more detail, including fictitious, but typical, examples of good and bad practice for each.³

1. *Owning one's perspective.* Authors specify their theoretical orientations and personal anticipations, both as known in advance and as they become apparent during the research. In developing and communicating their understanding of the phenomenon under study, authors attempt to recognize their values, interests and assumptions and the role that these play in the understanding. This disclosure of values and assumptions helps readers to interpret the researchers' data and understanding of them, and to consider possible alternatives.

Examples of poor practice: The authors report a grounded theory investigation of the process of recovering from childhood sexual abuse, but give no indication of who they are and what they brought to the research. In order to enhance the apparent 'objectivity' of their research, they never use the first person. The reader is forced to read between the lines in order to detect the authors' presuppositions.

Examples of good practice: The authors describe their theoretical, methodological or personal orientations as those are relevant to the research (e.g. feminist, symbolic interactionist and heterosexual); they describe personal experiences or training relevant to the subject matter (e.g. therapist who works with sexual abuse survivors), as well as their initial (or even emerging) beliefs about the phenomenon they are studying (e.g. that recovery from abuse requires forgiveness).

2. *Situating the sample.* Authors describe the research participants and their life circumstances to aid the reader in judging the range of persons and situations to which the findings might be relevant.

Examples of poor practice: In a phenomenological study of the experience of social ostracism, the authors fail to provide information about relevant characteristics of the participants, including their gender, age, ethnicity, social class and even the kinds of ostracism experienced.

Examples of good practice: The authors provide basic descriptive data (age, gender, ethnicity, social class) about their sample of adolescents, including how many reported being ostracized because their physical appearance, behavior, speech etc., and the length and pervasiveness of the ostracism.

³ In providing these fictitious but typical examples, it was not our intention to single out particular studies for criticism; any similarity between our examples and actual published or unpublished studies is purely coincidental.

3. *Grounding in examples.* Authors provide examples of the data to illustrate both the analytic procedures used in the study and the understanding developed in the light of them. The examples allow appraisal of the fit between the data and the authors' understanding of them; they also allow readers to conceptualize possible alternative meanings and understandings.

Examples of poor practice: The authors report the results of a naturalistic ethnographic study of family caregivers of elderly Alzheimers disease patients, in the form of a series of abstract themes (e.g. crisis-focused coping vs. daily coping), concluding with a detailed model of the process of caregivers coping with their demented parent or spouse. The reader looks in vain, however, for concrete examples of any of the themes, or even the kind of information that the researchers used to generate the categories.

Examples of good practice: The authors offer one or two specific examples of each theme (e.g. as an example of daily coping, a daughter describes how she arranges for a respite care service to mind her father one afternoon a week). In addition, the authors illustrate their data and categories by providing a one-page, condensed single case account of the range of different strategies used by one elderly husband to deal with his wife's condition.

4. *Providing credibility checks.* Researchers may use any of several methods for checking the credibility of their categories, themes or accounts. Where relevant, these may include (a) checking these understandings with the original informants or others similar to them; (b) using multiple qualitative analysts, an additional analytical 'auditor', or the original analyst for a 'verification step' of reviewing the data for discrepancies, overstatements, or errors; (c) comparing two or more varied qualitative perspectives; or (d) where appropriate, 'triangulation' with external factors (e.g. outcome or recovery) or quantitative data.

Examples of poor practice: A discourse analytical study of the construction of self and problems in anorexia is conducted by a single researcher using a database consisting of transcripts of interviews with eight diagnosed female patients. The interviewer identifies interpretive repertoires used by these patients to justify self-starvation (e.g. food as poison), along with accompanying conversational strategies (e.g. deflecting conversation away from problems by accentuating improvements). The discourse analyst reports no procedures to check his analysis, writing that he prefers to 'let the analysis speak for itself'; however, the brief examples that he provides are not extensive enough to allow readers to act as 'auditors' themselves.

Examples of good practice: The discourse analyst asks a female colleague with extensive experience working with eating disordered patients to look over the analysis and supporting data. This colleague suggests some corrections and elaborations to the original analysis. In addition, the researcher compares the accounts of patients in his sample who are 'in recovery' from anorexia to those who are 'in denial'. (The analyst does not carry out a 'member check' because discourse analysis presumes that many repertoires and strategies are not in informants' awareness.)

5. *Coherence.* The understanding is represented in a way that achieves coherence and

integration while preserving nuances in the data. The understanding fits together to form a data-based story/narrative, 'map', framework, or underlying structure for the phenomenon or domain.

Examples of poor practice: The authors of a grounded theory study of the experience of living with head injury present results as a list of 23 distinct categories, without any attempt to organize the categories into larger groups or along underlying dimensions. The reader's head swims while trying to make sense of the melange of categories, which refer to different levels of abstraction and different aspects of the phenomenon; furthermore, some seem to overlap, whereas others describe contradictory experiences.

Examples of good practice: The authors present an integrated summary of their analysis, using a figure with boxes and arrows to depict both the temporal-sequential (before-early-later living with) and the logical-hierarchical relationships (using 'effective agent self' to link initiating and self-reflective aspects of agency) among categories. Similar and temporally organized categories are grouped in such a way as to display these relationships. The authors also provide a verbal narrative of their model and organize their presentation around a rich, memorably-named 'core category' or 'constitutive feature' (i.e. losing and rebuilding an effective agent self).

6. *Accomplishing general vs. specific research tasks.* Where a *general* understanding of a phenomenon is intended, it is based on an appropriate range of instances (informants or situations). Limitations of extending the findings to other contexts and informants are specified. Where understanding a *specific* instance or case is the goal, it has been studied and described systematically and comprehensively enough to provide the reader a basis for attaining that understanding. Such case studies also address limitations of extending the findings to other instances.

Examples of poor practice: The authors state the objective of developing a general model of adjusting to life in a new culture, but limit their interviews to five recent male immigrants from Russia, uncritically claiming that this enabled them to achieve 'saturation' more readily, and then failing to follow through with a comparative sample. The authors then present an analysis of one of the informants' experiences, but their narrative account is missing information about the person's crucial early adjustment period and deals almost exclusively with language acquisition and employment issues.

Examples of good practice: The researchers carry out 25 interviews with a range of temporary and permanent immigrants, male and female, from five different parts of the world. To make the analysis manageable, they conduct intensive analyses of 10 diverse informants, supplementing this with less intensive examination of the rest of the sample, to ensure that their model is relatively complete. In their presentation, they emphasize that their conclusions only apply to the groups studied. In a separate publication, the authors provide a 'thick description' of one male Vietnamese immigrant's experience, in which themes involving struggles with language, work discrimination, religious crisis, family conflict, and psychological distress issues all interweave. In the latter paper, the authors are careful to warn against generalizing to other immigrants' experiences, emphasizing their account as a description of one particular form of immigration experience.

7. *Resonating with readers.* The manuscript stimulates resonance in readers/reviewers, meaning that the material is presented in such a way that readers/reviewers, taking all other guidelines into account, judge it to have represented accurately the subject matter or to have clarified or expanded their appreciation and understanding of it.

Examples of poor practice: On reading an analysis of the experience of menopause, the reader is left cold by the description given, which is described in such abstract jargon ('bodily-identified nexuses') as to be totally removed from human experience. In addition, the reader finds herself doubting the validity of the themes or model presented, because its overly negative emphasis is totally at variance with her experience and that of other menopausal women she has known or worked with.

Example of good practice: Upon reading the researchers' categories and overall narrative of the experience of going through menopause, the reader is struck by how the researcher has brought the interviewees' experience to life and finds that the researchers have managed not only to capture her own experience but also to find language for difficult-to-express experiences that she and her clients had struggled to put into words. In fact, she plans to use some of the authors' categories in working with clients.

Conclusion: Caveats and promise

Quantitatively-oriented colleagues have pointed out to us that rough analogues of each specific qualitative guideline exist in various quantitative traditions. For example, *grounding in examples* is analogous to reporting significance tests and effect sizes in quantitative research, in the sense that both research practices are used rhetorically to support conclusions about the phenomena being studied. Similarly, *owning one's perspective* finds a parallel in the statement of hypotheses in traditional psychological research, even though the function is different (i.e. hypotheses are used to guide an investigation whereas describing one's expectations and theoretical orientation are part of a process of trying to reduce or balance their influence). In fact, rather than undercutting the need for distinct principles of good practice for qualitative research, these parallels highlight important differences between qualitative and quantitative methods.

Most importantly, however, we want to emphasize that these guidelines are tentative and are expected to evolve as the field of qualitative research develops further. Furthermore, the examples given are for illustrative purposes only and are in no way intended to define the entire range of the guidelines they exemplify. After all, systematic qualitative research methods are a relatively recent development in psychology and related social sciences. Thus, they should be expected to show evolution as new methods are developed and as the field develops experience with the full range of qualitative methods and the specific strengths and weaknesses associated with each.

Furthermore, it is not our intent that these guidelines be applied to qualitative research manuscripts as a rigid 'checklist'; similar checklists for quantitative research such as psychotherapy outcome research (e.g. Kazdin, 1994) or meta-analysis (e.g. Durlak & Lipsey, 1991) are not meant to be applied rigidly either. In addition, we recognize the need for journals and graduate training programs that emphasize particular qualitative approaches to develop specialized guidelines that better express

their particular interests (e.g. empirical phenomenology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, or conversation analysis).

A related concern was raised by some colleagues who wrote to us with comments about these guidelines. These respondents worried that the explicit codification of principles of good practice for qualitative research risks imposing a dangerous methodolatry which may stifle a rich, emerging research tradition. Citing Feyerabend (1975), these respondents felt that any explicit guidelines are fundamentally at odds with the spirit of qualitative research. While we recognize this potential risk, we have come to the conclusion that some form of widely-recognized evaluative guidelines for qualitative research are necessary in order to win wider recognition and acceptability for qualitative approaches to psychological inquiry, as well as to encourage qualitative researchers to exercise greater self-reflectiveness in their conduct and reporting of investigations. We do hope that our concerned colleagues will be at least partly reassured by the tentative tone we have tried to maintain here. We invite more discussion and further suggestions for the evolving guidelines.

In the end, we hope that the proposed evolving guidelines will encourage more and better qualitative investigations of important areas of human experience and action. These methods lend themselves especially well to research on new and developing areas of psychology (e.g. multicultural treatment interventions). They provide systematic approaches for developing deeper theoretical understandings of important psychological phenomena (e.g. criminal victimization, Fischer & Wertz, 1979) or critiquing areas of current practice (e.g. sexist intervention with sexually abused individuals, Hutchinson & McDaniel, 1986). The results of qualitative studies (e.g. of clients' experiences of significant therapy events) can also provide item-material for use in developing quantitative questionnaires in informants' own language (e.g. Elliott & Wexler, 1994).

There has been debate about whether or not qualitative and quantitative research methods can complement one another (e.g. Smith & Heshusius, 1986). We believe that the larger issue is the philosophical frame within which one utilizes methods; that is, one's epistemological and ontological frame. Regardless of one's methodological orientation, it seems clear to us that the explication of tentative principles of good research practice can serve to help researchers make use of the special virtues of these approaches for studying and representing the meanings of human experience and action. Our primary goals are to assist reviewers at this stage in the development of qualitative research approaches and methods, and to encourage the further development of these research approaches. In that spirit, we include the current version of the *Evolving Guidelines* as an appendix, for easy duplication and reference (see Appendix).

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Appendix

Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields

A. Publishability guidelines shared by both qualitative and quantitative approaches

Although qualitative researchers often design their studies from a different philosophy of science than that followed by experimentalists, they generally share the following traditional guidelines for publishability of their research:

1. *Explicit scientific context and purpose.* The manuscript specifies where the study fits within relevant literature and states the intended purposes or questions of the study.
2. *Appropriate methods.* The methods and procedures used are appropriate or responsive to the intended purposes or questions of the study.
3. *Respect for participants.* Informed consent, confidentiality, welfare of the participants, social responsibility, and other ethical principles are fulfilled. Researchers creatively adapt their procedures and reports to respect both their participants' lives, and the complexity and ambiguity of the subject matter.
4. *Specification of methods.* Authors report all procedures for gathering data, including specific questions posed to participants. Ways of organizing the data and methods of analysis are also specified. This allows readers to see how to conduct a similar study themselves, and to judge for themselves how well the reported study was carried out.
5. *Appropriate discussion.* The research data and the understandings derived from them are discussed in terms of their contribution to theory, content, method, and/or practical domains, and are presented in appropriately tentative and contextualized terms, with limitations acknowledged.

6. *Clarity of presentation.* The manuscript is well-organized and clearly written, with technical terms defined.

7. *Contribution to knowledge.* The manuscript contributes to an elaboration of a discipline's body of description and understanding.

B. Publishability guidelines especially pertinent to qualitative research

The following guidelines are either specific to qualitative research, or are specifications of how more general principles apply to qualitative research. These guidelines are not intended to be all-inclusive or definitive. Authors should be able to address how they meet the intentions of these guidelines for reporting qualitative research, or their rationales for meeting alternative standards.

1. *Owning one's perspective.* Authors specify their theoretical orientations and personal anticipations, both as known in advance and as they became apparent during the research. In developing and communicating their understanding of the phenomenon under study, authors attempt to recognize their values, interests and assumptions and the role these play in the understanding. This disclosure of values and assumptions helps readers to interpret the researchers' data and understanding of them, and to consider possible alternatives.

2. *Situating the sample.* Authors describe the research participants and their life circumstances to aid the reader in judging the range of people and situations to which the findings might be relevant.

3. *Grounding in examples.* Authors provide examples of the data to illustrate both the analytic procedures used in the study and the understanding developed in the light of them. The examples allow appraisal of the fit between the data and the authors' understanding of them; they also allow readers to conceptualize possible alternative meanings and understandings.

4. *Providing credibility checks.* Researchers may use any one of several methods for checking the credibility of their categories, themes or accounts. Where relevant, these may include (a) checking these understandings with the original informants or others similar to them; (b) using multiple qualitative analysts, an additional analytic 'auditor', or the original analyst for a 'verification step' of reviewing the data for discrepancies, overstatements or errors; (c) comparing two or more varied qualitative perspectives, or (d) where appropriate, 'triangulation' with external factors (e.g. outcome or recovery) or quantitative data.

5. *Coherence.* The understanding is represented in a way that achieves coherence and integration while preserving nuances in the data. The understanding fits together to form a data-based story/narrative, 'map', framework, or underlying structure for the phenomenon or domain.

6. *Accomplishing general vs. specific research tasks.* Where a *general* understanding of a phenomenon is intended, it is based on an appropriate range of instances (informants or situations). Limitations of extending the findings to other contexts and informants are specified. Where understanding a *specific* instance or case is the goal, it has been studied and described systematically and comprehensively enough to provide the reader a basis for attaining that understanding. Such case studies also address limitations of extending the findings to other instances.

7. *Resonating with readers*. The manuscript stimulates resonance in readers/reviewers, meaning that the material is presented in such a way that readers/reviewers, taking all other guidelines into account, judge it to have represented accurately the subject matter or to have clarified or expanded their appreciation and understanding of it.

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