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## Author and Reviewer Guideline Series: Reporting Qualitative Studies

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## AUTHOR AND REVIEWER GUIDELINE SERIES

# *Reporting Qualitative Studies*

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The four most important criteria for deciding on the quality of a qualitative report involve having sufficient detail about where the investigators are coming from, what they did, how they arrived at their findings, and what the study means. These criteria have been selected because they are common weaknesses in manuscripts reporting qualitative work and they are discussed in methodological expositions about this broad type of research. The purpose of these guidelines is to guide the reporting (and thus the conducting) of qualitative research. We do not specify how individual qualitative methods should be applied: That level of guidance is found in texts and other basic sources. Although some professors are tempted to use hard and fast rules about qualitative rigor, we suspect these rules should be broken almost as often as they should be followed. For example, *prolonged engagement* is a good qualitative research concept: The researcher should spend enough time in the situation being studied to ensure that the phenomena under study are accurately portrayed. Just as we would not want a tourist spending a weekend in a village and claiming to understand the culture of the villagers, we do not want the infrequent visitor to a classroom claiming to understand that culture either. On the other hand, however, a series of semistructured interviews on a fairly circumscribed topic typically does not require prolonged engagement, as it is commonly understood. Therefore, we have avoided using a number of popular dicta (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For methodological and interpretive quality in qualitative research, authors and reviewers should consult Lincoln and Guba (1985) and other well-known writings about criteria (e.g., Lincoln, 1995; Manning, 1997). In empiricism, we are concerned with threats to internal and external validity. In constructivism, these are sometimes known as research-respondent mistrust, overdirection by a priori assumptions, misunderstanding about "bias," "privileging researcher interpretations over respondents" (Manning, p. 99), and mistaken assumptions about who owns the data. Guba (1981), as cited by Manning, lists a number of strategies for dealing with these concerns. They include member check, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, dialogical conversations, internal audit, and making the inquiry product accessible. In the *Journal of Early Intervention*, merely mentioning that these or other "reliability" or "validity" steps were conducted usually will not suffice. Some detail about why and how the strategy was used will be expected. Furthermore, authors will need to explain what, if anything, was done as a result of using the strategy. In general, authors should be explicit about their methods to allow the reader (i.e., reviewer) to judge whether the data and findings are authentic.

Some qualitative experts are concerned that, in an effort to circumscribe quality in qualitative reports, we might ask for more reassurances for those manuscripts than we do for quantitative ones. Our position, however, is that quantitative methods are full of well-

established practices for reducing bias and increasing reliability (e.g., operational definitions, methods to ensure statistical power, effect size estimates, repeated measures). Because much qualitative research is conducted iteratively, with decisions made by the researcher as new things come along, the reader needs enough information to judge those decisions. Qualitative research is subjective in two important ways: The researcher serves as the instrument or the lens, and the reader serves as the reliability and validity judge. But in quantitative research, the psychometric properties of the instruments are designed to diminish subjectivity, and authors provide information on the reliability and validity of their data. Because the researchers' subjectivities are so important in qualitative research, we must therefore ask for information such as their backgrounds; even though it would probably be wise to do the same with quantitative researchers.

### ***Where Are You Coming From?***

#### ***Background***

The *Journal of Early Intervention* expects the reader to be able to see the theory and research underpinning a study as well as the credentials and philosophy of the investigators (see Patton, 1990). Too much is already known about child development, disabilities, families, and so on to accept studies that are devoid of theoretical supports. We believe it is naïve to conduct studies ostensibly with no theory guiding the selection of questions to ask, people to involve, and places to observe. Furthermore, authors are expected to refer to past research dealing with the same or similar topics (Ducharme, Licklider, Matthes, & Vannatta, 1995). A good introduction will have a strong conceptual framework, clearly presented.

#### ***What Did You Do? Methods***

The reader needs to be able to make decisions about the trustworthiness of the study, in part by examining how information was collected. *JEI* reviewers will, therefore, expect to see sufficient detail about how data were collected. Authors need to be explicit about (a) how

they selected the participants, (b) what kinds of interview questions they asked (if any), and (c) how they documented their observations (if any).

Some purists on both sides of the usually unfortunate but pedagogically useful qualitative-quantitative divide insist that *data* belong to the positivist realm. Qualitative radicals believe the term describes a restricted set of information that does not justify the openness of qualitative information gathering. Quantitative radicals could not agree more, and would prefer not to have the meaning of *data* watered down by any meaning less precise. The *Journal of Early Intervention* will be inclusive and allow the use of the term *data* for any information derived from a legitimate source. Reviewers, however, will need some assurance that a silk purse is not being made out of the proverbial sow's ear. Studies are expected to have multiple viewpoints somewhere in the analysis, such as joint investigators, member checks, "memoing," peer debriefing, and other methods of understanding the investigator's perspective.

Because these concerns are related to dependability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the author needs to provide enough "thick description" for the reader to decide whether the findings are transferable to another setting. An audit trail and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba) are some indications that the authors have attended to the dependability of their findings. On the issue of amount of data, the reviewer's judgment will have to substitute for a statistical power analysis. Generally, the fewer the number of individuals or situations in a qualitative study, the deeper the level of analysis needs to be. This is somewhat related to the amount of contact expected between the investigator and the participants.

In deciding on the quality of the methods, we are looking for evidence that

- The participants are a good match for the purpose of the study,
- The data collection procedures allowed for an authentic documentation of the phenomenon under study (e.g., the participants' "voices," what was observed),

- The intensity of data collection was appropriate for the analysis, and
- The settings were appropriate for the purpose of the study.

In sum, evaluating the quality of the methods requires enough detail about what the researcher did to collect information.

### ***How Did You Arrive at Your Findings? Analysis***

A common manuscript weakness is to say, “After concluding all the interviews, we used constant comparative analysis and arrived at the following themes.” The *Journal of Early Intervention* recognizes that many researchers now know what to say, so we are looking for evidence that careful, recursive (i.e., returning to the data source) analysis took place. This evidence will have to come in the form of detail about the analytic steps. The reader needs enough information to determine whether the findings emerged logically from the data. When authors show links from text to codes to categories to subthemes to themes, for example, it is easier to determine the quality of the research. Using one theme as an example, it is very helpful to show the trail that led to the naming of that theme. If the findings did not emerge from a coding process, authors need to describe the steps from initial thoughts about the phenomena to the conclusions. The reader needs to confirm that the findings are grounded in data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and not “made up over coffee” (Ferguson, 1998).

The manuscript also should show how, at some point or points during the analysis, the researcher checked the findings or conclusions or themes with the data source. This could be done by returning to the data, such as by building confirming tables and disconfirming tables or returning to the data source, such as by having participants verify them. If authors used member checks, they need to be explicit about the level of information given to participants (e.g., transcripts, interview summaries, theme list, manuscript), what kind of response they received, and what they did with the responses. In sum, deciding on the quality of analysis will rest with having sufficient infor-

mation to decide whether a logical, thoughtful, informed process was used to arrive at conclusions (themes, findings). As a guideline, it will usually take more than one page to describe the analysis adequately.

### ***What Does This Mean? Implications***

Although qualitative studies can be useful for description, especially description unbounded by an empirical framework, the *JEI* policy is that description alone is not sufficient. It is tempting to give detailed examples of successful discussions (which are not required to be separated from results, as described below), but the ultimate criterion is that the findings need to be explained in terms of how they advance theory. Findings also can be explained in terms of advancing practice, but the link to theory or other research is required.

### ***Additional Points***

**Format.** Qualitative reports do not have to follow the conventional APA format of introduction, method, results, and discussion. The elements of these sections, however, usually contain our four main criteria listed earlier (background, methods, analysis, and interpretation). These criteria will all need to be explicitly addressed. Creswell (1998) has examined five qualitative traditions: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies, and each has a different approach for reporting studies. This explains why *JEI* is flexible in its format for qualitative reports.

**Mixed methods.** Whether qualitative and quantitative methods are used separately or combined as a mixed method, *JEI* insists that high quality is maintained. Therefore, if some quantification of qualitative data occurs (e.g., groups are compared on frequency of a code), then standards for quantitative analysis come into effect—even if the manuscript is generally qualitative. Similarly, if a mostly quantitative study includes a qualitative component, the standards described here would come into play. Mixing methods is not an excuse for abating quality in either method.

## Conclusion

The *Journal of Early Intervention* will continue to be a home for qualitative research in our field just as it is a home for other types of research. These guidelines are designed to provide a framework for ensuring that the quality of research published here is high. We want to be sure that families, university students, practitioners, policy makers, teaching

faculty, and researchers are exposed to information they can trust. Reviewers are henceforward required to consider these guidelines when evaluating manuscripts reporting qualitative research. We hope these guidelines also will be useful to authors. A summary of key indicators is shown in the box below. We are committed to encouraging the timely publication of high-quality research.

### Key Indicators of Quality in Reports of Qualitative Research

Does the manuscript explicitly describe

- The theoretical background for the study?
- How the participants were selected?
- What the participants' role in the research was?
- How the data were recorded?
- How intense the data collection schedule was?
- How the data were reduced?
- The steps for arriving at findings or themes?
- How often and thoroughly the original data were consulted during analysis?
- How participants or others contributed to verifying information?
- The level of information (e.g., transcripts, summaries, manuscripts) used in member checks, if member checks were used?
- The relationship of the findings to theory and other research?

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