

Editorial: Getting out of our heads through qualitative research in healthcare

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Welcome to Volume 8 of *Qualitative Research in Medicine & Healthcare*. Reading through each article, I am struck by a conundrum that, in a way, defines qualitative research. Qualitative research generally takes a phenomenological perspective, presenting and analyzing the “lived experience” of participants—a term that I see more and more and chafe against every time I read it. How can we really present the experience of anyone while necessarily imposing a variety of filters required to present that experience to our readers? That includes determining which topics are worthy of study, what questions we ask, who our participants are, and how and what to analyze. Furthermore, we are constrained by traditions and biases in our various academic disciplines. I would even go so far as to say that even autoethnography is necessarily distanced from experience, if only by the slippage imposed by written language.

Does this mean we shouldn't bother? Not at all. It means that we need to be fully cognizant and honest (starting by being honest with ourselves) that the enterprise of good qualitative research, on balance, is less about getting into the heads of our participants and more about getting *out* of our own heads. And at its best, qualitative research is about inspiring readers to get out of their heads,

too. It's about using evidence that we find in the words, thoughts, and behaviors of others to make a case that challenges our and our readers' assumptions about *everything*—in our situation, with an emphasis on health, broadly constructed.

Of course, as qualitative researchers, we do have to do our best to understand the experiences of our participants and to accurately represent those experiences on the page. But, as I often say to my students, that doesn't mean that participants have to agree with our interpretations; however, they should be able to read our work and understand where we are coming from. In other words, our work should be accessible to our participants, which I am sad to say, is far less the case with quantitative scholarship. (All the worse because it is nearly impossible to interest undergraduate students in reading most quantitative research, and—due to overabundance of jargon—a good bit of qualitative research as well.)

At its worst, qualitative research can be a means toward reaffirmation of a priori theoretical and/or ideological principles, from questions asked straight through to conclusions drawn. As a teacher, writer, and editor, such writing is at best a curiosity to me.

One of the pleasures of my role as *QRMH* editor is corresponding with and sometimes chatting with authors online. I always make myself available to authors whose work is rejected or whose work requires substantive revision, and sometimes, authors take me up on it. Given the nature of qualitative research, I don't have any easy fixes, but I do have my usual tropes if needed: describe the context, don't leave block quotes hanging, explain the methodology, and so forth. The most interesting conversations are those where I challenge authors to get out of their heads. I want authors to be surprised by what they see and to be productively vexed by data that doesn't fit their mental framework. So often, it is a matter of moving past description to interpretation.

Ideally, it shouldn't be a facile interpretation that merely confirms what authors already suspected. Indeed, qualitative writing should be an adventure into the unknown, or at least, the unknown from the perspective of the author(s). And as with all great adventures, the journey can fundamentally change the adventurer. Good qualitative research is a means of outgrowing the confines of our thinking. Although I have yet to see it, I look forward to the day where I see a qualitative researcher reject their entire theoretical foundation based on the evidence gathered.

I am confident that every article in this issue was an adventure for its author(s), forcing them to think past wherever they started. In fact, I know it, because I was witness to multiple drafts, and I have spoken directly with at least one of the authors. In this issue, as well as many others, I saw how authors went back to the data, back to the scholarship, and back to their colleagues to rethink where they were coming from and where they were going. Then, they plunged back into their data, not taking the data anywhere, but letting the data take them.

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Wendy Rieman's exploration of social support following broken marriage engagements is a case in point. Further, it is testament to the value of the excellent reviewers at *QRMH*. As I recall, the entire section toward the end on health implications was added in response to reviewers who asked Dr. Rieman what exactly is "health?" How far does the term flow in human experience and discourse? Responding to these questions, Dr. Rieman reconceived potential application of her work in a much wider range of contexts that she initially considered.

Perhaps the work that comes closest to explicating "lived experience" is Shweta Jain Verma's article on conducting field research in multilingual settings because it is a reflection on the author's own fieldwork. Dr. Verma meticulously describes how his approach shifted with his experience as he and his research team learned through trial and error how to build rapport and trust among patients in different regions of India and in different types of clinical settings.

Similarly, the article by Mark Finney, Jacqueline O'Reilly, and Claire Williams is largely—though not entirely—an analysis of their own diaries kept during the most intense months of COVID. Reading their work, we can sense genuine surprise at the findings that, despite (arguably *because of*) their privileged status as knowledge workers, they "were not exempt from the social, professional, and emotional consequences of the pandemic and that their efforts to enact resilience were unevenly successful" (p. 1). Interpreting patterns amidst their data, Finney et al. achieve the sort of challenge to "common sense" that I appreciate so much among qualitative research, disproving any assumption that knowledge workers had a comparatively easy ride during the worst of the pandemic.

Pushing the envelope even further, Roni Diamant-Wilson and her co-writers further challenge assumptions that, of all settings, healthcare facilities would be most receptive to LGBT, transgender, and gender-diverse patients' needs. I say that because, well, healthcare facilities are supposed to *help* people. Although I would classify this work as a mixed-methods approach, Diamant-Wilson, et al. do what qualitative research does best by building their case through compelling stories told by research participants, making a solid case for the risk of healthcare denial faced by transgender and gender-diverse patients—particularly those of color. The surprising element in this case, however, is that a temporal dimension divides experienced discrimination among the sample, with older LGBT participants more likely to describe past discrimination and transgender and gender-diverse patients reporting current disconnection from

care. Research such as this reminds us of substantial differences in conditions faced among specific populations.

Finally, special kudos to Julie Homchick Crowe whose article on debating claims pertaining to public health is the first pedagogical article published by *QRMH*, designed specifically for use in the classroom. In its emphasis on evidence and critical thinking, this article brings me back to where I started this editorial. Crowe's classroom activity asks students to critically analyze arguments used in the construction of health claims. Ideally, students will not only learn the immediate requirements of the lesson, but also use the skills taught to continually re-evaluate their own positions on health policies, practices, and beliefs. I hope that we see more classroom applications of critical thinking skills in upcoming issues of *QRMH*.

The best qualitative research is a journey beyond our initial, often self-imposed, limitations. We don't know where it will take us or what we will find along the way. Articles in this issue demonstrate curiosity and eagerness to broaden—even change—authors' perspectives, perspectives of their readers, and perspectives of their students. Enjoy the adventure.

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