

The Qualitative Methodology Exposure and Experiences of Journal Reviewers: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract—Reviewers are the gatekeepers of knowledge dissemination and promote the scientific validity of the research. However, authors often receive questionable feedback on qualitative manuscripts. Thus, this qualitative descriptive study sought to explore the qualitative knowledge and experiences of reviewers of psychology journals. A purposive and snowball sample (n = 27) of psychology journal reviewers completed an online questionnaire, and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Reviewers felt their postgraduate education, reading, and the process of reviewing qualitative articles equipped them to review qualitative manuscripts. Less than half of the reviewer's published articles were qualitative and male reviewers published more than females. Despite not expecting authors to have the same level of research skills, reviewers still experienced authors as unskilled and biased, creating difficulty in accepting and reviewing qualitative articles. The applicability of the qualitative method and recommendations in preparing qualitative manuscripts for reviewing are reported.

Keywords—Journal reviewers, psychology, qualitative research, research method, research skills.

I. INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH plays an integral role in shaping our understanding of phenomena. According to [1], the sufficient capacity to collect, assimilate and apply knowledge has become an imperative competence to succeed in the research world. This competence allows to understand others' research and conduct scientific and rigorous research [1]. To increase the credibility of research articles and journal impact factors [2], a peer-reviewing process of researchers' work is conducted. Editors select reviewers based on their methodological expertise and their research topic interests [2]. Consequently, reviewers and editors are seen as the publishing community's gatekeepers [3] and review articles as unpaid professional services. This service impacts researchers' careers as publishing papers, typically in high-impact journals, make or break a researcher's career [3], which places reviewers under enormous pressure [4]. Amid this pressure, review quality has been widely criticized [5], and researchers often receive questionable feedback on their submitted manuscripts [6]. Literature indicates that this is especially true for manuscripts employing qualitative methods [7]. The qualitative method is a natural form of research that uses words to conduct a meaning-based analysis of interactions in

their natural settings [8]. Due to this naturalistic inquiry, the field's pluralism of qualitative research has developed over the years [9] and causes complications for reviewers as the goals and procedures of qualitative psychology are diverse [10]. These complications can occur despite reviewers having qualitative knowledge, whereas they could still lack knowledge of the specific design employed in a manuscript [9]. Reviewers who lack methodological knowledge can reject robust studies and publish weak studies [9], which debilitates the development of research methods.

According to [11], reviewers of qualitative manuscripts should determine if the qualitative method, data collection and analysis were used appropriately. The fit between the research question and the specific qualitative research design is also considered [12]. However, a lack of transparency has been found in qualitative studies due to the researcher's lack of knowledge of the applied method [13], further complicating the reviewing process. Researchers are essential in increasing the impact of qualitative research in psychology [14]. They are called to educate themselves in using the method and to police their research area more effectively [13]. Reviewers are expected to decline manuscripts or contact editors if a manuscript utilises a method they are not well-versed in [2]. Those reviewers who lack adequate methodological knowledge may also utilise published criteria for evaluating the use of research methods (e.g., [9]).

A recent review of reviewer comments on qualitative studies found reviewers mostly commented on manuscript writing rather than methodology [15], thereby posing a threat to the advancement [15], and the publication of qualitative studies [16]. Reference [15] determined reviewers' qualitative research feedback by mapping their recommendations to authors. Reference [9] listed reasons for complications in reviewing qualitative methods as training, various method goals, knowing what we do not know and editors' uncertainty about which reviewer comments to trust, which can influence the amount of published qualitative articles. Reference [17], for example, found that only 27.5% of articles in 11 sports and exercise psychology journals utilised qualitative research methods. Reference [18] found limited qualitative studies published in the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology. Reference [19] found that qualitative studies published in five international psychology journals over ten years only made up 4.79% of the methodology used. Concurrently, [20] investigated the use of qualitative studies in three South African journals and found this method occurred

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less than quantitative, mixed and other non-empirical methods of the published studies and were omitted entirely during specific years of publication. These last two studies, [19] and [20], also highlighted the lack of description of the qualitative methodology used in their sampled articles and how the author and reviewer's knowledge can debilitate the method's use.

Peer reviewing is seen as the pillar of scientific publishing, and while inconsistency is found in the process, it is still seen as an effective practice [21]. It is, therefore, imperative to explore this practice to limit inconsistencies and the negative effect reviewing can have on methodological knowledge, review outcomes, the research community, psychology knowledge generation and methodological development. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the qualitative research method exposure and experience of psychology journal reviewers through two research questions:

- What exposure do reviewers have to the qualitative research method?
- What are the experiences of reviewers with the qualitative research method?

II. METHOD

Participants

Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants who were [22]: current or previous reviewers of manuscripts employing the qualitative research method for International Scientific Indexing (ISI) listed journals as well as those listed on Scopus concerned with the topic of psychology or social sciences. Participants were also required to have reviewed at least one qualitative article within the last ten years, regardless of whether that manuscript was accepted. Communication to partake in the study was through LinkedIn, Facebook and emails to appropriate participants that fit the inclusion criteria. The final international sample consisted of 27 participants (male = 55.5%, female = 40.7%, other = 3.7, missing = 3.7%) with a mean age of 46.4 years. The majority of participants were White (66.6%), Asian (14.8%), Indian (11.1%), African (3.7%) and Other (3.7%). Most participants had a PhD (85.7%), a graduate/honours degree (11.1%) or a Master's degree (3.7%).

Instruments

Data collection occurred through an internet-based survey hosted by Typeform.com containing demographic and three open-ended questions [23]. The demographic questions focused on creating a view of reviewer education and exposure to the qualitative method, and open-ended questions allowed participants the freedom to describe their experiences [23]. The open-ended questions were:

- What has stood out to you in reviewing qualitative manuscripts regarding your research skills and those of manuscript authors?
- Based on your reviewing experience, how do you view the quality of qualitative research publications?
- As a reviewer, what can you recommend to qualitative researchers when writing their manuscript for publication

concerning manuscript sections (e.g. introduction, problem statement etc.)?

Procedure

A qualitative descriptive research design was applied through straightforward descriptions of participant experiences without a theoretical or conceptual analysis [24], [25]. Pragmatism served as a philosophical underpinning, aiming to include the best research method for a specific research question [26]. By following this philosophical assumption, the researcher sought to solve a practical problem in the real world [27], namely gaining insight into the qualitative reviewer exposure and experience to improve the reviewer process. After receiving ethical clearance, participants were invited to take part in the study. Communication with potential participants included the inclusion criteria, expectations and the link to the online survey. Upon clicking on the link, participants were directed to the informed consent form on which an 'agree' option was presented at the end of the document to provide consent. Only after selecting 'agree' were the participants able to access the questionnaire, which they completed in their own time at a convenient place. A Microsoft Excel sheet with the anonymized data was generated by Typeform.com and analysed by the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

This study forms part of the anon for review with ethics clearance reference number: NWU-00019-21-A4.

Data Analysis

Frequency counts represent demographics, and Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyse open-ended questions. TA provides a systematic method of organising data to identify patterns of meaning in a specific research question [28], is applicable to the qualitative descriptive design [24] and consists of six phases [28]. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and re-reading the responses. Second, she generated initial codes relevant to the research question. After codes were created, the researcher developed themes by clustering similar codes together. These themes were reviewed or revised as needed during the fourth phase and then named in the fifth phase. The final phase included producing a report on the themes.

III. RESULTS

Demographic frequencies indicated in Table I show that qualitative reviewers review a mean of 5.4 qualitative articles a year. However, this number can differ vastly between reviewers. The frequencies also show that from the total number of articles participants published, only 44.3% were qualitative articles in the last ten years. Differences in publication frequencies were found between the male and female groups, whereas males reported publishing 12% more articles in general and 7% more qualitative articles than the female group.

Regarding reviewer training and exposure to the qualitative method, Table II indicates that most participants received

qualitative training during their postgraduate education and reading. Participants stated that this amount of education equipped them to review qualitative manuscripts.

TABLE I
REVIEWING AND PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE

Question	Mean	Mode	Highest	Lowest
Number of qualitative research articles you have reviewed in the last ten years	54,08	3	1000	2
Number of research articles you have published (national/ international journals) in the last ten years	30	15	130	0
Number of qualitative research articles you have published (national/international journals) in the last ten years	13,3	1,2,5,6	100	0

TABLE II
QUALITATIVE METHOD EXPOSURE AND TRAINING

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I regularly attend qualitative research method workshops or seminars	18.5%	22.2%	24%	18.5%	18.5%
Qualitative research was part of my postgraduate training	3.7%	7.4%	11.1%	44.4%	33.3%
My education in research methods has equipped me to review qualitative manuscripts	11.1%	11.1%	18.5%	22.2%	37%
Qualitative research was part of my undergraduate training	44.4%	18.5%	14.8%	14.8%	7.4%
I read articles and literature on qualitative research to develop my skills	3.7%	14.8%	7.4%	29.6%	44.4%

TA created the following themes and sub-themes for the three posed qualitative questions.

Q1. What stood out to participants in reviewing qualitative manuscripts concerning their research skills and those of manuscript authors:

Reviewer Skills

Reviewers as Experts

The few participants who deemed themselves to be experts in the qualitative method made it clear that they do not expect authors to have the same level of expertise: "I am a well-known qualitative research methodologist, and I am frequently asked to review articles in my area(s) of expertise. Thus, I do not expect authors to have my own level of expertise. Instead, I am looking to see if the articles I review meet the typical standards for qualitative research in journal articles" (P18). Another participant added that despite "...having good deal of methodological expertise, so I almost always review[ing] articles where the authors have less experience than I do. That said, I am generally impressed with the research skill of the authors that I review" (P8). One reviewer also notes that they have "...noticed that the research skills varies quite a bit across both reviewers and authors" and due to their own expertise they can "...be more flexible in my ability to read papers in light of the methods, traditions, and epistemological approaches that the authors were using" (P14).

Reviewing as an Education Tool

Participants also saw reviewing manuscripts as a tool to enhance and reflect on their own qualitative research knowledge and skills. Participant 21 humbly states that reviewing qualitative manuscripts showed them that: "...neither I nor the authors were very well versed in qualitative research methods". Other participants add that "[g]enerally I find that reviewing qualitative manuscripts helps me keep abreast of latest trends in methods and theory and occasionally I employ those ideas in my own research and writing" (P6) and "[r]eviewing is the best education for me" (P10).

Qualitative Research as a Method

Participants stated that acting as a reviewer for qualitative manuscripts accentuated "[t]he vast number of different techniques that can be used" (P19), that "[q]ualitative research is just as powerful as quantitative research" (P17) and that the method can provide "[g]reater depth than some quantitative studies" (P20).

Author Skills

Lack of Qualitative Methodology Skills

Generally, participants indicated that authors lacked basic qualitative methodology skills, which led to manuscripts that confused different qualitative designs, had misaligned methodology and lacked rigour. Participant 11 highlights this notion by stating, "There is a definite lack of knowledge and skills in terms of qualitative paradigms, design and methodology". The lack of skills can be seen when "...people confused the designs, or that these designs are so alike that they don't really differ" (P27) or that "the approach, design and methods are not always scientifically aligned" (P23). Moreover, "rigor [is] also lacking regarding qualitative articles published and submitted for review" (P23) as authors "...assume that methodological rigor is not necessary. If anything, it is MORE relevant, and I have desk-rejected papers if they said: "we did a qualitative analysis, and we looked for certain themes"" (P24).

This lack of rigour or description of the applied qualitative methodology also prohibits replication studies: "Authors often do not describe data analysis in enough detail that one can replicate the study" (P6). However, one participant did mention that the type of journal they review manuscripts for influences the quality of submissions: "I usually review for journals that emphasise qualitative research, so the skills of those authors are relatively high. I seldom encounter research that I considerably inferior" (P3).

Author Bias

Some participants also noted that they'd experienced authors being biased in choosing qualitative methods and in

their interpretation of findings when reviewing qualitative manuscripts. One participant felt that some authors "...sometimes seemed to choose a qualitative design based on being uncomfortable with statistics" (P25) despite the possibility that the "qualitative approach was not always the best match with the research question" (P25). Whereas other reviewers "...often question the interpretation and deductions made by qualitative researchers. It sometimes feels that confirmation bias is evident in many studies" (P26) and "I've often seen papers where the researchers "spin" material so their previously decided conclusions are reached" (P14).

Q2. Participants' view of the quality of qualitative research publications based on their reviewing experience:

Views on publication quality varied as some participants saw qualitative publications to be "awful to excellent... I rate less than 20% of the articles I review as either "accept" or "accept pending minor revisions" (P18) or even stated that "[s]ome is great, but generally the standard is lower than quantitative or mixed methods research" (P22). Participants listed various aspects that they thought influenced the quality of qualitative publications, such as journal type, author knowledge or experience and the perception of the qualitative method in research.

Journal Quality

Some participants stated that from their experience, journals determine the quality of qualitative publications as: "[s]ome journals that publish relatively few qualitative articles tend to accept work that I, as a reviewer, would have rejected" (P3). Whereas Participant 2 believes that "[i]n high indexed and high impact factor journals, it [qualitative manuscripts] is good".

Author Knowledge and Experience

Most of the participants stated that authors' knowledge on qualitative methods influenced the quality of publications as "[o]ne often get the impression that authors don't have thorough knowledge of qualitative research" (P6) whereas "[t]hose who are more experienced tend to produce higher quality work" (P16).

Qualitative manuscripts written by quantitative researchers also seem to contribute to lower quality publications: "[o]ften those that are most compromised are written by people who have great familiarity with quantitative methods but do not understand that the logic to justify rigor is different in qualitative approaches" (P14). Rigor was seen as an important factor in manuscript quality by other participants as well whereas low quality articles "...lack of science and rigor" (P23) and high quality articles were "...rigorous and especially good" (P14).

Perception of Qualitative Method

The perceived value of the qualitative method in research also seemed to play a role in evaluating the quality of qualitative publications: "The quality is no different from quantitative although there are perceptions that qualitative articles and manuscripts don't have value" (P17). Participant 24 highlights this point by adding that: "some researchers

think of it as second grade, and act like that, underreporting everything". Participant 26 expresses their own perception of the value of qualitative research by stating: "[m]ost of the time I am not convinced that the research is valid or really contributes to the body of knowledge. I would prefer if a mixed method is used and results are verified by a quantitative analysis as well". In contrast, other participants found the method "...interesting..." (P12) and saw "...qualitative research as innovative and important, also for generating hypotheses" (P5).

Q3. Recommendations to qualitative researchers when writing their manuscript for publication, with regards to the following sections:

Title and Introduction

13% of the participants commented that the "[t]itle should grab attention and reflect the intent of the article" (P16), "can have more depth" (P6) and "should be representative of [the] study and least complicated" (P2). The introduction was elaborated on by 25% of the participants. For participant 8 the introduction is "where too many articles lose their direction...new scholars in particular do not understand that this should indeed be a "problem statement" that develops the reasons for researching this topic and for using these methods to do that research". Participant 22 adds that "don't be afraid to cite quants work and why it cannot fully address the issue at hand" to support the use of the qualitative method. Participants saw the introduction as the point where authors "should provide context and invite the reader to read on" (P16).

Problem Statement

The problem statement was the third most commented on ($n = 29\%$) aspect in participants' recommendations and was deemed important by participant 18 when reviewing as it is "the first thing I look for is a solid problem statement". This is where authors are recommended to use "... 'qualitative terminology' e.g. 'subjective experience of...'. Indicate clearly what you are doing" (P6) and "clear statement of the problem and how the current research will address it" (P22).

Methodology

38% of the participants provided comments on the method section of manuscripts which as reviewers they "...specially..." (P10) focused on and recommended that it "...should be robust and crystal clear" (P2). Participant 19 adds that authors should provide "proper support for methodological choices" thereby "make[ing] sure that they select the right qualitative method for their research questions" (P21). Authors are further encouraged to "provide clear methods, data procedures, coding [as] reproducibility is critically important" (P24). Lastly, participant 26 recommends an author should link their methodology throughout their study "I often miss this golden thread from methodology to collection to analysis" (P26).

Data Collection and Analysis

21% of participants made recommendations for conducting

data collection and analysis. Participants encouraged authors to follow "...standard guidelines" (P2) be "...transparent about coding decisions" (P24) as data analysis can be "not very precise as it would be good if data can be represented clearly in other forms other than lengthy writings" (P12).

Writing a Report

21% of participants mentioned aspects that they find authors struggle with when writing their report such as: "...losing track of the research goals in the Results section the subsequent Discussion section" (P8). It is recommended that authors "[r]ead widely and keep your citations up to date... you don't want a reviewer to catch you out on sloppy references" by participant 16. Participant 13 recommended the "APA Journal Article Reporting Standards for qualitative research" and "Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology task force". Lastly, participant 27 recommended using "...exploring as the action verb in your title. Tables always help to represent your results. Be careful to generalise results".

General Recommendations

58% of participants provided general recommendations. The most common general advice was that authors often forget that the "golden thread" (P6 & P26) or "scientific alignment between the title, problem statement, research question, aim, approach, design, methods and rigor should be emphasised" (P23). Participant 23 reminded that "[q]ualitative research, as with any other approach, should also be research question led, and not method led. Sometimes it seems the method was decided upon, and everything else are 'forced' to fit the method" (P23). Lastly, participant 25 recommends that authors be "...realistic in the generalisation of your results. Also, don't choose a qualitative approach merely based on a fear for a quantitative approach".

IV. DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to explore the qualitative research method exposure and experience of psychology journal reviewers. Reviewers received little qualitative method exposure during undergraduate training and workshops but instead based their qualitative knowledge on their postgraduate training and reading. This finding is acknowledged by previous research where undergraduate studies in psychology, despite including research methodology classes, face various challenges in transferring knowledge effectively [29]. The qualitative findings of this study further show that reviewing manuscripts improved participants' understanding of qualitative methods, thereby lending support to reviewing qualitative manuscripts as a possible educational tool for enhancing qualitative skills.

The publication experiences of reviewers in this sample varied greatly, as most published only a handful of qualitative articles in the past ten years, and some reported publishing vastly more. Moreover, less than half of the samples' overall publications were qualitative articles. According to [19], qualitative research is published comparatively less than its quantitative counterpart in psychology journals. Older

research reported that conducting, publishing or funding a qualitative study is more challenging than other studies [30]. Reference [31] added that despite the growth in qualitative publications, it has also become apparent that the quality of qualitative manuscripts has declined with a growing trend of submitting qualitative work to low-impact factor journals. Findings from the current study concur that reviewers accept very few manuscripts of the qualitative articles they receive due to low quality, echoing the experiences of journal reviewers in other fields, see [32]. Findings also show that reviewers experienced higher-quality qualitative articles when reviewing for higher-impact journals.

Various articles and checklists have been devised to uphold quality in qualitative studies, e.g., [33]. However, according to [34], quality in qualitative research should not be seen as adhering to a list of rules but should instead be upheld by utilising toolkits that support transparency and rigour whilst allowing for creativity and novelty. Furthermore, reviewers identified authors' knowledge and experience as key determining factors in article quality and can be seen as central to their author recommendations. As reviewers, they discerned authors' knowledge through their ability to: link all aspects of the qualitative methodology throughout their manuscripts (golden thread), support the use of the qualitative method for their study, distinguish between different designs, awareness of researcher bias, transparency and basic scientific writing skills. Reference [35] explored graduate student perceptions about qualitative research, and these students expressed difficulty in conducting many of the areas mentioned above of qualitative research. Therefore, this study supports older research by [16] in that advanced training in qualitative methods is still needed for students and researchers. Furthermore, students from research of [35] also expressed fears of being biased in their studies, which reviewers from this study reportedly encountered.

Specifically, two types of bias were reported: confirmation bias and method bias. Confirmation bias, where researchers interpret information in a way that supports their beliefs or pre-established conclusions [36], was reported in this sample as authors "spinning findings" to meet their predetermined conclusions. According to [34], bias in research is common and can only be solved by being a devil's advocate for your research. Therefore, reviewers from this study implore qualitative researchers of all levels of expertise to uphold trustworthiness through rigour and transparency of the research processes.

Method bias was referred to as devaluing the method's contributions or choosing qualitative research regardless of the research question by both authors and reviewers. According to [37], bias can "infect" the peer-reviewing process, which this study supports as some reviewers stated that qualitative research is limited in their personal opinions, are evaluated against quantitative standards or authors choose qualitative methods to avoid quantitative statistics. Some of these opinions may be due to a lack of reviewer experience and exposure to qualitative methods based on reviewing and publication frequencies. This finding concurs with [15], where

quantitative mindset reviewers may endanger the growth of qualitative research. At the same time, some scholars do not consider qualitative research as scientific due to the lack of generalisability, replication and narrative nature [31], which was also found in this study. A negative view of a research method may lead to unjust rejections or simple suggestions to revise manuscripts [2]. Therefore, editors must select reviewers based on their topic interests and expertise. However, the responsibility to fend off bias also lies with the authors, as it is their responsibility to provide rigorous manuscripts that support their use of the qualitative method for their research and transparency on their research methodology. This responsibility is supported by this study's findings, as reviewers raised concerns about submitted manuscripts' transparency and methodological rigour. Concerns of transparency echo through the psychology field, as articles often lack the methodological steps to allow for replication studies [38].

The following limitations should be considered: Firstly, as data were collected through an online questionnaire and no probing for further elaboration was possible. Other methods of data collection, such as individual interviews, may provide more depth. Secondly, the current sample was small and homogeneous; thus, generalising to other groups is not encouraged, and further studies are recommended that may provide more depth in diverse samples.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite the variability in reviewer experiences, most reviewers expressed the need for educating qualitative researchers to improve the quality of qualitative manuscripts and the reviewing process. Educated researchers may also address some of the bias, rigour and transparency difficulties experienced by reviewers. Reviewing qualitative manuscripts was also essential in advancing researchers' skills, which should be considered an educational tool. The recommendations made by reviewers also add some depth to those made by [12] and could be consulted by authors to improve the quality of their manuscripts. Further research on how to enhance reviewing quality is encouraged.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data are available at
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.20445141>

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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