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Title: Registered reports for qualitative research

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Standfirst: Researchers are disincentivized from conducting urgently needed qualitative research, argues Veli-Matti Karhulahti. He recommends the adoption of registered reports for qualitative research as a remedial course of action.

Main Text:

The Martian Institute or Foundation for Furthering Science has received several applications regarding the study of "football," all trying to explain what this earthly game is about. Among the different proposals, the committee agreed that applications focusing on numbered individuals were strongest—after all, numbers create a firm basis for quantification. One good application proposed to research the role of invariances, with the preliminary finding that the total sum of all numbers remained somewhat constant through the game. Among the lowest-scoring proposals, in turn, one team suggested to talk to the creatures and ask questions like "What is the purpose of the game?" The unanimous rejection called out epistemology. Why should one believe retrospective verbal reports?

This satire by Rozin (Rozin, P. (2001). Social psychology and science: Some lessons from Solomon Asch. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *5*(1), 2-14.) commenting on the methodology of social psychology two decades ago remains relevant. As the evolving sophistication of statistical methods and open science practices are now reforming science at large, qualitative research—which is highly useful also in *preliminary* measurement development—persists as an *after*thought. This applies especially to my own domain of research: gaming-related health. Thousands of related publications since the 1980s are now culminating in "gaming disorder," which will be the first technology use mental disorder by the World Health Organization under addictive behaviors in the ICD-11 (https://icd.who.int/en). Having talked to many people with such problems over the years of my (still early career) research, I do not doubt that some will benefit from the upcoming services of medical gaming experts. Meanwhile, I am astonished by the lack of scientific interest toward these help-needing people *as people*. Even today, the field continues to operate with a dearth of knowledge regarding the lives of people with gaming-related health problems.

In the 1990s, Kimberly Young collected valuable reports of "internet problems" from actual help-seeking people. Nevertheless, the field became soon defined by Young's internet addiction questionnaire instead—based on pathological gambling in the DSM-IV—ultimately leading scholars to excessively apply checklists in survey studies. This practice continues until today. The ICD-11 now offers its own criteria, which have already produced several new checklists. At the same time, it is largely unknown how and why do people end up being treated for their gaming. Because the scientific community lacks an understanding of how to *describe* and *identify* those with gaming-related health problems, even in advanced studies gaming disorder remains mostly defined by *being in* treatment, and not the problems *for which* one is being treated.

Scarce in-depth interview research on gaming problems, which could help describing and identifying cases, relates to Rozin's previous criticisms. Many top journals perceive qualitative approaches, such as interviews, still lacking in rigor. I can list at least two reasons for this.

1. Interview studies, especially with clinical populations, rarely share data. Compared to surveys, for instance, anonymizing interview transcripts is laborious and often requires an archive to collaborate with and control reuse. Additionally, whereas numeric data are relatively easy to interpret across languages, non-English transcripts entail extensive backtranslation work. In brief, the expenses, expertise, and labor required to open qualitative data exceed the limits of most researchers, making it impossible for them to publish in top journals that want open datasets.

2. Interview studies have different epistemologies, some of which are difficult to peer review. Even if the data are available, the results may not be reproducible like statistical ones are. Multiple experts can draw different inferences from the same data with neither being clearly more correct. And because interpreting interview data can be very time-consuming, good editorial decisions demand major journal resources—yet still not necessarily reach the levels of confidence that the reviews of statistical manuscripts do.

The above have contributed to a vicious meta-scientific cycle. When qualitative, descriptive findings typically carry less institutional value than statistical ones, it makes sense for researchers to direct their careers toward the latter. It is likewise more profitable for universities to invest in researchers with statistical expertise who have priority access to journals that yield the greatest financial (and status) gains for the organizations themselves. Ultimately, these incentives hinder the development of qualitative meta-science. For instance, few scholars pursue solutions to the challenges of qualitative data sharing, which nonetheless appear resolvable if sufficient energy and effort is exerted.

One promising approach for tackling these issues is the registered report format that directs attention to data sharing and epistemological clarity before a study has started. Authors, editors, and reviewers can collectively identify problem points during planning, which helps overcoming many of the pitfalls that qualitative designs might present in traditional publication review. Despite these benefits and the potential to move toward better methodological inclusivity, only few journals currently accept qualitative registered reports (https://www.cos.io/initiatives/registered-reports). Along with the increasing acceptance of descriptive research, registered reports could serve as a controlled means for stimulating further development of qualitative science and knowledge that—in addition to explaining what things *are* and *mean* to people—also help producing more robust instruments for statistical inference.

References

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