

The qualitative research article under scrutiny

Revista Ciência & Saúde Coletiva receives articles that adopt a qualitative approach in order to analyze health issues. Regrettably, many such articles are refused. In this editorial, we share our experience as editors and we venture to offer a few tips to authors.

We provide here a list of the most common problems cited by the peer reviewers: the use of generalist titles to address specific issues; incomplete abstracts, i.e. failing to specify the topic of the research, the details of the research plan or method, data analysis or discussion and conclusions drawn; key words that do not tally with the appropriate terms for the area; introductions that fail to contextualize the theme nationally and internationally; a purely formal description of the method used without highlighting how the issue is addressed, the place of study, the universe and search tools, the field work and how the analysis was performed; presentation of the results without straying from the description of empirical data, except for a formal categorization; descriptive discussion with little analytical detail and without debating empirical data and concepts; and conclusions that often tend to feature one of two problems: either they continue the discussion even citing bibliography, or they stray from the subject, raising new issues that have no bearing on the subject under scrutiny.

We tentatively put forward seven suggestions for initiating a dialogue with the authors: (1) think carefully about the title, so that it is a brief summary of the issue addressed in the text. Get the reader interested in your text; (2) provide a cogent abstract listing the objectives, methodology, results and conclusions. Remember that when readers are interested in your article, they will scan the title and abstract: motivate them to read it by providing pertinent information; (3) list key words that are part of the terms established for the topic to facilitate bibliographical research; (4) concentrate on an introduction that, at the very least, provides an illuminating bibliography at national and international level on the discussion of the research question addressed and, where necessary, put it in context in terms of time and space; (5) give a methodological description of how your results were obtained, citing the approach used and how you established the space and scope of the research; how you decided on the search and sample group, if necessary; specify what tools were used to conduct the data collection work; how the material was ordered, classified and analyzed, not omitting to mention the ethical procedures; (6) when making a qualitative analysis, we suggest two alternatives: describe the data categorized according to the relevance established by the investigators in the field at the same time as they are discussed in depth and in breadth; or, first, present a description by means of classifications that arise from the categories brought in from the field, and then initiate a discussion which is based on the empirical facts, but shows the conceptual coherence of what has been stated. This stage is often the most challenging aspect in the articles received by the journal. In the analysis, it is necessary to start with the empirical findings and then elaborate theories from the facts ascertained. In other words, it is necessary to overcome what Theodor Adorno called “duplication of data” and Pierre Bourdieu referred to as the “illusion of transparency.” The secret is to *extrapolate from within the data and not from outside* what it is that makes any local problem part of universal problems: showing how its roots lie in the world we live in and its transformative possibilities; (7) Lastly, in the concluding paragraphs, return to the research question, avoid inserting further quotes, present your own interpretation of the findings, thereby inviting the readers to delve further into the issues you raised.

We are aware that it is not easy, and may even appear audacious, to put forward suggestions like these. Our idea is to enter into a frank and transparent discussion among editors, peer reviewers and authors, so that we can invigorate a key area to public health such as that which qualitative research undoubtedly is.

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