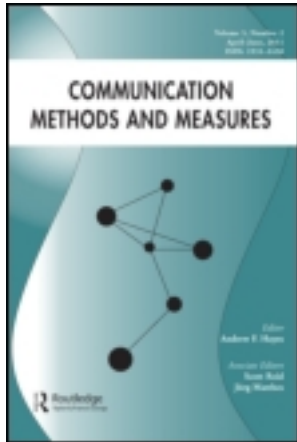


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Interview and Focus Group Research: A Content Analysis of Scholarship Published in Ranked Journals

Robin E. Jensen ^a, Katheryn Christy ^b, Patricia E. Gettings ^c & Louise Lareau ^c

^a University of Utah

^b The Ohio State University

^c Purdue University

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SHORT REPORTS

Interview and Focus Group Research: A Content Analysis of Scholarship Published in Ranked Journals

Robin E. Jensen
University of Utah

Katheryn Christy
The Ohio State University

Patricia E. Gettings and Louise Lareau
Purdue University

Two qualitative methods, interviewing and focus groups, guide scholarship in a range of fields, yet evaluation of such work has long been riddled with complications. Scholars have called for the investigation of norms in qualitative research design to offer evaluators and qualitative scholars alike additional tools for judging and justifying specific methodological choices. In answer to this call, we analyzed the content of articles ($N = 13,670$) published in top-ranked journals in communication, public health, and interdisciplinary social science from 2005 to 2009. Findings revealed that the typical interview study had approximately 30 participants (*median* = 27). Focus groups had slightly more participants (*median* = 36) spread across an average of six groups. Only approximately 25% of all interview and focus group studies ($N = 1,865$) reported participants' mean age, and only about 19% reported participants' race/ethnicity. These findings offer a point of departure for discussions about standards in qualitative research.

Finset (2008) recently delineated some of the major challenges of evaluating qualitative research, such as the difficulty in assessing whether a given study actually reached saturation during sampling, that is, the point at which no further themes emerge (Flick, 2002), and the difficulty in adequately reporting data collection methods and procedures that are unique or unprecedented and therefore require much by way of descriptive overview and justification. Others have echoed

his concerns and identified corresponding challenges related to the lack of commonality across diverse qualitative methods, the inherently subjective nature of inductive analysis, and the largely ungeneralizable inferences regarding qualitative data analysis that seem to resist standard evaluative benchmarks (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Dixon-Woods, Shaw, Agarwal, & Smith, 2004; Kuper, Reeves, & Levinson, 2008; Stige, Malterud, & Midtgarden, 2009).

One way that scholars have attempted to assuage these challenges and concerns has been to establish standardized criteria for research methods and procedures that, if followed, are said to constitute the foundation of robust qualitative scholarship (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Tracy, 2010). Another method that scholars have used to alleviate the burden of qualitative evaluation involves identifying key values that can be used to organize a research study's design and that can be reported, thereby functioning as proof of a study's reliability and validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Davies & Dodd, 2002; Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Thomas, 2006). Although these efforts have been widely applauded, they have also been criticized as antithetical to the qualitative mission of contextualization and attention to unique subjectivities (Bochner, 2000; Howe, 1990).

What scholars have yet to do to address these challenges is to track the commonalities and norms in recently published qualitative work, thereby contributing to what Seale (1999) has labeled scholarly "methodological awareness" informed by the "careful consideration of research studies done by others" (p. 465). In the present study, we aim to close this gap in the literature by quantifying recently published interview and focus group research from three areas of study (i.e., communication; public, environmental, and occupational health; interdisciplinary social sciences) in terms of variables such as method, sample size, and make-up of participants. By offering a quantitative picture of what published qualitative research includes and reports, this content analysis offers evaluators and qualitative scholars additional tools for assessing the rigor of qualitative research studies and, potentially, for identifying ways in which published research may be lacking.

In addition, the utility and growing popularity of qualitative methodology has led to increased funding opportunities (Christie & Fleischer, 2010; Smith, 2008). Yet qualitative researchers applying for funding (state, federal, or otherwise) are confronted with a unique challenge. Many funding agencies require that applicants define and defend particular methodological choices, such as sample size, in advance. Quantitative researchers address this requirement by performing power analysis (designed for a priori estimation of sample size based on estimated effect). Qualitative researchers, however, do not have a similar method for a priori justification as they tend to set sample sizes during the data collection process. For example, the saturation criterion posits that researchers continue to collect data until new themes cease to arise (Flick, 2002). Thus, qualitative researchers generally cannot explicate their final sample size until the data collection process is complete. This does not mean that the saturation criterion (or similar approaches) is flawed as it facilitates a responsive, context-driven data-collection process. Yet the problem of how to accurately estimate a qualitative sample size remains.

In this respect, qualitative researchers and evaluators would benefit from a content analytic snapshot of normative sample sizes in recently published interview and focus group studies, a snapshot that could be used to estimate sample size targets according to publishing norms. Ultimately, our attempt to delineate what journals have deemed publishable in the recent past will aid in efforts to consider and redefine ongoing standards of excellence within qualitative inquiry.

METHODS

Sample

The sample for this study comprised all research articles published from 2005 to 2009 in the top 10 Institute for Scientific Information–ranked journals in three areas (communication; public, environmental, and occupational health; and social sciences–interdisciplinary), as well as *Qualitative Health Research*. For cases in which a journal was listed in two or more areas, the journal was counted toward only the category for which it had been granted a higher ranking. If the content of a journal was not available to the researchers via their institutional libraries, then the next journal on the list was included within the sample. For a complete list of journals, see Table 1. To be coded, an article needed to focus on either new research or a secondary data analysis (i.e., review articles and editorials were not included). The final sample consisted of 13,670 research articles.

Coding

Coding was performed by four trained coders (three graduate students and one undergraduate student). Prior to in-depth coding, articles were coded to determine whether they satisfied initial criteria for inclusion in the sample. For the purposes of this project, the studies that were

TABLE 1
Coded Journal Articles by ISI Content Areas

<i>Content Area</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Social Science— Interdisciplinary</i>	<i>Public, Environmental, & Occupational Health</i>
Journals	<i>J. of Communication</i>	<i>The Future of Children</i>	<i>Annual Review of Public Health</i>
	<i>J. of Health</i>	<i>Patient Education & Counseling</i>	<i>Tobacco Control</i>
	<i>Communication</i>	<i>J. of Sex Research</i>	<i>American Journal of Public Health</i>
	<i>Public Opinion</i>		
	<i>Quarterly</i>		
	<i>J. of Computer-Mediated Comm.</i>	<i>Human Relations</i>	<i>J. of Epidemiology & Community Health</i>
	<i>Human Communication</i>	<i>J. of Safety Research</i>	<i>J. of Adolescent Health</i>
	<i>Research</i>		
	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Qualitative Inquiry</i>	<i>AIDS & Behavior</i>
	<i>Research</i>		
	<i>Communication Theory</i>	<i>American J. of Evaluation</i>	<i>Social Science & Medicine</i>
	<i>Cyberpsychology and</i>	<i>Evaluation Review</i>	<i>Nicotine and Tobacco Research</i>
	<i>Behavior</i>		
	<i>Public Understanding of</i>	<i>J. of Risk Research</i>	<i>Psychiatric Services</i>
	<i>Science</i>		
	<i>Telecommunication</i>	<i>Qualitative Health</i>	<i>Prevention Science</i>
	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Research</i>	

Note: Top journals from 2008 Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) rankings. *Qualitative Health Research* was also coded as it is a journal that publishes top-tier qualitative research.

considered eligible for inclusion were qualitative studies that used focus groups or interviews as the primary methodology. Ten studies using a combination of both interview and focus group data were excluded from the analysis.

If an article was determined to be ineligible for inclusion, coding for that article stopped. If an article was coded as eligible for inclusion, then the following information was coded: qualitative research method (focus groups, interviews), number of participants, number of focus groups (if applicable), number of participants per focus group (if applicable), mean participant age, standard deviation of participant age, participant age range, and percentage of Caucasian participants. These coding categories were generated via recent qualitative guidelines for research reporting (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Reliability

During training and reliability assessment, the same randomly generated 178 articles were coded by all coders. Instances of disagreement were resolved through group discussions under the supervision of the principal investigator. At the conclusion of the training period, coders had attained a Krippendorff's alpha of .83 for determining whether an article was an interview study, a focus group study, or ineligible for inclusion.

RESULTS

Overall, 13,670 articles were examined in this study, and 13.6% ($n = 1,865$) of the articles were classified as interview or focus group studies. Most of the studies eligible for inclusion reported interview research (77.9%; $n = 1,452$), followed by focus group research (22.1%; $n = 413$).

Seventy-five percent of interview studies were published in public health journals, followed by studies published in interdisciplinary social science journals (20%) and communication journals (5%). Public health published more articles over the sampling frame (9,023), but communication also published fewer interview studies proportionately ($67/2,226 = 3.0\%$) than public health ($1,092/9,023 = 12.1\%$; $\chi^2 = 159.73$, $p < .001$) or interdisciplinary social science ($293/2,421 = 12.1\%$; $\chi^2 = 134.16$, $p < .001$). For focus group studies, 72% were published in public health journals followed by studies published in interdisciplinary social science journals (17%) and communication journals (11%). Proportionately, communication published fewer focus group studies ($47/2,226 = 2.11\%$) than public health ($295/9,023 = 3.27\%$; $\chi^2 = 8.12$, $p = .004$) but not interdisciplinary social science ($71/2,421 = 2.93\%$; $\chi^2 = 3.16$, $p = .075$).

For interview studies, one study reported an abnormally large sample size ($n = 1,511$), which makes the median (27) a better representation of the studies as a whole (see Table 2). Seventy-five percent of interview studies had fewer than 45 participants and half had 27 or fewer. As a whole, the distribution of the sample sizes was positively skewed. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was no significant difference in sample size across disciplines, $F(2, 1370) = 2.48$, $p = .09$.

Focus group studies generally had more participants (*median* = 36) than did interview studies. Seventy-five percent of focus group studies had 61 or fewer participants and half had 36 or fewer. The distribution of the sample sizes was positively skewed. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was no significant difference in sample size across disciplines, $F(2, 345) = 1.37$, $p = .26$.

TABLE 2
Number of Participants by Methodology and Discipline

	<i>Interview</i>				<i>Focus Group</i>			
	<i>Com</i>	<i>I-SS</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Com</i>	<i>I-SS</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Mean</i>	56.76	43.38	38.58	40.35	65.74	51.63	49.61	51.80
<i>SD</i>	189.80	73.65	49.41	67.37	88.88	75.73	42.61	56.65
<i>Median</i>	20.50	28.00	26.00	27.00	38.00	30.00	38.00	36.00
<i>Mode</i>	16	20	20	20	16	21	32	32
<i>Range</i>								
Low	4	2	2	2	6	3	4	3
High	1511	971	700	1511	480	424	230	480
<i>Quartiles</i>								
25%	13.75	18.00	16.00	16.00	19.00	16.00	19.00	19.00
50%	20.50	28.00	26.00	27.00	38.00	30.00	38.00	36.00
75%	48.25	48.00	45.00	45.00	71.00	54.00	62.00	61.50
<i>Skewness</i>	7.62	9.04	6.65	11.91	3.32	3.77	1.78	3.62
<i>SE</i>	.30	.15	.08	.07	.38	.30	.16	.13
<i>Kurtosis</i>	59.20	102.81	66.28	208.26	12.72	15.32	3.52	18.80
<i>SE</i>	.60	.30	.15	.13	.74	.60	.31	.26
<i>n</i>	67	293	1092	1452	47	71	295	413

Note: Mean, median, and mode number of participants by methodology and discipline in published research from top-ranked journals. Com = Communication, I-SS = Interdisciplinary Social Science, PH = Public Health

The typical focus group study had approximately 9 focus groups ($mean = 9.38$) with a median of 6. Seventy-five percent of focus group studies had 10 or fewer focus groups, and 50% of focus group studies had six or fewer. Again, the distribution of sample sizes was positively skewed ($skew = 4.18$, $SE = .13$), and there was no significant difference in focus group size across disciplines, $F(2, 340) = 0.06$, $p = .95$.

Approximately one quarter of interview and focus group studies reported a mean age for the sample, and less than half reported an age range (see Table 3). Only about 20% of interview and focus group studies reported any information about the race or ethnicity of participants in the sample. Of those reporting race/ethnicity data, about 30%–50% of the sample was identified as White or Caucasian.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a previously unavailable overview of recently published qualitative scholarship in top-ranked journals representing three fields. This quantification offers a point of departure for discussion about standards in qualitative research, as well as opportunities for the justification of methodological choices and reporting. The findings suggest that the majority of interview and focus group studies that have been deemed publishable over the past few years by top-ranked journals tend to draw from sample sizes of approximately 27 for interview studies and 36 for focus group studies, with the majority of focus group studies drawing from 6 individual

TABLE 3
Study Characteristics by Methodology and Discipline

	<i>Interview</i>				<i>Focus Group</i>			
	<i>Com</i>	<i>I-SS</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Com</i>	<i>I-SS</i>	<i>PH</i>	<i>Total</i>
Mean age	32.08	43.01	42.35	42.17	36.71	50.58	35.48	38.90
<i>SD</i>	14.06	15.77	15.46	15.55	19.57	14.79	14.84	16.50
% that reported mean age	17.90%	26.62%	27.01%	26.51%	25.53%	29.58%	21.70%	23.49%
% that reported age range	28.36%	43.32%	47.34%	45.45%	55.32%	36.62%	47.80%	46.73%
Mean % of White participants	53.65%	53.85%	47.82%	49.81%	36.96%	38.11%	27.74%	32.80%
% that reported race	14.93%	27.99%	17.03%	19.15%	34.04%	32.39%	15.59%	20.58%
<i>n</i>	67	293	1092	1452	47	71	295	413

Note: Age, age range, and percent of studies reporting racial information by methodology and discipline in published research from top-ranked journals. Com = Communication, I-SS = Interdisciplinary Social Science, PH = Public Health.

groups. It should be noted that this does not necessarily mean that these are the appropriate or best numbers in any specific case, or that all qualitative studies should be designed so as to achieve these same targets. Nevertheless, these normative findings suggest that editors and reviewers for top-ranked journals tend to deem these numbers appropriate. In this light, these quantifications may offer some legitimization for future studies reporting similar sample sizes and focus group numbers.

Although no significant differences were detected in terms of number of participants or reporting practices among communication, interdisciplinary social science, and public health journals, it is nevertheless worth considering the finding that 12% of studies featured in interdisciplinary social science and public health journals were interview studies while only 3% of studies published in communication journals were interview studies. By contrast, approximately 2%–3% of studies published in each discipline's journals featured focus group research. One could legitimately argue that these percentages are quite low across the board and that this content analysis must catalyze an increase in/improvement of not only the reporting practices of qualitative scholarship but also the qualitative scholarship that is submitted to ranked journals and ultimately considered for publication. In the field of communication specifically, the very low percentage of interview studies featured in ranked journals (especially in light of higher percentages in ranked journals representing other, corresponding fields) may function as an invitation to contemplate why so few interview studies are being published and what steps must be taken to alleviate this discrepancy in methodological diversity.

Correspondingly, an aspect of this study's findings that evaluators and qualitative researchers may find particularly troubling is the high percentage of published work that failed to report on study participants' race/ethnicity or age. Although this study found that the mean percentage of Caucasian participants across studies was approximately 50% for interview studies and 30% for focus group studies, this finding is relatively inconsequential because only about 19% of all studies reported any racial information concerning participants at all. Less than 50% of studies reported participants' range of ages, and about 25% reported participants' mean age.

Given that qualitative studies tend to emphasize contextualization and individual subjectivities, this lack of information about participants' demographics necessarily limits readers' ability to understand, evaluate, or make use of the results. In this respect, those evaluating qualitative research studies must begin requiring qualitative researchers to incorporate demographic information into their research reports, including, but not limited to, participants' ages, age ranges, and races/ethnicities. Theoretical work on the major role that individuals' intersectional identities play in shaping their unique experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Crenshaw, 2003; Shields, 2008), demonstrates the necessity of situating qualitative findings within the context of participant demographics.

That being said, the present study's coding scheme was not comprehensive in its scope and did not account for the reporting of other important demographic information such as participants' gender, socioeconomic status, or level of education. Future content analyses on recently published qualitative studies should not only include this information but should also expand coding to include a wider range of qualitative methodologies and more specific methodological variables such as the length of interviews and focus groups and the number of participants per focus groups. Such work will offer qualitative scholars and evaluators a more comprehensive picture of what other published scholarship tends to report. Even more importantly, this research program will provide continued opportunities for discussion about what published qualitative scholarship should be reporting.

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