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Navigating the messy swamp of qualitative research: Are generic reporting standards the answer?

A review essay of the book *Reporting Qualitative Research in Psychology: How to Meet APA Style Journal Article Reporting Standards, Revised Edition* by Heidi M. Levitt

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Abstract

In this book review essay of Heidi Levitt's *Reporting Qualitative Research in Psychology* I consider whether generic reporting standards for qualitative research, such as those laid out in this book, can support good practice in qualitative research, particularly for those new to the "messy swamp" that is qualitative research. As a qualitative methodologist with a particular interest in thematic analysis (TA), I reflect on whether these reporting standards can support good practice in reflexive TA. One of the particular challenges that non-positivist TA researchers – including reflexive TA researchers – encounter is reviewers and editors asking for evidence of coding reliability or evidence of achieving saturation. I explore whether these reporting standards will help reflexive TA researchers navigate such requests. One of the complexities of the messy swamp of qualitative research is that positivist approaches and concepts developed in an environment hostile to qualitative research values, and that helped qualitative approaches gain a foothold in quantitative dominated

disciplines, now sit alongside approaches and concepts developed in qualitative paradigms that reject positivist norms and values. The question *Reporting Qualitative Research in Psychology* raises is whether generic reporting standards can coherently contain both positivist and non-positivist approaches to qualitative research?

I remember feeling both surprised and excited when I heard that US qualitative psychologists were forming a grouping within the American Psychological Association (APA) – surprised, because at the time, from the outside, US psychology seemed irretrievably hostile to qualitative research, and especially to non-positivist qualitative research, and excited because this had to mean good things for the standing and visibility of qualitative research in psychology here in the UK. The Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP) was established within Division 5 of the APA in 2011. In 2013, SQIP established a task force – led by clinical psychologist, LGBT and psychotherapy researcher, Heidi Levitt – to develop recommendations for the design and review of qualitative research – the task force report was published in the Society’s journal *Qualitative Psychology* in 2017 (see Levitt et al., 2017). Around the same time an APA working group Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research (JARS–Qual), also led by Levitt, was tasked with developing reporting standards for qualitative research in psychology (see Levitt et al., 2018). This working group was formed in response to increasing use of qualitative methods in US psychology, and the challenges facing journal reviewers unfamiliar with qualitative methods, or a particular qualitative research tradition, to evaluate manuscripts submitted for publication. The resulting Reporting Standards were published in the *American Psychologist* in 2018 (Levitt et al., 2018). These have also been influential in UK psychology (see Shaw et

al., 2019). Levitt has subsequently co-authored reporting standards for critical qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2021) and design and reporting standards for counselling and psychotherapy research (Levitt et al., 2021). Levitt's new book *Reporting Qualitative Research in Psychology: How to Meet APA Style Journal Article Reporting Standards* is intended to supplement and expand on the existing APA journal article reporting standards.

In this review essay, I explore whether generic reporting standards like these can support quality practice for researchers navigating the "messy swamp" of qualitative research. I use this term to capture both the tumult of overlapping, intersecting and divergent methods and traditions that constitute qualitative research in psychology (and beyond) – what Madill and Gough (2008, p. 254) dubbed "a fuzzy set" - and the vast array of texts offering students and researchers new to the field a slightly, or considerably, different pathway into the field. As a qualitative researcher and methodologist with a particular interest in thematic analysis (TA), I consider whether these reporting standards can support – what we consider to be – good practice in reporting reflexive TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2020). One of the challenges I most frequently encounter as a non-positivist qualitative researcher and TA practitioner is reviewers and editors seeking to impose postpositivist quality standards on my research – with questions about when saturation was reached, how bias was avoided and how accuracy of interpretation was established all too common. Will these reporting standards help me to "argue back" against such requests?

The book aims to support researchers in achieving methodological integrity when reporting their research. Methodological integrity is the flagship concept that "emerged" from the work of the SQIP task force. It echoes earlier notions of "fit" and coherence (Willig, 2013), as principles of qualitative research design, where the research aims and purpose,

philosophical, theoretical and methodological assumptions, and methods of a study cohere together (Chamberlain et al., 2011; Tracy, 2010). *Methodological integrity* similarly captures when:

research designs and procedures (e.g., autoethnography, discursive analysis) support the *research goals* (i.e., the research problems/questions); respect the researcher's *approaches to inquiry* (i.e., research traditions sometimes described as world views, paradigms, or philosophical/epistemological assumptions); and are tailored for *fundamental characteristics of the subject matter and the investigators*. (Levitt et al., 2017, pp. 9-10)

Levitt describes methodological integrity as "one of the most effective standards for measuring rigour" (p. 29) in qualitative research. Methodological integrity is a unifying concept for ensuring and judging quality – variously understood as trustworthiness, credibility or validity – in all forms of qualitative research. It consists of two components – fidelity to the subject matter (connection with the phenomena being studied) and utility of research contributions (the effectiveness of the research in achieving its goals and addressing the research questions). Methodological integrity holds that there isn't one correct way to conduct qualitative research – it focuses on contextualised rationales for selecting and adapting procedures. I have found methodological integrity to be a useful concept in my own research and methodological scholarship. Moreover, it's strategically very helpful for qualitative psychology that an influential professional body like the APA takes the view that flexibility in qualitative quality standards is essential, and that different traditions need to be judged on their own terms.

But given this acknowledgement of diversity, are *general* reporting standards useful and necessary? Are general standards even *possible* – when many qualitative researchers acknowledge the partial, located and positioned character of qualitative researching. Does the same apply to our methodological scholarship – is it also partial and positioned? *If* general standards are possible, are they likely to improve the quality, the *methodological integrity*, of reports of qualitative research? The utility of generic quality criteria and standards has been passionately debated over the years, with critics highlighting the difficulty of developing truly generic – what Tracy (2010) calls “big tent” – criteria (e.g., see Elliott et al., 1999; Reicher, 1999). Such standards are usually at least partly shaped by the authors’ unacknowledged assumptions about, and positioning within, qualitative research. Perhaps now is a good point to confess that I am rather fond of a quality checklist! I have co-authored two with Virginia Braun for reflexive TA (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). We also draw on all the standards and criteria cited here in our research and methodological scholarship, but we hold them *lightly*, as tools for reflecting on our practice, and as useful rhetorical devices for when disagreeing with editors and reviewers. We also tweak these criteria to better suit our values and purpose – Elliott et al.’s (1999, p. 221) “owning one’s perspective” has become in our work “striving to own one’s perspectives” to acknowledge the multiplicity of our perspectives and the incompleteness of reflexivity (see Sparkes & Smith, 2009).

Levitt argues that general reporting standards *are* needed – we can't only rely on quality criteria and reporting standards for particular methods – because qualitative researchers don't always use established or defined methods in their research and they may develop new, or adapt existing, methods. Thus, the goal of these reporting standards is to provide guidelines for reporting and evaluating qualitative research "that are not bound to specific

sets of procedures but that articulate underlying principles" (p. 30). Throughout the book, and in keeping with the principle of methodological integrity, she stresses the diversity within qualitative research and that one size doesn't fit all when it comes to reporting qualitative research: "There are many places in the reporting standards where we indicate that flexibility should be honoured" (p.6). There is a tension here, however, as Levitt positions the reader both as needing guidance and as knowing what's best for their research – "As a researcher, you know your research best" (p. 6). It's down to researchers to judge how to apply the reporting standards to their own research – "the JARS-Qual guidelines... do not specify the specific procedures that should be reported for every qualitative method (which would make them unwieldy). Instead, researchers are expected to familiarise themselves with the methods they are using and to report in a manner that represents their features" (p. 24). I am struggling to imagine a reader who would both have the skills, knowledge and experience to negotiate the messy swamps of approaches like grounded theory or TA, with long histories and varied practice, and to judge what they should take and leave from these standards, and yet still *need* these standards to report their research effectively and with integrity. But that may reflect differences in context. Levitt highlights the lack of training in qualitative research even at the graduate level in the US, and the fact that she discovered qualitative research after training as a quantitative researcher. By contrast, my undergraduate degree in the 1990s at a UK university included teaching on qualitative methods and a qualitative dissertation. And, apart from one wretched SPSS course, my PhD training, also in the UK, in the late 1990s and early 2000s was entirely focused on qualitative, and particularly critical qualitative, research.

These differences in our personal histories reflect wider differences in the histories and traditions of qualitative research in the US and the UK. When communicating with

qualitative researchers in the US, I often feel like we are speaking different languages. I understand why the 15 example studies used in the book were all published in US journals – this is primarily a book written for a US audience – but it is impoverished by its narrow focus on US qualitative research, and the failure to draw more on the rich and diverse traditions of qualitative research in other countries. Do these differences in context mean standards considered by some to be generic in the US don't translate well to the UK context? There is certainly plenty of good advice here for reporting qualitative research. For instance, Levitt uses the image of qualitative research as story-telling to introduce the book and some of the individual chapters, emphasising the need to engage and entice readers and to tailor your story so it will be accessible to and resonate with your particular readership. She highlights the use of evocative data quotations, plays on words and references to popular culture as catching and compelling paper titles. She encourages researchers to consult the journal they are planning to submit their work to, to find examples of research using similar designs/traditions to get a sense of what the journal deems appropriate formatting and presentation. But, the problem with these general reporting standards, like generic quality standards more broadly, is that they are *not* entirely generic.

Levitt works with, but doesn't fully explicitly articulate, a definition of qualitative research that is broad and all-encompassing. Her overt definition in Chapter 2 is of qualitative research as including a variety of methods and traditions with a concern for "natural language and other forms of human expression" (p. 20), that centre an iterative research process (this perhaps best describes grounded theory methodologies; see Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020), that present "findings" in a way that "emphasizes their context and situation in time" (p. 21), and highlight the role of the researcher in producing findings. Through the book, however, she refers to methods that range from the postpositivist (e.g.,

consensual qualitative research [CDQ]) to the critical (e.g., discourse analysis), and to a wide expanse of philosophical frameworks (e.g., postpositivism, constructivism) and research techniques and practices (e.g., demonstrating consistency through interrater reliability and consensus, analytic schemes and coding categories emerging from analysis). Comparatively little known in the UK, US counselling psychologist Clara Hill's CQR methodology seeks to circumvent researcher "bias" by capturing the research teams' agreement "on the best representation of the data" (Hill, 2012, p. 10) and reflects a deliberative qualitative positivist tradition that I particularly associate with the US context. Whereas discourse analysis, in varied forms, strongly rejects both positivist traditions (whether quantitative or qualitative) and experiential qualitative traditions premised on a view of language as a transparent window onto the world of human experience and sense-making (Wiggins, 2016; Willig, 2013). Critics have questioned the possibility of developing coherent and meaningful quality/reporting standards that encompass both experiential and discursive traditions (e.g., Reicher, 1999). Is seeking to also incorporate qualitative positivism overreaching?

In defining qualitative research, I find Kidder and Fine's (1987) distinction between small q and Big Q qualitative helpful - as it demarcates qualitative research conceptualised as tools and techniques (small q), typically used within the (psychology) disciplinary dominant postpositivist paradigm, and qualitative research conceptualised as providing both tools and techniques and underlying research values/principles (Big Q). I view small q qualitative research in the UK as reflecting largely the lingering influence of postpositivism and quantitative research values - small q research seems rarely to be conducted knowingly, where the researcher deliberately embraces postpositivism in preference to, and with full understanding of, other qualitative research values and paradigms. I question whether it is helpful for these two very different conceptualisations of qualitative research to be brought

together in this book, and whether such an expansive definition of qualitative research facilitates methodological integrity. I perceive the lingering influence of postpositivism in many of the credibility checks and reporting practices discussed such as demonstrating consistency through interrater or intercoder reliability and consensus, member checking or participant validation, triangulation, and the inclusion of quantified information (for critiques of these practices, see Braun & Clarke, 2022; Morse, 1997; Varpio et al., 2017).

Levitt does acknowledge that these are not universally applicable but leaves the reader to work out *why* they are not, and *whether* they might be relevant for their research. This is where I think this book has potential to lead researchers more to methodological incoherence than to methodological integrity. Without a thorough-going explication of the ethos and values embedded in particular research traditions and practices, it's challenging for researchers new to the messy swamp that is qualitative research to determine which practices cohere with their chosen approach. This is especially the case, if they are not using an established tradition or are adapting existing techniques, or using flexible methods like thematic analysis, where there is much, typically unacknowledged, diversity, and considerable conceptual and design thinking is needed to use this method with integrity (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

To further add to the potential for methodological incoherence, and particularly to the imposition of postpositivist standards on non-positivist qualitative research, some of the language and concepts Levitt uses are not, in my view, generic and often lean towards the postpositivist, but are not positioned or acknowledged as such. She frames the introduction to a report as an "identifying the gap" literature review – whereas I understand it more expansively and openly as a contextualisation and rationale for the research, something that

may encompass literature, but that also locates the research in relation to relevant theory and contexts (see Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The “identifying the gap” version of an introduction is for me a hang-over from the quantitative reporting tradition, one that is often necessary in contexts less familiar with Big Q qualitative (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). She refers to “results” and predominantly to “findings” - the latter I find particularly problematic as it can imply that themes/categories etc. pre-exist the analytic process, they are “diamonds scattered in the sand” (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 740), or “fossil[s] hidden in a rock” (King & Brooks, 2017, p. 220), and the researcher’s role is one of discovery. I prefer the heading “analysis” over findings or results in a research report to capture the reporting of themes (or categories/discourses etc.) that are conceptualised as *created* by the researcher at the intersection of the data, the researcher’s philosophical assumptions and all they bring to the analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Themes in this rendering are not ontologically “real” things but interpretative stories the researcher tells about their data.

In the book, researcher “influence” isn’t typically framed as an inevitable feature of qualitative research, but rather as potential and it seems to be often understood as “bias”, as something that needs to be managed and controlled. The reader is asked in Chapter 3 (p. 32) in relation to “perspective management”: “Have you reported how you managed the influence of your perspective in data collection... on the production of meaning in the analysis?”. They are provided with the following examples of ways to address these questions: “Describe methods of evaluating and limiting how your perspective might influence data collection (e.g., memoing, bracketing) ... the analysis ... Describe seeking participant feedback on findings. Describe methods of achieving consensus.” Although it is acknowledged that researcher perspectives may “structure the analysis” (p. 33), the focus is on “perspective management”, rather than a conceptualisation of subjectivity as a resource

for qualitative research (Gough & Madill, 2012), and reflexivity as a tool for reflecting on *how*, not whether, the researcher “influenced” their research. This framing of researcher involvement as “perspective management” again leans towards the postpositivist and sits uncomfortably with Big Q notions of researchers and participants co-constructing meaning together during data collection (e.g. Wilkinson, 1988).

Saturation is presented an example of the rationale for the decision to cease data collection but is typically the only example that is ever provided - which may lead a reader less well versed in the diversity of qualitative research to not unreasonably assume this is an important criterion for many different forms of qualitative research, whereas it has been widely criticised and rejected by many (e.g., Dey, 1999, Low, 2019, O’Reilly & Parker, 2012), myself included (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). Indeed, Levitt defines saturation both in terms of no new information and also in a way that is more in keeping with the traditional grounded theory conceptualisation of theoretical saturation, but doesn’t explain for the reader the differences between the more tightly defined originator concept “theoretical saturation” and the more loosely defined notion of saturation as information redundancy (or “no new” themes, codes etc.) that has developed from this. She notes that saturation conceptualised as no new information has “gained broad acceptance in the field” and the procedures associated with it are “now routinely incorporated into other qualitative methods” (p. 25). To not draw the reader’s attention to critiques and contestation here for me seriously limits the usefulness of this book in supporting and promoting methodological integrity. I like Varpio et al.’s (2017) analysis of concepts like saturation, triangulation and member checking as postpositivist/realist-friendly concepts that were strategically deployed for qualitative research to gain a foothold in quantitative dominated disciplines but have now become baggage weighing down qualitative research and limiting its development and

flourishing *as* qualitative research. These types of critiques are not referenced by Levitt, which means the definition of qualitative research that underpins this book is both all-encompassing and yet also exclusionary, creating an image of diversity and harmony that conceals, what I perceive as, the messy swamp of contested practice that is qualitative research in psychology.

Levitt does acknowledge different rhetorical styles in reporting qualitative research – providing the examples of an objectivist style where “researchers reported in an impersonal manner without revealing biases or self-interest in order to convey a stance of independence between the researcher and the scientific process” (p. 137), and a constructivist style which “tends to discuss the ways in which findings developed in relation to the researcher’s perspectives, cultural assumptions, and expectations” (p. 137). The objectivist style is the dominant reporting style in quantitative research, one most psychologists are trained in. Although she views the constructivist style as becoming increasingly recognised and favoured, she notes that because psychology “is in transition in terms of accepting and understanding qualitative methods” (p. 139) researchers may need to choose between using terminology that is more widely understood versus terminology that better reflects the approaches they are using. She also encourages researchers to think through the language they use and highlights reporting strategies that “reveal misunderstanding of qualitative methods” (p. 21). She uses the term “sample” as an example here to refer to your participant group/dataset “when you did not use sampling theory to estimate the population” (p. 21), something that I've been guilty of in previous writing.

There is of course another role for reporting and quality standards – a strategic one, where researchers use such standards as rhetorical shields when encountering reviewers and editors less familiar with, especially non-positivist/Big Q, qualitative research. And it is the strategic goals of the book that are perhaps its greatest strength for qualitative psychologists outside of the US. Levitt encourages readers to use the book to help them explain their reporting decisions to reviewers or editors (I would add examiners too). I've already seen how this book can be used effectively to do that. Notes for reviewers like "there is no agreed-upon the minimum number of participants for a qualitative study" (p. 11); "it may not be useful for researchers to reproduce all of the questions they asked in an interview, especially in the case of unstructured or semistructured interviews as questions are adapted to the content of each interview" (p. 13) will no doubt be invaluable for researchers wrangling with the notorious Reviewer 2. Her argument that reporting formats need to change to better facilitate the methodological integrity of qualitative research is also powerful. She argues that journals should permit longer word counts for qualitative articles and give authors the option of placing supplementary materials online.

Levitt acknowledges that these reporting standards are likely to evolve and that they may reflect unacknowledged assumptions – "I hope that any lapses in our work are corrected over time" (p. 145). As I was reading I wanted to know more about Levitt, more about her training and experiences as a qualitative researcher. Methodologists often fail to locate themselves, to acknowledge the positionality and partiality from which they write, which is ironic given that we often make proclamations about the importance of researchers striving to own their perspectives. Levitt acknowledges that "as someone who was first trained in quantitative psychology, I find I often slip into this form of writing as it has become a natural for me. It can take some effort to become aware when I am lapsing into an objectivist

rhetorical style” (p. 139). I would have liked to have seen more examples of what she regards as common problems in published research - a few of these are mentioned incidentally throughout the book (such as data collection questions being used as themes/categories in Chapter 6), but it would be helpful for readers to understand what an experienced qualitative researcher/reviewer/editor like Levitt sees as common problems in published research. It would also tell us more about her positionality and research values.

In summary, if I think of the method that I am most familiar with - TA – without expert supervision and teaching, it's easy to see how researchers end up bewildered about quality standards in TA. There are so many different approaches laying claim to this label, but authors rarely articulate how their approach is situated in relation to other approaches also called “thematic analysis” – I know I am guilty of this, and we have consciously tried to correct this in our most recent writing about TA (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021c). But Levitt positions readers coming to this book as able to work out for themselves what reporting standards are appropriate to the approach and tradition they have used. I'm not convinced that will always be the case. How will the reader using TA determine whether or not interrater reliability, achieving consensus and participant validation are appropriate credibility checks for their research? Many texts will tell them these are appropriate credibility checks for TA (e.g., Guest et al., 2012); some will tell them they are not (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Without an explanation of the assumptions embedded in these key concepts and practices, and a sense of the positioning and stake of the author, unfortunately, this book has the potential to befuddle as much as it has to clarify. I don't think that generic standards that encompass both small q and Big Q qualitative will help qualitative researchers to navigate the messy swamp. The risk for Big Q qualitative researchers is that we will continue to be judged by the standards of qualitative positivism.

Despite the “lapses” I perceive here, I do think reporting standards have a role to play in qualitative quality, and I hope my and other critiques will contribute to the evolution of the APA Reporting Standards and particularly to the centring of non-positivist qualitative traditions, methods and techniques in future iterations of these Standards. As Varpio et al. (2017) argued, as qualitative research becomes more respected and understood in (post)positivist dominated disciplines, perhaps some of the (post)positivist language and techniques that got us to this point can be relegated to the history of qualitative research in psychology?

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