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## Qualitative research in demography: a review of the last decade

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**Is the published qualitative research  
in demographic journals fit for  
purpose?**

**Est-ce que les recherches qualitatifs,  
publies dans les revues  
demographiques sont adapte a  
l'usage?**

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[IUSSP Panel on qualitative methods in demography]

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# Objective

To systematically and transparently describe the extent, and quality, of qualitative research in demography journals.

# Rationale

- Qualitative research methods (either alone or mixed with quantitative methods) in demography has increased substantially post-2000.
- Little discussion about the quality of that research.

# Method

- Top 10 ISI citation rated demographic journals
- Pre-piloted search terms
- Coding framework (tested)
- Excluded articles
  - Without an abstract
  - Not written in English
  - Published before 1997
- All included articles coded
- Themes developed through group discussion

# Why review published (peer-reviewed) articles?

- Evaluation by peers
- The gold standard of judging the credibility of knowledge claims
- A social transformation of information into knowledge

# Results

- 3381 articles
  - 120 duplicates
- 3261 articles screened on the basis of their abstract
- 186 articles included in the review

# 1/9: Clarity of article purpose

- Without a clear idea of what the paper is setting out to do, it is hard to assess whether the methods, analyses and conclusions are achieving what they set out to do.
- Common to all research, but possibly more complex in mixed methods research.



## 2/9: Substantive focus on sexual and reproductive health

- Low representation of research dealing with fertility, mortality or migration that uses qualitative or mixed methods.
- Might this undermine future attempts to use qualitative methodologies for other topics?
  - Qualitative methods closely identified with SRH, and not considered appropriate for other demographic research questions?

## 3/9: Descriptive analysis

- Predominantly descriptive analyses
- Description is good and necessary
- BUT
- Qualitative research is not being used to its full potential in demography

# 4/9: Depth of methodological description

- Under-specification of
  - Respondent selection
  - Who collected the data
  - How respondents were accessed
  - How data were collected and recorded

They all affect the data collected

# 5/9: Context

- Rare to find context-setting information about the research
- Limited to socio-demographic description of the respondents
- Research is abstracted and decontextualised

## **6/9: Internal checking: validity, reliability and “groundedness” of findings**

- Evidence usually = quotes
- Difficult to assess whether sufficient original information presented
- Little evidence of guarding against selectivity in the use of evidence
- Few cases of presenting data that might refute the findings
- Low levels of triangulation

## **7/9: Author reflexivity / positionality**

- Rarely done
- When it is done, it is done well

# 8/9: Limitations and their implications

- Many articles did not mention their limitations
- When they did, just a description of the limitations
- Research needs to consider the implications of the limitations for findings

# 9/9: Ethics

- Very wide variation in reporting
- Often just a mention that have got ethical clearance
- Rare to find mention of when ethical issues arose during the research (and how they were dealt with)
- How was research explained to the respondents?
  - This shapes the data produced



# Some practical suggestions: journals

- Longer word limits for articles that use qualitative and / or mixed methods approaches?
  - With more words, the reviewer and reader is given the opportunity to engage critically with quality by being able to assess the research.
- More explicit guidance for reviewers (and authors) about how qualitative/mixed methods research is being assessed.
- To use self-rating of reviewers in terms of both their substantive and methodological expertise, and that these ratings are taken into account when their reports are reviewed by the editor(s).