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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).