# “Being really confidently wrong”: Qualitative researchers’ experiences of methodological incongruent peer review feedback

**Supplementary Materials**

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## Note 1: Research and reporting practices that are generally not congruent with Big Q Qualitative research: A resource for authors, reviewers and editors

Table 1 offers a resource for responding to research and reporting practices often requested, if not demanded, by post-positivist minded peer reviewers and editors, that are *not* methodologically congruent with Big Q Qualitative research (for simplicity, we just use “qualitative” in the table itself). It is intended to support authors’ navigating methodologically incongruent peer reviewer feedback. But we also encourage peer reviewers and editors, especially those less familiar with (the diversity of) qualitative research, and especially Big Q Qualitative research, to use this table to inform and guide their assessments of Qualitative manuscripts. We note that Big Q Qualitative approaches are practiced by scholars across a range of onto-epistemological traditions, from “western” through Indigenous knowledge frameworks, processes and practices, and so questions of congruence are not merely ones of *technical* alignment, but require wider conceptual alignment as well.

The practices and expectations listed in Column 1 are commonly encountered, and do *not* represent universal good practice for qualitative research – although they are often assumed to. In Column 2, we provide brief explanations of why these comments are not methodologically congruent, and reference relevant literature that provides more detailed discussion. The Table differentiates between general reporting style, and specific design related practices.

**Table 1: Twenty research and reporting practices that *generally* are not compatible with Big Q Qualitative research**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Requested practice or expectation*** | | ***Brief explanatory notes and recommendations for further reading*** |
| *Presentation of the report* | | |
| 1 | Removing discussion of ontology, epistemology and methodology | Given the diversity of qualitative research practice with regard to its theoretical foundations, it is considered good practice for qualitative researchers to conceptually locate their research (Braun & Clarke, 2023). |
| 2 | Removing theory (if not used to develop hypotheses) | Qualitative researchers engage with theory in lots of different ways, including as an interpretative lens for making sense of their data. However, qualitative research does not generally test hypotheses or use theory to develop hypotheses (see Kara, 2022). |
| 3 | Separating “Results” and “Discussion” (based on ideal of separating data and researcher’s interpretation of data) | Interpretation is inherent to qualitative analysis, meaning data and interpretation are not separable (Eakin et al., 2020). For this and other reasons, qualitative researchers often opt to combine the “Results” and “Discussion” sections of their paper (Riley, 2012). |
| 4 | Removing data extracts from the “Results”  *or*  only having data extracts in the “Results” | Qualitative analysis typically combines two elements: the researchers’ interpretative analytic commentary and data extracts. Data extracts are presented to illustrate or evidence analytic claims; in (experiential) research with participants, “they reveal the genuine voice of the participants” (Martin et al., 1999, p. 83). They are also crucial to quality practices such as “reader evaluation” (Potter, 1996). |
| 5 | Removing references to literature in the “Results” | Qualitative researchers may cite literature in their “Results” to deepen analysis, through contextualising their analysis in relation to existing literature, and/or using theory as an interpretive lens (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Kara, 2022). |
| 6 | Removing researcher personal reflection | Reflexivity is good practice in qualitative research (but reviewers/editors should not require personal disclosures). It involves the researcher considering their role in knowledge production, including personal positioning in relation to the topic and/or the participants, and the implications of their choices for knowledge production (Finlay, 2017; Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). You can expect to find personal/reflexive content in method/ology and discussion sections, and perhaps elsewhere, depending on the qualitative approach used (Riley, 2012). |
| 7 | Removing writing in the first person/expecting writing in the 3rd person | Given the inevitable subjectivity of qualitative research, and the importance of researcher reflexivity, qualitative researchers often recommend first person writing (Walsh, 2015). |
| 8 | Removing specialist terminology | Qualitative research has its own conceptual language and terminology, which should not be dismissed as “jargon,” just because it’s unfamiliar to the reviewer/editor.  Whether specialist terms may require explanation for the intended audience is a fair consideration. |
| 9 | Requesting frequency counts for themes/codes | Frequency counts imply, among other things, structured data collection and that prevalence equates to importance. Qualitative data generation is typically loosely-structured to unstructured, with participants asked open-ended questions, and without a structured approach definitive ‘frequency’ type claims aren’t theoretically justified. And ideas/concepts can be prevalent, but irrelevant, and infrequent, but important, in qualitative analysis, so theme/code frequency doesn’t inherently indicate something meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2022). |
| *Research design, processes, tool and techniques* | | |
| 10 | Adding hypotheses | Qualitative research is not designed to test hypotheses, but is guided by – often broad – research questions/aims. Qualitative researchers typically do not report what they “expect” to find. In some qualitative approaches (e.g., interpretative phenomenological analysis, Smith et al., 2022, researchers are explicitly encouraged to reflect on and “bracket off” (strive to set aside) their assumptions, approaching the research with an open-mind. |
| 11 | Discussing or rectifying the limitations of the “sample” (often positioned as small, ungeneralizable, unrepresentative, un-random, and/or not statistically significant) | Qualitative research typically prioritises the depth and richness of a dataset, rather than the size, when assessing adequacy (Malterud et al., 2016). Because qualitative analysis involves in-depth engagement with data items, datasets are often “smaller” than quantitative norms – and bigger datasets *may* be detrimental to analytic nuance/complexity (Braun & Clarke, 2016). There are no absolute requirements around dataset size (and constitution) in qualitative research, with substantial variation between different approaches in terms of adequate and ideal datasets.  Although the term “sample” is used by many qualitative researchers, this isn’t intended to evoke sampling from a population for the purpose of statistical generalisation. *If* qualitative researchers engage with generalisation, it is at the level of phenomena, not population (Smith, 2018). |
| 12 | Using power analysis/statistical tests to determine the “sample” size | It is not possible to meaningfully determine the number of participants/data items necessary for qualitative analysis using statistical tests, as such models rely on conceptual ideas which are theoretically incompatible with most qualitative analytic approaches. Qualitative-centric norms and models (such as information power [Malterud et al., 2016]) offer more congruent tools. |
| 13 | Using data saturation as a stopping criterion | Data saturation – stopping data collection when new data do not contain any new information – assumes meaning is fixed in data, whereas qualitative researchers assume meaning requires interpretation by a subjective and situated researcher. This means there is always the potential for new interpretations, and new meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Low, 2019; Varpio et al., 2017). In contrast, information power (Malterud et al., 2016) offers a conceptually-aligned guide to dataset size, which requires a subjective but informed assessment from the researcher. |
| 14 | Having a control or comparison group | A formal comparative orientation makes no sense given the open-ended, and often only loosely structured, exploratory, meaning-generating, and evolving character of qualitative research. Comparative analysis requires, among other things, structured data generation, which is rare in qualitative research. |
| 15 | Treating participant demographics as variables | Qualitative research emphasises the situatedness of meaning, so demographic information is collected to situate the participant group (Elliott et al., 1999) and display sensitivity to one of the contexts (Yardley, 2024) of the research. It supports both researcher and reader reflecting on how participants’ positions and locations shape their accounts and the knowledge produced. |
| 16 | Participants validating the accuracy of interview transcripts | One aspect of “member checking” (see Motulsky, 2021), this practice is rejected in many Big Q approaches for one or more of several reasons, not least because interviews are understood as producing situated accounts, not decontextualized essential truths of participants’ experiences. |
| 17 | Using NVivo/QDAS | QDAS is not required for Big Q qualitative – some researchers use it (sometimes), some don’t *ever* use it. It can be useful, including making some practical aspects easier (O’Kane et al., 2021), but most importantly it does *not* increase the reliability/accuracy of qualitative analysis. |
| 18 | Using coding reliability practices/measures to manage researcher “bias” (this includes: consensus coding; theme agreement; multiple coders; codebooks; rules for coding; and calculating intercoder agreement using statistical tests) | In qualitative research, researcher subjectivity is conceptualised as a resource for the research, rather than a potential threat (Gough & Madill, 2012). With qualitative research inherently subjective, objectivity is neither possible *nor* desirable, and the notion of researcher “bias” (a threat to, or distortion of, objectivity) makes no sense. A single researcher is normal and not a weakness.  As analysis is a process of interpretation of data by a subjective and situated researcher (or researchers), it cannot be tested for accuracy or reliability. Coding practices – if used – tend to be open, organic and prioritise depth of engagement and richness of insight, sometimes using theory as an interpretative lens. Intercoder agreement and other objectivity-oriented coding reliability practices are critiqued and rejected (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2022; Morse, 1997). If multiple researchers are involved, the process is understood as oriented to reflexive collaboration rather than consensus. |
| 19 | Member checking for accuracy/participants validating the accuracy *of the analysis* | This practice assumes an external reference point for judging the “accuracy” of analysis – that there is an essential (decontextualized) truth of participants’ experiences that the researcher can access if they keep their subjectivity in check (Smith & McGannon, 2017), which omits the central interpretative role and authority of the researcher in Big Q qualitative. Congruent alternatives for engaging participants in a “relational, collaborative, critical process” (Motulsky, 2021, p. 395) include member reflections (Tracy, 2010), reflexive participant collaboration (Motulsky, 2021), and reflexive member checking (Cho & Trent, 2006). However, such alternatives are *not* a requirement, and may be irrelevant or even harmful in some studies. The use of reflexive participant collaboration etc. should be carefully considered and justified (Motulsky, 2021). |
| 20 | Using a reporting checklist (e.g., COREQ, CASP) | Reporting checklists such as COREQ (Tong et al., 2014), CASP (2018) and similar checklists (e.g., SRQR, O’Brien et al., 2014) are increasingly popular, but are not wholly congruent with qualitative research and the use of any checklist should not be expected as a proxy for quality. They have been criticised for failing to acknowledge the conceptual and methodological diversity in qualitative research, and assuming practices specific to particular traditions (e.g., saturation, researcher triangulation, and member checking) are universally applicable. For Big Q qualitative, they even encourage methodologically *incongruous* reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2024a; Buus & Agdal, 2013). Some qualitative researchers reject the use of such tools altogether (Morse, 2021), while others have sought to develop more conceptually congruent reporting guidelines (e.g., RTARG for reflexive thematic analysis [Braun & Clarke, 2024b] and BQQRG for Big Q qualitative [Braun & Clarke, 2024c]). |

## Note 2: Participant information sheet

**Participant information sheet**

**Focus and purpose of the research**

We are collecting data with the aim of writing a journal article about the types of methodologically incoherent comments qualitative researchers have received on their manuscripts as part of the peer review process. The goal will be to develop a sense of common types of methodologically incoherent comments, and to critically discuss some of the problematic assumptions underpinning such comments. The ultimate purpose of this project is to write a paper that will provide a resource for authors having to respond to methodologically incoherent comments on their qualitative manuscripts, and a resource for editors and reviewers seeking to improve the quality of peer review of qualitative research. Members of the team may also give presentations at relevant academic conferences and seminars.

**The research team**

The research team includes six qualitative researchers, coordinated by [Dr Victoria Clarke](https://people.uwe.ac.uk/Person/VictoriaClarke) from the University of the West of England. The other members of the team are: [Prof Jane Callaghan](https://www.stir.ac.uk/people/266363) from the University of Stirling, [Prof Virginia Braun](https://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/people/v-braun) from the University of Auckland, [Dr Joanna Semlyen](https://research-portal.uea.ac.uk/en/persons/joanna-semlyen) from the University of East Anglia, and [Dr Andrea LaMarre](https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/expertise/profile.cfm?stref=630222) and [Dr Jeffery Adams](https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/expertise/profile.cfm?stref=386630) from Massey University.

The research has received ethical approval from the University of the West of England.

If you have any questions before completing the survey please email Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk; you can also find Victoria on Twitter @drvicclarke.

Please feel free to contact any of the other members of the team:

Jeffery Adams: [J.B.Adams@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.B.Adams@massey.ac.nz)

Virginia Braun: [V.Braun@Auckland.ac.nz](mailto:V.Braun@Auckland.ac.nz)

Jane Callaghan: [Jane.Callaghan@stir.ac.uk](mailto:Jane.Callaghan@stir.ac.uk)

Andrea LaMarre: [A.LaMarre@massey.ac.nz](mailto:A.LaMarre@massey.ac.nz)

Joanna Semlyen: [J.Semlyen@uea.ac.uk](mailto:J.Semlyen@uea.ac.uk)

**Who can take part and what participation involves**

Participation in the study is open to any researchers who have experience of receiving methodologically incoherent comments on a qualitative manuscript as part of the peer review process. If you would like to take part, after completing a consent question you will be asked six main questions about: the types of comments you have received, how you responded to them (if relevant), and some optional questions about the names of the journal(s), your discipline/research area, your broad career stage (e.g. early career), and anything else you'd like to add. We will only quote from your survey responses with your express permission.

**How we will process and store the data**

The study is being administered on the Qualtrics survey platform. Once data generation is complete, Victoria will download the data into Word and Excel documents, remove any identifying information (including your names if you would like to be an acknowledged contributor - the list of names will be stored separately from the rest of the data), and share with the research team. We will store electronic versions of the data file on password protected computers/laptops and any hard copies will be stored in locked cupboards when not in use. We will work together to analyse the data, with the aim of submitting a paper in the 2022/23 (UK) academic year. We will retain the data until six months after the paper has been accepted for publication. Please read the [Privacy notice for research participants has.22.03.086](https://uwe.eu.qualtrics.com/CP/File.php?F=F_bCREugadGI3EOAS) for more information.

**Choosing how you participate - an anonymous or acknowledged contributor**

If you would like to be acknowledged as a contributor to the paper, you will have the option of providing your name as part of the survey - we will include a list of all the contributors (who wish to be identified) in the paper. We also recognise that not everyone will feel comfortable with being identified, so you can complete this survey anonymously. We don’t anticipate any risks with taking part - other than perhaps revisiting some frustration with inappropriate reviewer comments!

**Withdrawing your data**

Like any research, you can stop taking part at any point. We may decide to use partial survey completions - so please do get in touch with Victoria if you would like to withdraw your data. It will be difficult to withdraw the data once we have begun our analysis, which we’re aiming to do in October 2022, so please get in touch before then if you change your mind.

## Note 3: The full survey

Q1) Please share any methodologically incoherent comments you have received from peer reviewers or editors on qualitative manuscripts. You can quote from or paraphrase the reviews; if quoting please use quotation marks. If sharing comments from more than one manuscript submission review experience, please indicate these as separate instances.

Q1a) Please indicate if you are happy with us to (anonymously) quote your response, or you would like us to paraphrase:

I’m happy for you to quote my response

Please don’t quote my response, paraphrase only

Q2) Please share how you have addressed the comments you have received (if you had the opportunity to respond to the reviews):

Q2a) Please indicate if you are happy with us to (anonymously) quote your response, or you would like us to paraphrase:

I’m happy for you to quote my response

Please don’t quote my response, paraphrase only

Q3) If you’re happy to do so, please let us know the journals that you have received inappropriate review or editorial comments from (NB we won’t link the name of the journal to your other responses):

Q4) If you’re happy to do so, please let us know the name of your discipline/research area (NB we won’t link this to your other responses):

Q5) If you’re happy to do so, please let us know which category best describes you (NB we won’t link this to your other responses):

Doctoral student

Early career researcher (within 10 years of completing your PhD)

Midcareer researcher (within 20 years of completing your PhD)

Late career researcher (20 or more years since completing your PhD)

Another option (please specify)

Q6) If you would like to, please use this box to tell us anything else you would like to add.

If you would like to be acknowledged in a list of contributors to the paper, please write your name below (NB we won’t link your name to your responses):

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