International Journal of Qualitative Methods
Volume 16: 1–3

DOI: 10.1177/1609406917713418
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq
SAGE

The Five Neglected Skills All Qualitative Researchers Need

Alexander M. Clark[1,2] and Bailey J. Sousa[2,3]

Those doing qualitative research in academic settings have never had more options or been more challenged. Work is more casual, jobs scarcer, and research grants smaller. Doing research is more complex—stakeholders expect to be involved not only at the end but also from the outset of projects. Whereas in previous decades researchers would mostly work alone, now research is done far more in interdisciplinary teams. Expectations of academics and students and their outputs at every stage seem to be wider, higher, and more frenzied. Culture, social factors, and behaviors spill outside of the physical realm into online and augmented reality spaces. Given these changes excelling at qualitative research requires a lot more than substantive expertise and methodological prowess. With this in mind, we identify here the five most neglected but essential skills needed for success.

Know Your Literature

Qualitative researchers need to know their literatures. Understanding the contribution of your qualitative research—whether doctoral thesis, journal article, or research proposal—to knowledge is dependent on your awareness and insight into past research literature. In practice, this situates your research within a deep understanding of international literatures, movements, and the histories and debates within the field (Thomson, 2015). Like all conversations, these literatures are interesting not only in terms of what has been overtly "said" but also what is assumed, neglected, and fought over. Without this in-depth knowledge of literatures, your credibility to argue novelty, innovation, or creativity becomes mere chance. Researchers do know their literatures, *right*? We don't think so.

Indeed, too often, qualitative work is presented with insufficient, even scandalously scant, acknowledgment of past work, qualitative and quantitative. Studies both seminal and similar are ignored or cited so selectively as to misrepresent the novelty of the contribution.

This lack of acknowledgment is somewhat understandable given the past. The published academic literature has doubled in size roughly every 9 years (Bornmann & Mutz, 2014) since the 1600s, with less than 90% of papers being published after 2010. The sources of publication are growing too: new journals publishing qualitative work—open access, online, or traditional—offer ever more options to share qualitative work. Fifteen years ago, most topics would benefit from only a few qualitative or mixed method studies, for example, the world's single biggest cause of death and disability (coronary heart disease) had about 20 qualitative articles each focusing, respectively, on experiences and accounts of heart disease and failure. Today, almost 200 examples exist, along with large systematic reviews of these articles (Angus et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2014). Yet, time and time again, qualitative studies are performed and published replicating the questions, methods, and populations of these past studies with no acknowledgment or seeming awareness of this large existing work. This is wasteful and unethical.

Researchers doing qualitative work don't get to pass on knowing their literature. The credibility of their work depends on it. While accounts of literatures are always coconstructed (Kamler & Thomson, 2006), this necessitates incorporating past research into the narrative grounding of the new work. Not knowing your literature and/or failing to demonstrate this in your own work undermines the credibility of not only the work itself but also the qualitative methods and those doing it.

The tsunami of new research being published every new day demands using technology well. Ongoing and determined

[1] Editor-in-Chief, International Journal of Qualitative Methods
[2] University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
[3] Director, International Institute for Qualitative Methodology

Corresponding Author:
Alexander M. Clark, Level 3 ECHA, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2R3.
Email: alex.clark@ualberta.ca; Twitter: @DrAlexMClarkc

reading, doing and using systematic reviews, and using librarians can all help individuals develop practices and systems to stay abreast of qualitative literature. Honing your skills to develop and execute rigorous searches for past literature is a vital means to strategically increase your systematic review skills. Qualitative filters can be used to search and identify published work from online databases rapidly and accurately.

Develop and Write Exceptional Grants

There was a time, not that long ago, when researchers could focus only on methods and writing books . . . on methods. However, while methods remain vital, a focus on methods alone, increasingly, can no longer sustain career progression in most universities. Researchers can and should publish and share their methodological insights, but, increasingly, these arise as a by-product of doing research rather than as a primary area of scholarship. Accordingly, researchers need to develop their own abilities to seek funds, undertake research, and disseminate their work. A vital element of this is attaining internal and external funds for this work via competitive funding proposals.

Writing grant proposals remains one of the most hidden forms of scholarship there is. As an occluded genre (Swales, 2005), successful proposals are not shared or readily accessible like successful publications are in journals. Rather they are hidden from view in submission systems—the purview only of those writing, contributing, or reviewing them. Understanding the key elements of successful proposals involves getting into parts of this review system, tuning into what design and writing elements are needed for success, and incorporating those into the specifics of your own proposal.

The proposal development and review process is not only an intellectual and interpersonal endeavor but an emotional trajectory too. Seeking competitive funds involves putting yourself "out there"—a sensation that our workshops indicate that the most novice to the most expert researchers feel uncomfortable with.

A plethora of books and workshops are available to help grant writing skills. Yet, it remains even more important to start at the beginning to develop ideas or conceptions of research projects that will be attractive to funders. Only after this, should these ideas be incorporated into compelling research designs—and only after this, does writing compelling persuasive proposals become the goal. A bad research concept written up well in a grant proposal is as weak as a good idea written badly.

Accordingly, researchers doing qualitative work should develop their abilities to develop, evaluate, and hone research ideas. This is a vital but neglected prerequisite to writing persuasive grant proposals. It involves developing abilities to see opportunities for the contribution of qualitative research and to argue persuasively for these in research designs. Given the occluded nature of the proposal genre, getting involved in the peer review process whether informally in support of others' work or formally in academic workplaces or with funders provides vital insights from the other side of the proposal fence. Ostensibly, the work involved in this act of giving to others is one of the most productive means to improve your work development and writing skills.

Work Well With Others

Being technically and methodologically proficient, highly qualified, or well published may aid your confidence and reputation but can only take your research so far. Doing research inevitably involves other people: colleagues and collaborators in a research team, staff and students employed to contribute, and central staff who liaise with wider administration.

Yet, while working with others is one of the most necessary part of doing research, it can also be one of the most challenging. Academic work done well, particularly when done in teams, encompasses unusually high levels of listening, patience, empathy, asking questions, giving feedback, and all manner of difficult conversations you would probably rather not have. Few of these behaviors come naturally. It's tempting to also downplay the skills involved compared to the technical "hard skills" of research. However, these facets are essential to making decisions, sharing disagreements and difference in perspectives, resolving conflicts, building trust, and ultimately being successful in getting the research done.

As academics, many of us tend to have strong arguments and passions about research projects and the choices in them. Others sitting around our project tables have strong feelings too. We all want to be seen, heard, respected, and understood. Recognizing this is key. While we may claim to value people's perspectives, uniqueness, and diversity—how we engage and treat other people is far more telling. Moreover, how we work with others to promote excellent contributions to the research itself is far more important (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003).

Consequently, deliberately developing your mind-set and skills in working with other people is vital (Dweck, 2006; Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). This has intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, leading to improved research, better relationships with others, and also lower personal stress and anxiety. These skills allow new and different ways of seeing even the most challenging interpersonal situations (Stone, Patton, Heen, & Fisher, 2010) and can render any difficult situation to be an impetus for potential growth or project gain (Holiday, 2014). Books, podcasts, workshops, and self-reflection can all help you do this.

Publish in the Mainstream

Preaching to the choir is pleasant. We know how to connect to them, they almost always listen, and readily appreciate our wisdom. As a means of making ourselves feels better—there's little to beat it—but it does little to change the world beyond our "friends" and walls.

Too often, qualitative research is confined to a fairly narrow set of friendly journals. These are the ones many of us have published in before. They have audiences that "get" our work.

We're not asked to compromise our work by writing shorter papers or with different words than we would otherwise use for our qualitative colleagues. Our chances of acceptance are reassuringly high. Despite a large increase the volume of qualitative research published, it has been confined to some journals but not others. Journals in mainstream fields, notably in health and medicine, remain strangely free of qualitative research. This is something of a chicken and egg problem: Do such journals not publish qualitative because they don't receive many submissions or do the journals fail to get submissions because they don't publish qualitative papers? While there may be a lack of familiarity with qualitative methods or the paradigms that can guide them, most of the journals do feature case studies and humanities pieces but little qualitative research.

It's important that qualitative researchers continue to lobby journals over fair dealing for qualitative research (Greenhalgh et al., 2016). Nevertheless, researchers themselves need to get more skilled in packaging up their work for these mainstream general journals (Clark & Thompson, 2016). This involves writing work up in different ways—using different framing, language, and presentational styles to ensure the qualitative research connects to the intended mainstream journal audiences. While submissions will be rejected—these journals often have very high rejection rates—the visibility that the journals provide as a platform for qualitative work outweighs the potential risks involved.

Bring Your Work Alive to People and Communities

Our qualitative research is ripe for sharing. This is ethically important: research and universities need to be relevant not only for scholarship but also for society. Finding new and different ways of sharing your research with audiences outside of academia is then important. Mass media (the web, newspaper, television, and radio), social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat), and blogs—all offer potential avenues to share our research findings with those outside of academia. Yet, surprisingly, little qualitative research finds itself outside the academy.

This is surprising: qualitative research deals with stories, experiences, and processes that members of the public can not only readily identify with but also embraces some of our profound and transcending human experiences. There are many diverse ways to share the insights from qualitative work with different audiences—get creative and be courageous about sharing the findings of our qualitative research. These activities should be recognized as legitimate scholarly outputs and rewarded as such. This is part of our contract with society.

Similarly, workplaces, supervisors, and mentors have a similar contract to prepare new researchers for the challenges of doing qualitative research in the modern world. Addressing these five key but neglected skills will be an important part of this future.

References

Angus, J. E., King-Shier, K. M., Spaling, M. A., Duncan, A. S., Jaglal, S. B., Stone, J. A., & Clark, A. M. (2015). A secondary meta-synthesis of qualitative studies of gender and access to cardiac rehabilitation. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *71*, 1758–1773.

Bornmann, L., & Mutz, R. (2014). Growth rates of modern science: A bibliometric analysis based on the number of publications and cited references. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *66*, 2215–2222.

Clark, A. M., Spaling, M., Harkness, K., Spiers, J., Strachan, P. H., Thompson, D. R., & Currie, K. (2014). Determinants of effective heart failure self-care: A systematic review of patients' and caregivers' perceptions. *Heart*, *100*, 716–721.

Clark, A. M., & Thompson, D. R. (2016). Five tips for writing qualitative-research for high-impact journals: Moving from #BMJnoQual. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 15*, 1–3.

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Greenhalgh, T., Annandale, E., Ashcroft, R., Barlow, J., Black, N., Bleakley, A., . . . Mays, N. (2016). An open letter to The BMJ editors on qualitative research. *British Medical Journal*, *352*.

Holiday, R. (2014). *The obstacle is the way*. London, England: Portfolio.

Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2006). *Helping doctoral students write*. London, England: Routledge.

Katzenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (2003). *The wisdom of teams: Creating the high performing organization*. New York, NY: Harper Business Essentials.

Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen, S., & Fisher, R. (2010). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. London, England: Penguin.

Swales, J. M. (2005). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Thomson, P. (2015). *What is an "outstanding" publication?* Retrieved May 14, 2017, from https://patthomson.net/2015/06/29/what-is-an-outstanding-publication/