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Qualitative social research in addictions publishing: Creating an enabling journal environment

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In 2005, the journal *Addiction*, one of the highest-ranking addiction journals, published a review of qualitative methods in addictions research (Neale, Allen, & Coombes, 2005). This review noted that *Addiction* had published only three qualitative research papers in the previous year; around 2% of the research papers it had published in 2004. Accepting that “such marginality prompts uncomfortable questions”, the authors posed the possibility that some addiction journals might “directly or indirectly militate against the publication of qualitative research” (p. 1584). To begin to remedy this situation, the authors emphasised two challenges. First, they argued that qualitative researchers “should have confidence in the scientific rigor and value of their methods” and thus, should “not hesitate in writing up their data for any journal that will reach their target audience”. And second, they called upon addiction journals to “adopt policies and practices that will potentially encourage more qualitative submissions” (p. 1591).

Of course, the extent to which qualitative research is published in any particular journal is shaped by a variety of factors, including: the rate at which such papers are submitted; the scientific quality of submissions; the amount of research funding available to qualitative researchers; the scientific capital and impact accorded such work in any given addiction research culture; as well as how journal policy and disciplinary leanings shape reviewing and editorial decisions.

Interested to see how a selection of addiction journals compared, and taking a single year (2009), we estimated the proportion of published original research papers that employed qualitative methods (Table 1). We selected the top eight ranked journals in the ‘social science’ category of the Thomson ISI impact factor (IF) ratings, supplemented by journals of relative high impact in the field of drug use or known to attract social research submissions. Accepting the limits of such a snapshot exercise, what we found overall is probably of little surprise: Qualitative research – at 7% (100/1338) of papers published – is a minority output of addiction journal publication. The proportion would have been even lower if we had sampled addiction journals outside the ‘social science’ category.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare a vested interest in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, as Editors-In-Chief (Tim Rhodes, Gerry Stimson), and as Associate Editors (David Moore, Philippe Bourgois). David Moore also declares his role as Editor at *Contemporary Drug Problems*, where Philippe Bourgois and Tim Rhodes serve on the editorial board.

We also found that some journals publish more qualitative work than others. The addiction journal publishing the highest proportion of qualitative research papers – at 57% in 2009 – is the *International Journal of Drug Policy* (Table 1), followed by *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* (36%) and the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* (34%). The addiction journals contributing least – at 1% or less – to qualitative research are *Psychology of Addictive Behaviours*, *Addictive Behaviors*, *Addiction*, and *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. With the exception of the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, which has an IF of 2.5, the proportion of qualitative research published in any given journal is roughly inversely proportional to that journal's IF. With the exception of one, all journals with an IF of over 2 published 3% or less research articles reporting qualitative data.

The marginality of qualitative research in addiction journals

The field of drug use and addiction has an established tradition in generating ground-breaking qualitative and ethnographic research that has crossed over into wider fields to inform social science methods and theories (for example, Agar, 1973; Becker, 1953; Lindesmith, 1938; Weinberg, 2005). Clearly, not all addiction journals are the same, and some are deliberately or otherwise more open to the publication of qualitative research. Different fields of addiction study – such as policy, health and harm – may orientate themselves better to qualitative and social research. But Table 1 implies that the potential outlets for the publication of qualitative research in addiction journals are limited, especially when the journal is influential in the field (with an IF above 2). Where else then is qualitative research on drug use and addiction being published?

It is our sense, especially when considering journals of record, that much original qualitative research – perhaps most – is submitted to generic social science, health and policy journals (for instance, Fraser & Treloar, 2006; Shannon et al., 2008; Weinberg, 2000). We know this too as authors (for instance, Bourgois, Prince, & Moss, 2004; Moore, 2009; Rhodes, Bernays, & Houmoller, 2010). We submit to social science journals by default as well as by desire. Addiction journals are often beyond our immediate consideration when submitting empirical qualitative research because they may not seem 'social science' enough or, conversely, our work may appear too theoretical, too critical, too reflexive, too subtle and complicated, or just too long. It is obviously important for social scientists to publish in social science journals but it is equally important, and arguably more so for addiction science, for social scientists to be publishing in addiction journals. The field of addiction science reflects the theoretical and methodological parochialism of the biological and laboratory sciences. It is in danger of developing outside the orbit of dramatic theoretical advances in critical approaches to understanding power relations and subjectivity formation occurring in the humanities and qualitative social sciences over the past decade (for example, Butler, 1997; Keane, 2002; Peterson & Bunton, 1997; Rose, 1996; Valverde, 1998).

As a consequence, not only are most addiction journals publishing little qualitative research (Table 1), but they may be marginalising more theoretically grounded and methods-driven qualitative research. Most importantly, they may be failing to capture cutting edge work on the social inequity and structural forces shaping addiction. Surely, addiction journals wish to encourage rather than marginalise qualitative research that engages with current developments in social and cultural theory and methodology? For this, amongst other things, is what distinguishes the quality in qualitative research (Seale, 1999).

These questions touch upon recurring debates on multi-disciplinary addictions research (for example, Bourgois, 1999, 2002; Moore, 2002; Rhodes & Coomber, 2010), including those in *Addiction* (McKeganey, 1995; Neale et al., 2005), and captured by journal 'special issues'

specific to qualitative research (for instance, Moore & Maher, 2002; Rhodes & Moore, 2001). A critical point in these discussions concerns the 'epistemology of method'. By epistemology, we refer to the ways in which we come to know things as well as how we demonstrate the legitimacy of that knowledge. In multidisciplinary debates, two positions tend to dominate: the representation of 'interpretative' qualitative research as paradigmatically distinct from, even incompatible with, 'positivist' quantitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and a call for 'pragmatism' (Hammersley, 1992; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Pragmatism usually proffers a 'horses for courses' approach, wherein a plurality of methods are envisaged as a kind of 'tool box', selected according to what is fit for purpose (Creswell, 2003; Hammersley, 1992; Miller, Strang, & Miller, 2010; Silverman, 1997). The pragmatist position, which sits comfortably inside narratives of evidence-based medicine, implies that differences in the epistemology of method are exaggerated as well as unhelpful. McKeganey, for example, has argued for reconciling differences between quantitative and qualitative methods in addictions research, suggesting that "divides" are "unhelpful", and that "methodological identity" should not be preserved at "the cost of greater understanding" (1995). Neale et al. (2005) largely side-step questions of epistemology, instead positioning the challenge of mainstreaming qualitative methods as a problem of practice and technique rather than of the credibility and legitimacy afforded to different ways of knowing in addictions science.

Differences in the epistemology of method can make truly interdisciplinary research challenging, and perhaps even painful (Bryman, 2007; Curtis, 2002; Mason, 2006; Moore, 2002). But differences are helpful too. There are many good examples of mixed-method research projects which embrace epistemological differences, including as a way of critiquing the methods they use and the evidence they produce (Barbour, 1999; Mason, 2006). Embracing difference creates new flows between epistemology and method (Bryman, 2001; Mason, 2006). There is increasing acceptance of post-positivism in quantitative research, as well as recognition of straight-forward realism in much applied qualitative research, and a growing respect for the need to reflect on how research questions and methods relate to epistemological assumptions. Collaborations between ethnography, epidemiology and mathematical modelling provide examples (Agar, 2003; Bourgois et al., 2006; Ciccarone & Bourgois, 2003; Moore et al., 2009).

In our view, pragmatism alone is not enough. Social constructionist approaches are at once a commitment to illuminating how power, context and objectification shape knowledge, including in relation to addiction (Bourgois, 1999). Fundamentally, and rather obviously, epistemological assumptions informing research cannot be masked by simply ignoring them (Bryman, 2001; Hammersley, 1992). For instance, it makes no sense for pragmatists to imply, as some do, that 'giving-up' critical realism for the 'pretence' of realism is a necessary condition for fruitful multidisciplinary collaboration. We cannot simply choose to avoid epistemological differences or methodological identities. Quantitative realists may believe they capture objective truths about addiction, and qualitative researchers may wish for mainstream acceptance of social constructionist work, but it should be axiomatic that addiction journal publishing does not contribute to the marginalisation of constructionist critiques of addiction and addiction science. The mainstreaming of qualitative methods into specialist journals cannot, and should not, rest upon qualitative researchers suspending their attachment to social constructionist theory, writing in epistemological disguise or 'dumbing down' their analyses. We see addiction and addiction science as quintessentially social and historical constructions (Courtwright, 2001; Reinarman, 1995), and a key role of qualitative research, through theoretically informed, systematic and grounded analyses, is to explore and demonstrate how particular assemblages of knowledge, practice and subjectivity come to be taken as 'real'.

Addiction journal practices

Despite our comments above on how the epistemology of method unavoidably pervades addiction science (and all research), there may be a tendency to separate out such issues from the day-to-day practices of journal publishing. If research “does not exist in a bubble” (Bryman, 2001), then neither does addiction research. If “methods are not simply neutral tools” (Bryman, 2001), then neither are journal publishing practices. How might the nuts and bolts of addiction journal publishing shape opportunities to publish qualitative research?

Perhaps the single most important factor here is journal policy limiting article length. Text and documentary analyses require more words than quantitative analyses. Reliability in the reporting of qualitative research is accomplished through combining ‘low inference description’ with the display of data, to demonstrate systematic comparison and concept generation as well as to illustrate ideal, typical and negative cases (Seale, 1999). Whilst coding is a method of reduction and concept organisation, the corpus of data is large. The need to demonstrate through critical and reflexive engagement with data how analyses were performed, and how grounded theories or concepts were generated, is fundamental to good analytical practice (Charmaz, 2006; Seale, 1999). Narrative and discourse analyses, with their explicit focus on language and form, can demand even closer attention to textual data than thematic analyses. The danger, otherwise, is that the qualitative extract is reduced to no more than supplementary illustration, with qualitative analytical practices such as induction and iteration becoming opaque. This arguably feeds a common charge, especially amongst sceptics, that qualitative research appears under-analysed, even anecdotal, as well as beyond critical appraisal regarding its reliability and credibility.

Journal policy on article length may therefore not only act to limit qualitative research submissions, but crucially, the type and quality of work accepted. Obviously, it is not impossible to produce concise qualitative research reports, as illustrated by journals such as the *British Medical Journal*. But longer critical analyses are also necessary. There are multiple audiences for qualitative analyses—policy makers, practitioners, biomedical and laboratory scientists, as well as social scientists and social theorists. A diversity and flexibility in addiction journal publishing practices is required. The word guidance for research submissions issued by the addiction journals listed in Table 1 clusters around 3000–4000. Some journals – those tending to publish the least qualitative research – suggest maximum word lengths as low as 2000 (*Addictive Behaviors*) or 3500 (*Addiction*). It is difficult to see how such policies encourage varied forms of qualitative submission, or other forms of discursive historical and policy analyses. Only one journal we reviewed (*Contemporary Drug Problems*) sets no upper word limit.

Our own journal, the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, has been working to a guide of up to 5000, and “exceptionally”, 7000 words. We have recently revised our guide to authors to emphasise that we will consider submissions to a maximum of 8000 words, on a par with most social science journals, noting our openness to considering work from a diversity of social and other sciences. We now allow unstructured as well as structured abstracts. Our qualitative research submissions are reviewed by applied experts in qualitative, ethnographic and social science research. We reinforce our interest in considering submissions that are qualitative or ethnographic, as well as critical (such as those informed by science and technology studies), including narrative, historical and discourse-based analyses. We wish to open up opportunities for diversifying the qualitative research published in addiction journals.

In their review of qualitative addictions research, Neale et al. (2005) noted the need for addiction journals to publish statements welcoming qualitative research submissions,

alongside adopting flexible policies regarding the structure and length of papers, and having qualitative research reviewed by appropriate social science experts. We endorse these recommendations, and encourage other addiction journals to do likewise. If multidisciplinary addiction journals are to better enable the publication of qualitative research (as well as other forms of discursive analysis), it is critical that editorial policies, practices and systems are supportive. A journal architecture is required that embraces such work, and this includes the sufficient incorporation of social science and qualitative expertise into editorial boards as well as reviewing and decision processes.

Neale and colleagues also ponder whether journals should set a per annum quota of journal space for qualitative research publication. This is difficult given that no addiction journal is the same, and each probably envisages its methodological leanings and scientific identity differently. But if journals claim a multidisciplinary ethos, perhaps a minimum publication quota expectation for different forms of research could be set, including for quantitative and qualitative analyses and for systematic reviews. If roughly 7% of research papers in addiction journals are qualitative (Table 1), perhaps this could be taken as a minimum target for every journal publishing multidisciplinary addiction research.

Conclusion

Addiction science is dominated by biomedical and psychological approaches (Miller et al., 2010). Despite a rich heritage, the social science of addiction, and qualitative research in particular, remains a peripheral voice in addiction journal publishing. Patterns of drug effect, use and dependency, as well as the effects of drug policies and interventions, do not obey universal laws, but are shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they occur and help to produce. We need qualitative research to capture how drug use and addiction is lived and represented according to time and place. We need social constructionist research not only to understand the social bases of addiction but also of addiction science. We call upon addiction journal editors to reflect upon their practices of addiction journal publishing. We call upon addiction journals to develop editorial policies supportive of the publication of qualitative social research, and to facilitate active engagement with social theories informing our knowledge in the field of addiction studies. At the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, we wish to strengthen our ethos of multidisciplinary whilst continuing to build our publication as a primary avenue for qualitative and social science research.

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Table 1

Qualitative research in addiction journals, 2009.

| Journal | ISI impact factor, 2009 ^a | Estimated qualitative papers in 2009 ^b |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| International Journal of Drug Policy | 2.5 | 57% (25/44) |
| Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy | 0.7 | 36% (9/25) |
| Journal of Psychoactive Drugs | 0.8 | 34% (11/32) |
| Addiction Research and Theory | 0.6 | 28% (12/43) |
| Drug and Alcohol Review | 1.6 | 14% (7/49) |
| Harm Reduction Journal | — ^c | 14% (3/21) |
| Contemporary Drug Problems | — ^c | 13% (4/30) |
| Substance Use and Misuse | 0.7 | 12% (16/133) |
| European Addiction Research | 1.2 | 3% (1/30) |
| Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment | 2.9 | 3% (3/85) |
| Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs | 2.0 | 2% (2/112) |
| American Journal on Addictions | 1.5 | 2% (1/57) |
| Psychology of Addictive Behaviours | 2.7 | 1% (1/83) |
| Addiction | 3.8 | 1% (2/162) |
| Addictive Behaviors | 2.2 | 1% (2/176) |
| Drug and Alcohol Dependence | 3.6 ^d | <1% (1/256) |

^aISI Thomson Impact Factor Rankings for 2009 for Substance Abuse Social Science Category.

^bDenominator includes original research articles, and excludes reviews, commentaries, and policy/historical analyses, in print journal issues for 2009 including special issues and supplements, accepting that 2009 may not be a typical year.

^cNo ISI impact factor.

^dA high impact addiction journal not listed in the 'social science' ISI category, but 'science' only.