The Pioneering Qualitative Spirit: Twenty IJQM Articles Over 20 Years of IIQM

Anniversaries compel reflection, retrospection, and speculation. Since its inception, the International Journal of Qualitative Methods (IJQM) has exerted a distinctive and influential presence in the qualitative methods landscape. As the journal of the International Institute of Qualitative Methodology (IIQM), under seven editors and now an interdisciplinary editorial team, IJQM has sought to share IIQM’s 20-yearlong vision as a pioneering and inclusive space for sharing and learning about qualitative methods. The true prescience of IIQM and IJQM, and of their founder, Janice Morse, can be appreciated with reference to what has happened since. The contributions of subsequent IJQM Directors over the last 11 years, Lisa Given, Amanda Campbell, and Bailey Sousa, are reflected in how both IJQM and IIQM have continued to adapt—being forward focused and responsive to need but also leading in supporting qualitative researchers worldwide.

To celebrate IIQM’s 20th anniversary, we now reshare and revisit a curated collection of 20 of our own journals’ “top” papers in this special issue (based on download and citation rates). We are very grateful to the original authors of the papers for their willingness to reflect anew on their papers’ origins and wider place in qualitative research.

Anniversaries as Opportunities

IJQM started as and remains an online journal in a world that is now digitized—including the seemingly conservative sphere of scholarly publishing. While this move away from paper-based journals was initially very unnerving for publishers (Odlyzko, 1999), the vast majority of established academic and professional journals are now fully and mostly only in the online space—it’s great that our much older sisters have caught up! In this digital space, with IJQM, we are excited to continue to harness and reflect newer types and uses of qualitative data: audio, video, and virtual reality. We strongly encourage submissions incorporating data from these exciting mediums.

While open-access journals were once rare and considered idiosyncratic (Prosser, 2003), open-access publishing is now championed worldwide by governments, universities, and scholars as the most ethical and effective means to disseminate research (Tennant et al., 2016). While it’s nice to be in vogue, IJQM’s status as “open-access” is no fad. Over the years, including the journal’s transition to being published by SAGE, IJQM has retained an unwavering commitment to open-access scholarship: All IJQM papers are free to read, always. This allows scholars from all over the world, irrespective of location or wealth, membership of a library, or other means to pay, to access every single IJQM paper in our history readily and at no cost.

The journal has always been avowedly interdisciplinary. Looking back, it’s hard to fully appreciate how ahead of the curve this inclusive and collaborative vent was. In a context in which journals sought readership segments based on established professional communities, like IIQM, the journal cast aside the comfort of professional affiliation to exist in a transcendent space: above and beyond demarcated disciplines. This risked being everywhere but also nowhere—but such bold positioning has been a consistent asset not only as scholars doing qualitative work themselves have moved to work across professional boundaries but also because, epistemologically, this is both ethical and useful (Ryan, Kurtz, Carter, & Pester, 2014). Methods owned by an individual or disciplinary group are prone to stasis and territory but thrive and grow from varied utilization and adaptation from different groups for different purposes (Ryan et al., 2014).

While academic debate is notorious for heated arguments over details both big and often small, it has been our long commitment that scholars of all stages, inclinations, and methods would find a welcoming place and true voice in IJQM. This inclusivity, reflecting that of IIQM, is vital in contexts in which the contributions of qualitative methods are still not as widely recognized or even respected as many of us would like. It is a commitment that has occurred over decades in which qualitative research and those doing it have also become increasingly diverse. Yet this commitment itself renders maintaining inclusivity ever challenging and yet ever important. Where once qualitative methods were grounded far more in health disciplines and interview-based methods, the variety of scholars, disciplines, methods, and data collection techniques has proliferated. In this rapidly changing context, being truly inclusive...
does not happen automatically but requires self-reflection, careful assessment, and planning—particularly around our blind spots. Pointedly, both IJQM and IIQM have sought to recognize the richness and diversity of qualitative scholarship happening outside of North America, high-income countries, or from a few select establishment voices. We have increasingly sought to bring new, diverse, and distinctive voices to the fore to challenge conventions and push boundaries in what qualitative methods are and how they can be used. We have drawn attention to common but under acknowledged aspects of qualitative work relating to mental health, work skills, and writing. We commit to further this focus not only in IJQM’s published papers, but in new features, notably a new IIQM editorial section featuring the perspectives of early career qualitative researchers.

Like IJQM, IIQM has sought to adapt to changing times—reflecting changes in methods, needs, and wants of qualitative researchers globally. These changes are reflected in the choices of the papers presented in this special issue, but also in the value of revisiting them—and understanding more of the questions and provocations that gave rise to them.

Our Selection of IJQM Papers

Thus, the pages of IJQM reflect the growth and challenges of qualitative research methods over the past 20 years. The need for many of us to navigate notoriously tricky methodological territory remains enduringly common—reflected in our selections in phenomenology (Groenewald, 2004), Delphi method (Brady, 2015), phenomenography (Sin, 2010), autoethnography (Wall, 2008), and participatory action research (Schneider, 2012). Yet the need to go beyond method and ontology to practical elements of data collection has also been important—reflected in selections on rigor (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002), concept mapping (Kinchin, Streafield, & Hay, 2010), focus group analysis (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009), and interviewing (Irvine, 2011).

Practical insights around the seemingly conventional in transcription (Davidson, 2009) and analysis (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) are balanced with a strong sense that what constitutes “qualitative data” has also been changing, for instance, around our selections on visual methods (Pain, 2012), audio diaries (Gibson et al., 2013), drawing (Literat, 2013), and Internet data collection (Nicholas et al., 2010). And just when we thought we had arrived, IJQM authors frequently also revisit established topics and taboos with new and fresh insights—challenging conventions and orthodoxies in grounded theory (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010), generic qualitative research (Kahlke, 2014), reflexivity (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), and member checking (Koelsch, 2013).

In the past 2 years, we’ve been encouraged by the rise in the journal’s status and impact factor and the consistently high number of citations that many IJQM papers receive—our most cited paper has 4,000 citations (Morse et al., 2002). Yet we’re particularly excited by how engaged our IJQM readers remain: downloading today’s new IJQM papers up to 15,000 times per month. It’s difficult to know what the next 20 years will hold for qualitative research. But avowedly for IIQM and IJQM, we seek to remain the forward-focused pioneer of the last 20 years: to meet the needs of the present and future rather than mirror the past and ensure that the most useful advances, insights, and innovations in qualitative method are here to support your qualitative research.

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