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SIGNALLING REFLEXIVITY AND COMPLEXITY: A STEP ANALYSIS OF METHODS SECTIONS IN QUALITATIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Abstract

To academic researchers in many fields, particularly within the social sciences, qualitative research offers an attractive option. However, the task of writing qualitative research articles poses specific challenges for L2 English users. Such papers are expected to include more detailed descriptions and reflections than is usual when working in the quantitative paradigm, and writers need to negotiate their own identity as researcher, writer and participant carefully. This paper approaches qualitative writing through the methods section, where it is reasonable to assume that specific features of the text signal adherence to the principles of qualitative research. After reviewing previous academic writing research on methods sections, this article applies the conventional 9-step framework used for analysing methods sections in quantitative publications to ascertain to what this structure is used in qualitative research papers, and to establish what other steps specifically occur in papers that are based on qualitative research paradigms. Additional steps include mention of ethical clearance, and reflections on the researcher role and the complexity involved in collecting and analysing data. A revised step framework for qualitative methods in the social sciences is proposed, as it will prove useful for novice academic writers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term "qualitative research" in the social sciences gained currency in the second half of the twentieth century as an alternative to the strictly quantitative, statistically-focused methods of research that dominated fields such as psychology and education at that time. It now covers a range of research approaches with different perspectives, paradigms and methods. It has been variously described as the endeavour to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 43), as a form of research that involves "understanding, interpretation, 'getting close' and making distinctions" (Aspers & Corte, 2019), or as meaning "interpretive study of a specified issue or problem in which the researcher is central to the sense that is made" (Banister et al., 1994: 2). In general, however, we can say that qualitative researchers seek to understand action and experience as a whole and in context, rather than narrowing down their inquiry to specific aspects that lend themselves to quantification (Punch, 2013).

To academic researchers in many social science fields, qualitative research is a very attractive option. Qualitative analysis based on relatively small datasets may yield useful and interesting data for answering certain research questions via descriptions of behaviours, characteristics or interactions between small numbers of people. Qualitative research might thus seem to be a practical route for many people whose resources are limited, including researchers who are not based at leading universities in English-speaking countries.

However, it seems that many non-native users of English prefer to work within quantitative paradigms in the social sciences, not least because these are perceived to place a lighter linguistic burden on the writer. Twenty years ago, Flowerdew (1999) found that L2 English users in Hong Kong tended to avoid the qualitative paradigm because of the linguistic and other difficulties that it poses, which they felt exacerbated their disadvantageous position as non-native speakers. This perception has subsequently been confirmed by more recent studies. Belcher and Hirvela (2005: 187) report that L2 English users "may consciously avoid adopting qualitative research methods, undoubtedly because of the challenges that such a self-reflexive, rhetorically complex, and generically unstable research report mode poses". Closer to the present, Casanave (2010) documented her anxiety about how to advise Japanese PhD students embarking on qualitative PhDs about their writing "without creating discomfort" for them or herself. However, it is notable that little research is available in this area, and the paucity of studies on teaching L2 academic writing focusing on qualitative paradigms probably reflects both the insecurity of L2 writing researchers when addressing this area and the difficulty of providing appropriate support in a paradigm characterised by reflexivity and contestation (Starfield & Ravelli, 2006).

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1.1. Challenges of writing qualitative research

Regarding difficulty, it is worth considering what the root cause of this discomfort might be. In their analysis of why qualitative approaches are perceived as challenging, Belcher and Hirvela (2005) locate part of the difficulty of writing qualitative research in the paradigm itself, with its claims to holistic understanding, sensitivity, reflexivity and complex reasoning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Sutton & Austin, 2015). They identify two specific areas that may cause particular problems for L2 English users. First, the emphasis on obtaining empathetic insights into people's complex life-experiences through data that are primarily linguistic already poses a challenge to non-language-specialists. The linguistic-discursive skills required to do this are considerable. For example, Rossman and Rallis's (2003) delineation of best practices for qualitative researchers highlights the qualities that the qualitative researcher/writer is expected to exercise and expressly display commitment to, namely highly developed interpersonal, emotional, ethical, and political sensitivity. As Belcher and Hirvela (2005) note, the need to display these qualities places a particularly heavy burden on L2 writers: it is no longer a question of summarising quantitative results and describing graphs. Here, the emphasis is on telling a coherent story, filling in meaningful details, reporting and problematising nuances in someone's conversation, and showing great sensitivity to what that person might be feeling. In the words of a well-known handbook on qualitative research (Richardson, 2000), qualitative research reports should demonstrate a deeply grounded perspective, show use of creative analytic practices, demonstrate adequate self-awareness and reveal enough about the self for readers to judge the legitimacy of the writer's viewpoint, and provide enough information about the context and phenomenon under study to generate "a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience" (Richardson, 2000: 937). Added to this, we might consider the extra difficulty for writers outside English-speaking countries caused by doing language-based research in one language (using questionnaires, interviews, narratives, and so on) and explaining it in another, which adds a further level of complexity both in terms of analysis and when it comes to writing up the results.

Second, these authors emphasise the lack of definition within communities of qualitative research practice concerning the target genre. The general approaches to writing up qualitative research have been described by academic writing experts as "fuzzy" (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005: 189): there appears to be a lack of consensus about genres (in their case, the dissertation, but we might also extend this lack of definition to some other genres, such as the research paper). Along similar lines, Chang and Swales (1999) highlight the linguistic burden that qualitative research writing places on L2 English users. Their informants reported discomfort with more qualitative approaches to academic writing (in their case, mainly in humanities fields) not only because of the frequent changes of register (e.g. participants' highly informal, fragmentary statements are combined into a text that conforms to a more

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conventional academic register), but because certain types of writing appear to ignore prescriptions given in general handbooks of academic style, and encourage a more personal approach that reflects an awareness of the researcher's own presence and envisages a different relationship to both subjects and readers (Hyland, 2002). Qualitative researchers may thus make more frequent use of first person singular pronouns, as well as more informal features such as sentence-initial "and" and "but", direct questions and imperatives, for example (Chang & Swales, 1999), which is confusing for L2 writers.

Furthermore, the confusion that arises concerning *how to write* is probably compounded by the attitude encountered among qualitative researchers within a post-modern paradigm who celebrate difficulty and claim, for example, with certain tones of satisfaction, that "I have developed a certain writerly incompetence and underachievement and am unable to write a text that 'runs to meet the reader'" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005: 971). The experience of writing qualitative research, memorably described by Meloy (1994: 2) as like "balancing on a high wire over an empty river in the middle of a moonless night", may seem like an exciting endeavour for proficient L1 English users – but for L2 users, it might appear to present a degree of complexity that deters all but the most adventurous.

All in all, qualitative research presents a major challenge for L2 writers, and it is surprising that few publications exist addressing qualitative research genres themselves, or providing strategies for novice L2 writers. The variation found among qualitative publications in different fields, or even within one field, and the range of paradigms grouped under the heading of "qualitative research", may go some way to explaining this absence. When publications in some qualitative journals can range from a poem to a visual logbook, or from a linguistically technical conversation analysis to a humanistic discussion based on nineteenth century classics of sociology, it is hard to envisage that a classic genre analysis approach would yield useful results. In fact, previous applied linguistics research on qualitative writing in the social sciences, that is, outside the field of humanities and literary studies (see Bratić & Vuković Stamatović, 2021), has tended to focus on non-linguistic aspects such as learner motivation (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005), or on very specific linguistic features that appear to defy learners' preconceived notions concerning academic style (Chang & Swales, 1999).

In this context, it would be overambitious to attempt a genre analysis covering everything that is found in qualitatively focused journals. However, one area where a genre analysis approach to qualitative research could be productive is precisely that of identifying commonality between publications in journals of this kind. Such a study would shed light on what these publications have in common, and provide a framework for understanding how "qualitativeness" is understood in different disciplines. Since a comparison of whole articles would generate an excess of data, the present paper will concentrate on one aspect that arguably has key importance: the account of methodology provided in the "methods" section, or otherwise integrated into the earlier parts of the text.

1.2. Focus on methods sections

Qualitative research is distinguished from quantitative research principally through its methodology, and so it is particularly relevant to focus on methods sections. In quantitative research papers, methods are considered to be among the easier sections to write, since they often follow a standard formula and can easily be adapted from the bibliography (Swales & Feak, 1994). Previous researchers conclude that the main moves in the methods sections of quantitative research papers are, variously, describing data collection, explaining how important variables are identified, and advancing the statistical techniques to be used to process results (Brett, 1994), or describing data collection, recounting experimental procedures and explaining data analysis techniques (Ngowu, 1997). Within quantitative paradigms, these aspects appear to be subject to little or no variation, except that depending on the actual study design (laboratory experiments or clinical trials, for example). For example, in her account of 60 biochemistry papers Kanoksilapatham (2005) found that 100% of the methods sections in her sample included a description of materials and experimental procedures.

Rhetorical move	Constituent step
Move 1: Describing data collection procedure/s	Step 1: Describing the sample
	Step 2: Recounting steps in data collection
	Step 3: Justifying data collection procedure/s
Move 2: Delineating procedure/s for measuring variables	Step 4: Presenting an overview of design
	Step 5: Explaining method/s of measuring variables
	Step 6: Justifying method/s of measuring variables
Move 3: Elucidating data analysis procedure/s	Step 7: Relating data analysis procedure/s
	Step 8: Justifying the data analysis procedure/s
	Step 9: Previewing results

Table 1. Summary of moves and steps in methods sections, from Lim (2006)

Less is known about methods sections in the social sciences, and what we do know points towards a more complex picture. Comparing eight disciplines, Peacock (2011) found that social science methods were much less homogeneous than methods in science. A large-scale study by Cotos, Huffman, and Link (2017) of methods sections across 30 disciplines used an algorithmic analysis to detect disciplinary clusters, and established that there were important differences between social sciences (psychology, education, sociology, applied linguistics) on

the one hand, and the experimental and basic sciences on the other. These authors attribute this clustering to the presence of different epistemological traditions and approaches to scientific inquiry. However, the broad scale of this study precludes a detailed focus on specific disciplines. One influential study that focuses on methods in social sciences is Lim's (2006) analysis of methods sections in empirically-focused management articles. This provides a detailed 9-step framework for understanding the three basic moves mentioned above (describing data collection, identification of variables and data analysis procedures), summarised in Table 1 above. Lim's study brings to light considerable homogeneity concerning the inclusion of the first two moves, but also notable variation within the different steps included, and their order.

Some research on methods sections in applied linguistics also suggests homogeneity. A recent comparative study by Farnia and Baratizade (2020) followed Lim's 9-step framework to analyse the moves in methods in applied linguistics articles in English and Persian, again finding relatively high homogeneity, although there were some differences between language groups. Also in applied linguistics, Khamkhien (2015), using a similar framework, found that all sections included accounts of the sample, research instruments and procedures. However, we should be aware that applied linguistics covers a range of perspectives, and many text-based studies reflect a quantitative paradigm, while some kinds of classroom-based study involving approaches such as participant research or ethnography are qualitative. As for other social sciences, Pramoolsook, Li, and Wang (2015) used Lim's (2006) steps to test for differences between management and marketing research, finding a wide variety of move structures in both, but particularly in marketing, where no two articles presented the same overall step content and organisation. This finds some parallels in the study by Cotos et al. (2017), which found that even within groups (i.e. experimental science, social science), some disciplines appeared to be more homogeneous than others (i.e. immunobiology methods showed great homogeneity while psychology methods had great intradisciplinary variation).

In short, in qualitative research the description of methods may well be more complicated. As Lim (2006) points out, a convincing methods section is essential to underpin the validity of the study as a whole, but we might add that the way researchers convince their peers in qualitative research is not the same as the way they do so in, say, experimental research. It is expected that qualitative methodology will be shaped by some fundamental underlying assumptions, such as consideration of the researcher's own positioning and relationship to the subjects/topic and epistemological perspective, and the way the participants are treated in the research processes (through observations, interviews, narratives and other data gathering techniques) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this context, Swales and Feak (1994: 166; 2000: 206) posit the existence of "slow" and "fast" methods sections, the former being typical of certain social sciences, where authors include details and justifications when describing the sample and procedures, while the latter reflects the condensed style found in the hard sciences. The "slow" methods sections have been illustrated in the inclusion of justifications that occur after sampling

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descriptions (Lim, 2011), instrumental/material descriptions (Lim, 2014), and descriptions of data collection procedures (Lim, 2019). The importance of considering justifications for research procedures has also been given due consideration in a newly published monograph (Lim, 2021).

This basic distinction between the two types would also tie in with Bruce's (2008) distinction between methods in the sciences based on the need to "explain" in the "fast" way, and certain social science methods that adopt a narrative style combining "reporting" and "recounting" in the "slow" or "extended" way (all cited words are from the explanation provided in Bruce, 2008: 40). Moreover, since one of the tenets of qualitative inquiry is that no single method can grasp the complexity of ongoing human experience, qualitative researchers seeking triangulation often use original combinations of interconnected, interpretive methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The choice of a variety of qualitative methods (i.e. ethnography, conversation analysis or narrative analysis) would logically be harder to explain than a set of conventional laboratory tests or statistical procedures, for example. In short, although Lim's (2006) framework was developed specifically to address methods in social sciences, it does not really take account of the quantitative/qualitative division within this broad area. Lim's steps are fully consistent with the quantitative paradigm and relevant to the analysis of qualitative papers, but more research needs to be done to reveal what might be specific to the presentation of qualitative methods.

For all these reasons, it is worth exploring the methods sections of research papers within the qualitative paradigm, to examine how the different expectations of qualitative research are materialised in the text. A deeper understanding of this would have consequences for teaching academic writing in disciplines where qualitative research is an option. The research questions addressed were thus:

1. To what extent do methods sections in qualitative social science journals follow the 9-step framework proposed by Lim (2006)?
2. What other steps occur specifically in the methods sections of qualitative social science research papers?

2. CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The present paper uses a mixed methods approach to address the methods sections in four different journals that are explicitly dedicated to publishing empirical qualitative research, two with a healthcare focus, and two with more general sociological scope. These were selected in order to obtain a focused sample of empirical qualitative research. The corpus comprised all the methods sections from 30 articles collected consecutively from issues published in 2019 and 2020 in each of the following journals: *Global Qualitative Nursing Research* (Sage) and *Qualitative Health Research* (Sage), *Qualitative Sociology* (Springer) and *Qualitative Social Work* (Sage). All the journals had been positioned in Q1/Q2 on Scimago during the years

preceding collection. All the articles selected were empirical: review articles, essays and articles of a descriptive or narrative nature were excluded. Regarding the corpus size, although some previous studies of academic genres used samples consisting of only 10 (Chang & Swales, 1999; Pramoolsook et al., 2015), 20 (Lim, 2006) or 25 (Khamkhien, 2015) examples to represent a discipline, a consensus is emerging that a sample of 30 texts provides more reliable results (Cotos et al., 2017; Hyland, 2002; Zhang, 2022). In the journals in the present study, the methods sections were almost always labelled as such. The only exception to this was that in *Qualitative Sociology* the methods sometimes formed part of the introductory sections of the article and had to be extracted from continuous text, or had idiosyncratic titles. A subcorpus was constructed for each set of 30 sections, to facilitate comparison between journals, and the subcorpora were uploaded to Sketch Engine for lexical processing.

The research methods applied were as follows. Relying on Bhatia's (1993) principles of genre analysis, I followed a process of recursive reading and re-reading to explore the moves and steps in the text. In this, I followed Lim's (2006) 3-move, 9-step framework to obtain an overview of the general moves and steps within the sections, and I used a checklist to record which steps were used in each methods section, and calculated both the number of steps used in each article/journal and the number of times each step was used in each subcorpus. However, while reading, I also paid special attention to other aspects of the text that might be considered particularly relevant to research within the qualitative paradigm, such as reflection on the researcher's own position and how this affected data collection and analysis. I thus sought to expand the 9-step framework by identifying steps that explicitly indicated the presence of reflections on the researcher's own position or stance during data collection and analysis. Steps covering other aspects of particular relevance to qualitative inquiry, such as ethics clearance and safeguarding of subjects, were also noted. For ease of reference in the graphs and examples, the journals are abbreviated as follows: *Global Qualitative Nursing Research* (QualNurs) and *Qualitative Health Research* (QualHealth), *Qualitative Social Work* (QualSW) and *Qualitative Sociology* (QualSoc).

3. RESULTS

The quantitative section contains the results obtained by applying Lim's (2006) 9-step framework to the four subcorpora, followed by a description of the six new steps identified with an overview of their frequency. This is followed by a qualitative analysis of the six new steps, with examples from the different subcorpora.

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3.1. Quantitative step analysis

This section shows the frequency of the 9 steps in the four subcorpora, and then presents the additional steps found, with a brief overview and an account of their frequency.

3.1.1. Presence of 9 conventional steps in the four subcorpora

As mentioned above, the steps in each methods section were identified using Lim's 9-step framework (see Table 1), and the frequency of each step in each subcorpus is shown in Figure 1.
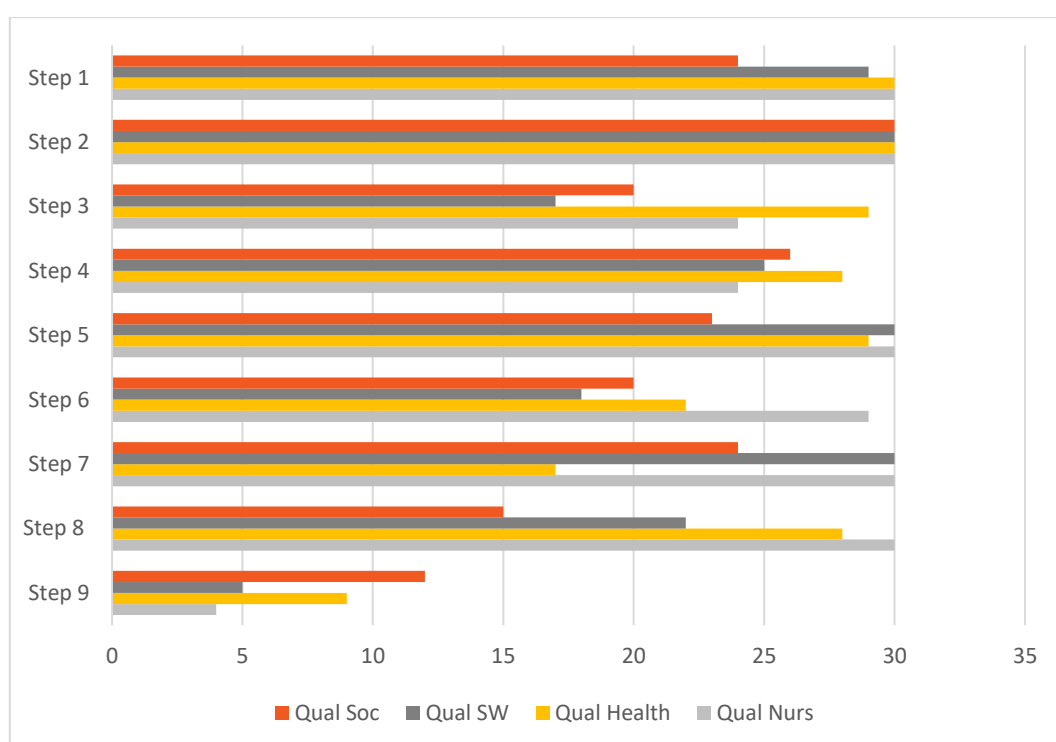

Figure 1. Steps found in the methods sections in each subcorpus (number of texts including each step in each subcorpus)

As we can observe, all the moves were represented in the majority of articles in all four journals, but not all the steps were universally present. The two health-related journals contained the largest number of steps (a mean number of 7.7 per methods section in *Global Qualitative Nursing Research* and 7.4 in *Qualitative Health Research*). The mean number of steps per article was slightly lower in *Qualitative Social Work* (6.9) and *Qualitative Sociology* (6.5), but we should note that the numbers are still relatively high, and that most articles in all the journals included at least two steps from each move.

Regarding the steps that appeared most frequently, the only step that was universally present was step 2 (recounting steps in data collection). Step 1 (describing the sample) and step 5 (explaining method of measuring variables) occurred in 113 and 112 sections respectively. These were followed by step 4 (presenting an overview of design, present in 103 cases) and step 7 (relating data analysis procedures, present in 101 cases). The steps from moves 1 and 2 that were found least in all the corpora were steps 3 (justifying the data collection procedure, 90 cases) and 6 (justifying method of measuring variables, 89 cases): many authors simply stated that they used interviews or thematic analysis, without providing any justification. When justifications were provided, they were brief, consisting of one sentence or one bibliographical reference. Overall, the step that appeared least of all was step 9, previewing results, found in only 30 cases. Where this did occur, the preview was of the most summary nature (it is actually rather surprising that a preview of results should occur at all in a methods section). For this reason, step 9 has been proposed as an "optional step" in the revised table (see Table 2).

As far as differences between the journals are concerned, all the methods sections from *Global Qualitative Nursing Research* contained steps 1, 2, 5, 7 and 8, while all those from *Qualitative Health Research* had steps 1 and 2, and a large proportion also had steps 3, 4, 5 and 8. The methods sections from *Qualitative Social Work* all contained steps 2, 5 and 7, and most also contained step 1. *Qualitative Sociology* presented the least homogeneous picture.

3.1.2. Additional steps identified

Analysis of the text also brought to light six steps that are not included in Lim's framework (2006, see Table 1), and which occurred with some frequency in the four subcorpora. These new steps are described in more detail with examples in the following section, but an overview of all the possible steps in the methods section is provided in Table 2.

Here, for greater clarity, the new steps are displayed in bold type, indicating where they are generally located in the move structure of the methods section. These steps can be considered optional, since they almost all occur in fewer than half of the texts in each subcorpus, with one important exception: the step "stating ethics clearance" occurs in 99 of the 120 methods sections analysed, either placed at the very beginning, mentioned briefly in move 1 or 3, or highlighted as an independent subsection at the end. The only journal in which a statement of ethics clearance appears not to be obligatory is *Qualitative Sociology*: this could reflect different editorial policy, different ownership (this is the only journal owned by Springer), or a time-lag factor (journals have gradually incorporated the need for explicit ethics clearance in the social sciences over the last few years). In general, it seems that "stating ethics clearance" should replace "previewing results" as an obligatory step for methods sections in this context.

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Rhetorical move	Constituent step
Move 1: Describing the data collection procedure/s	Step 1: Describing the sample
	Step 2: Recounting the steps in data collection
	Step 3: Justifying the data collection procedure/s **(*optional step: reflecting on the researcher and participants in the data collection procedures) (*optional step: reflecting on the difficulty or complexity of the data collection procedures)**
Move 2: Delineating the procedure/s for measuring variables	Step 4: Presenting an overview of the design
	Step 5: Explaining the method/s of measuring variables
	Step 6: Justifying the method/s of measuring variables
Move 3: Elucidating the data analysis procedure/s	Step 7: Relating the data analysis procedure/s
	Step 8: Justifying the data analysis procedure/s **(*optional step: reflecting on the researcher's role in the data analysis procedures) (*optional step: reflecting on the complexity of the data analysis procedures)**
	(*optional step: previewing the results)
Supplementary move (at any point)	**Step 9: Stating ethics clearance (*optional step: stating any additional measures taken to protect the subjects)**

Table 2. Revised framework for moves and steps in qualitative methods sections (*optional steps) (new steps indicated in bold type)

The six additional steps identified were quantified, and are displayed in Figure 2 below.

The steps can broadly be characterised as indexing reflexivity and complexity. Regarding their position in the text, the specific steps identified fall into three clear areas: data collection procedures (move 1), data analysis procedures (move 3), and ethics (usually at the beginning or end). At both the data collection and data analysis stages, then, it appears that qualitative researchers emphasise a reflexive stance, involvement with the subject of their research, and complexity of procedures and design, rather than striving to produce the smooth, seemingly effortless, impersonal accounts favoured in the quantitative paradigm. Examples and qualitative analysis of these steps are found in the following section. Since ethical considerations are generally related to the way data are collected, labelled and conserved (rather than to the subsequent phase of isolation of variables and analysis), they are sometimes included as part of the first move, but in other articles they are found in an independent subsection of the methods section, sometimes placed at the end, and occasionally at the beginning. Examples of conventional ethics clearance statements and additional safeguarding procedures are also provided in the following section.
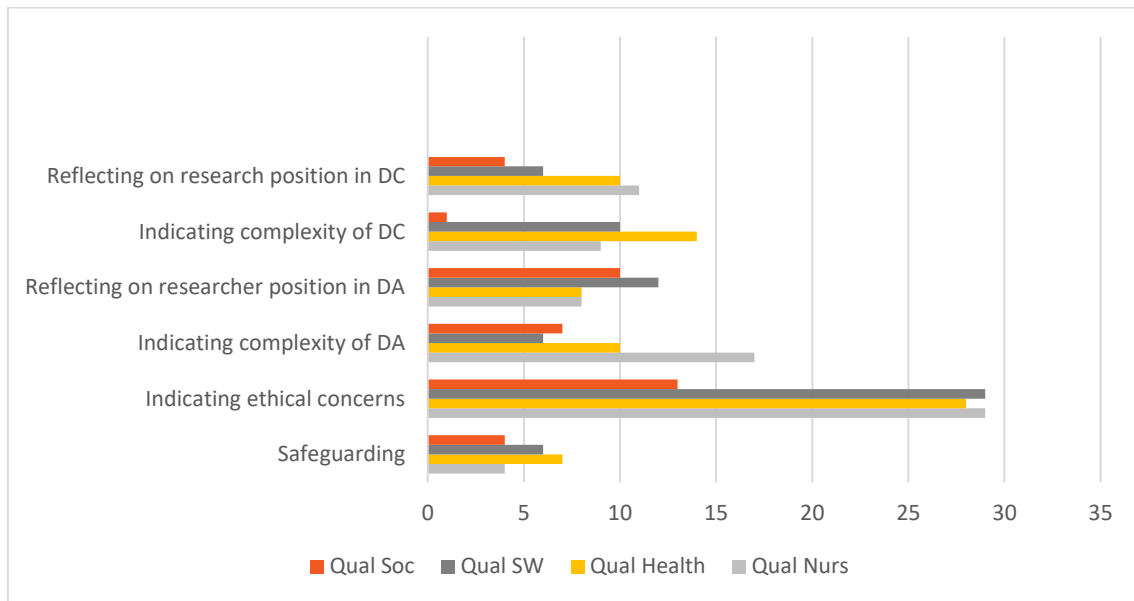
Figure 2. Additional steps found in methods sections in each subcorpus (number of texts including each step in each subcorpus)

3.2. Qualitative step analysis

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In this section, the new steps displayed in Table 2 are analysed, with examples from the corpus (to avoid redundancy, examples of the 9 steps identified previously are not provided). These steps are generally found located at some point within Lim's (2006) move 1 (data collection procedures) and move 3 (data analysis procedures), and they can be regarded as complementary to these moves. In move 1, authors may explain how their status, ethnicity, or other attributes facilitated or hindered their relationship with the subjects of the study, and they also sometimes discuss the difficulty of obtaining data or the shortcomings of their data collection methods. In move 3, authors may explain how their status, knowledge, experience or involvement affected the way they approached data analysis, and indicate layers of complexity in their data analysis procedures and how they overcame the issues that threatened validity or reliability. Although one might expect the ethical considerations to be mentioned in move 1, because they condition the overall access to subjects, the study design, and the data collection procedures, they often appear right at the beginning or end of the methods section, or are placed in an independent subsection. For this reason, the examples of ethics clearance and any complementary safeguarding statements are discussed last. (For a full overview of how these steps could be integrated into the overall moves and steps within the results section, please see Table 2).

Optional steps in move 1 on describing data collection procedures

Optional step 1: Reflecting on the researcher and participants in the data collection procedures

In general, the presence of the researcher within the research process was made visible to the reader.

(1) To acknowledge and minimize the influence of researcher bias on the results, the primary analyst maintained a reflexive journal throughout Phase 1, including the influence of her professional experiences of clinical education and communication. (*QualHealth*)

In a number of the papers in all four subcorpora, the researcher's position was problematised: the authors explicitly voice concerns about aspects of their own identity that might pose difficulties for members of the sample, such as their status, gender or ethnicity:

(2) I was, however, concerned that local interviewees might be reluctant to share their views about their interactions with the immigrants, especially with the son of an immigrant. (*QualSoc*)

In this step, the authors explain the measures they took to be accepted by members of the sample, or to be able to observe and interact with the sample in a neutral way:

(3) I tried not to be seen as an authority figure so students would act naturally around me. I did not reprimand students when they were off-task or misbehaving. I talked with them and asked questions as if we were friends. (*QualSoc*)

Some of the authors go into considerably more detail, using a narrative approach to tell the story of how they came to understand the way the target group related to them, and how they overcame problematic issues that arose from this.

(4) (…) statements made by women regarding my "normalcy" made it clear that although my gender allowed me to make the initial contact, other aspects of my identity proved more significant. At first, I encountered distance and suspicion, and realized that I had mistakenly assumed that characteristics such as class and social status were secondary to gender (…). Reflecting on my own appearance and physical characteristics (…) I looked much more like the hostel's professional staff than the residents, which possibly further enforced the social distance. Nevertheless, the women gradually felt more comfortable in my presence, beginning to talk freely about spousal relationships; concerns about friends, family, and the staff; and body issues. (*QualSoc*)

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Negative reactions by subjects are also sometimes mentioned, along with accounts of how they are handled.

(5) In some of the start-up sessions, the participants became emotional and started to cry when they discussed sensitive topics with the RNs. This meant that the researcher at times withdrew from the setting and was careful to handle the observation and the subsequent informal interviews in a careful and respectful manner. (*QualNurs*)

Although the vast majority of such statements revolve around the relationship between researcher and researched, occasionally other vitiating factors within the setting are openly stated:

(6) During the interview process, she faced some challenges. For example, when some interviewees were asked to evaluate government hospice care services, certain dissatisfactions were not able to be readily expressed because, due to political constraints, interviewees worried about not receiving government funding if they expressed too much negative emotion. (*QualSW*)

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some authors simply make a personal statement explaining their ethnicity, professional background, status, or other aspects of their identity. These are provided baldly, without an explicit connection to the rest of the text, seemingly in the spirit of acknowledging author identity and providing information that might be useful to readers.

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(7) I am a school social worker providing mental health counseling and case management to students. I work with students on making positive life choices and help them navigate difficulties at home and in school. (*QualSW*)

Optional step 2: Reflecting on the difficulty or complexity of the data collection procedures

Methodological choices are often discussed in terms of strengths and drawbacks, rather than simply being proposed as the most suitable method (8). Brief discussions of this kind are used to justify the combination of different methods to overcome potential problems.

(8) Focus group discussions, however, have a potential weakness. (…) have termed this as 'groupthink', which could limit what participants say and subsequently limit what is heard in focus groups. Therefore, in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with 16 participants after six focus groups were carried out. (*QualSW*)

It is notable that authors in these subcorpora demonstrate a spirit of openness, mentioning the problems that they had obtaining information and the "work in progress" status of their instruments (9):

(9) However, we experienced substantial challenges in getting rich data on how the participants related to the program, leading us to revise the interview guide. (*QualHealth*)

The admission that some of the data collection procedure had to be modified as time went on runs counter to the logic of much quantitative research, in which ongoing changes are not reported, but rather glossed over as though the final design had been planned from the outset. However, it is often found here, meticulously described in the methods section:

(10) I amended the interview questions during subsequent meetings with participants by asking more about help-seeking behaviors (…), yielding data that were constantly compared with help-seeking behaviors in the context of validation. (*QualNurs*)

Optional steps in move 3 on describing data analysis procedures

Optional step 3: Reflecting on the researcher's role in the data analysis procedures

As in the data collection phase, the author's own identity and experience can be understood to pose a theoretical problem when it comes to analysing the data. This is again acknowledged by a certain number of authors. In particular, authors' past experiences and professional or personal involvement are raised as a potential threat to objectivity:

(11) To remain open to the living meanings, essences, or "eidos", the interviewer self-acknowledged her own past experiences with other Mexican American adolescent mothers in clinical health settings and strove to put aside preconceived beliefs that might transfer to the young mothers who shared their stories. (*QualHealth*)

This threat can be addressed by making the conscious effort to overcome this problem, as in (11), or by the introduction of procedural checks and balances, as in (12). In this context, non-integral citations are often used to justify choices (Zhang, 2022):

(12) The lead research associate kept a research diary to help her identify preconceptions, and also to record thoughts and feelings following interviews, which were discussed by the authors (Shaw, 2012; VanManen, 1990). Discussions then took place between the two authors to compare interpretations and confirm final themes. (*QualSW*)

As well as knowledge/experience, the author's emotions are also held up for scrutiny as an aspect that could possibly introduce a bias into the data analysis:

(13) The validity threat related to data analysis was that our role in development might motivate us to portray Andy in a favorable light. Feelings of pride or disappointment

did indeed arise in different situations, and this is something we have regularly examined in reflexive memos. By reflexively confronting these feelings whenever we feared that they might influence the study, we believe we have focused on the participants' perspectives and stayed true to the data. (*QualHealth*)

In general, references to bias are usually countered with explanations of how such bias was overcome, again often providing citations:

(14) Peer debriefing was used with members of faculty and cohort at Rutgers University Doctor of Social Work Program (Padgett 2017). This method can reduce researcher bias and could help with coding. (*QualSW*)

Optional step 4: Reflecting on the complexity of the data analysis procedures

The data analysis is often described as involving complexity, although usually only a few specific details are given to illustrate this.

(15) Throughout the analysis, the authors worked together to ensure validity in an iterative and thoughtful analysis with repeated considerations and discussions on the relationships and interpretations of the data set. The findings were guided by "constant comparative analysis" by shifting attention from the whole data set to the individual case. (*QualNurs*)

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Sometimes the threat of bias is explicitly mentioned, and in this case, authors generally provide information about how they attempted to overcome it.

(16) To address potential bias and engage in reflexivity in the analytic process, we conducted multiple reads of transcripts, collaborated in four months of coding and revisions, and wrote extensive notes and memos during all phases of coding. (*QualSW*)

Finally, true to the epistemology of qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), claims of open-endedness are sometimes presented around the end of the methods section, suggesting that multiple interpretations may be in order, and rejecting claims to hegemonic knowledge.

(17) We tracked how meaning is created, rather than imposing meaning ourselves. (*QualSoc*)

Obligatory step 5: Stating ethics clearance

Ethics clearance statements are included in almost all the methods sections of three of the journals in this study, and they tend to be formulaic in nature.

(18) The study was granted approval by the Health Research Ethics Authority of Newfoundland and Labrador and by provincial health authorities. Ethical considerations included participant imposition, discomfort, confidentiality, and freedom to withdraw. (*QualNurs*)

Optional step 6: Stating any additional measures taken to protect the subjects

In addition to the ethics clearance statements, some authors display additional sensitivity to the subjects of their research, adding information about further safeguarding procedures, such as ongoing support for people involved (19), reminding them of the right to withdraw from the study, explanations of what happened when participants reacted badly (20) and so on.

(19) To minimize the likelihood of psychological harm resulting from the interview process, several safeguards were implemented, including the availability via phone of a registered clinical psychologist and providing participants with a list of mental health service resources. (*QualHealth*)

(20) When participants showed signs of severe emotional distress, the researchers, with the participants' consent, contacted the social worker assigned to their case at the NGO to arrange a follow-up. (*QualHealth*)

In this sense, some researchers also include brief acknowledgements of their own ethical responsibility for the work published.

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(21) Here, it is important to note that the ethical complexity of this kind of research requires that I, as the researcher, take full responsibility for any methodological issues that arose and all insights generated. (*QualSW*)

In the case of this example (21), we can speculate that the researcher's insistence on taking responsibility personally may have a twofold purpose. In this case, she is making explicit reference to the inevitable personal dimension when gathering and interpreting information about a highly sensitive topic (this paper is about attitudes to parenting by women who themselves come from troubled family backgrounds), as though to say that these are her insights, but these could be tinged by subjectivity. But at the same time, by expressly taking personal responsibility, she is providing a disclaimer that dissociates her institution, or the institutions that gave her access to this population, from her published results.

4. DISCUSSION

This research has shed light on the previously neglected area of methods sections in empirical qualitative social sciences. First, the methods sections found in the

qualitative social science journals investigated here, specifically in the social and healthcare fields, are relatively homogeneous and follow most of the steps described previously (Lim, 2006). Regarding the conventional 9-step framework, the results of the present study are similar to previous findings. Three of these journals (*Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, *Qualitative Health Research* and *Qualitative Social Work*) yielded a pattern resembling the management methods studied by Lim (2006), in that most examples included step 1 (describing the sample), step 2 (recounting steps in data collection), step 5 (explaining methods of measuring variables), step 7 (relating data analysis procedure) and step 8 (justifying data analysis procedure). Such a pattern was also confirmed by Farnia and Baratizade (2020) in applied linguistics. Notably, one of the journals in the present study, namely *Qualitative Sociology*, yielded lower scores for almost all the steps, which points to some variation between journals or subdisciplines. One interesting contrast between the present data and previous studies is that Lim (2006) found that step 4 (presenting an overview of the design) was relatively infrequent, while the present study identified this step in the majority of methods sections in all corpora. Finally, the results obtained here align with those of Farnia and Baratizade (2020) who also found that step 9 (previewing results) was infrequent. For pedagogical purposes, it would probably be useful to regard this step as optional, at most.

On the other hand, it is clear that previous papers that make claims about writing qualitative research based on corpora from management or applied linguistics may well not be representative of qualitative research in the social sciences as a whole. The qualitative methods sections analysed here include other steps that can be regarded as particularly characteristic of research within the qualitative paradigm (Sutton & Austin, 2015), in that they emphasise researcher reflexivity and awareness of complexity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), together with a heightened concern for the human subjects of the research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The absence of these steps from previous analyses of social science methods might be due to the fact that previous researchers did not consider them relevant. However, it is also likely that they reflect disciplinary differences: previous research centred mainly on management (Lim, 2006; Pramoolsook et al., 2015) or applied linguistics (Farnia & Baratizade, 2020; Khamkhien, 2015), where concerns with researcher reflexivity and ethical treatment of subjects may be less pressing. Some differences may also reflect ongoing developments in research practices (for example, it is now conventional to include institutional ethics clearance).

In general, however, we should not ignore the importance of the steps identified as reflecting the qualitative paradigm. As Cotos et al. (2017) discuss, the moves and steps that recur within research genres in different disciplines reflect underlying epistemological presuppositions, and these differ sharply between quantitative and qualitative approaches to the same subject matter. The present study adds to our knowledge of how researchers demonstrate reflexivity, rigour and credibility in qualitative research, and provides some pointers as to why it might be

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more difficult to write qualitative papers than to report strictly quantitative research. Many years ago, Belcher and Hirvela (2005) highlighted the difficulties of qualitative research writing for L1 English users, describing the experience as "dispiriting" (2005: 202) and calling for more focused academic writing support for L2 students working in qualitative research paradigms. Future studies could adopt a corpus-assisted approach to explore more detailed aspects such as lexical clusters or frame-slot structures found in these sections, or to compile local grammars of frequent lexis (see Breeze, 2015). It would also be interesting to examine methods sections across a range of social science areas in order to shed more light on interdisciplinary variation in this area.

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper has paved the way for preparing teaching material for academic writing classes to meet the needs of students working within qualitative social science paradigms. By using the revised framework of moves and steps presented here in Table 2, academic writing teachers should be able to raise student awareness of specific aspects of the target genre, and help them to identify exactly where and how it might be appropriate to show evidence of reflexivity, openness to complexity, and awareness of sensitivity to ethical issues. At the same time, this framework should not be regarded as a recipe to be followed faithfully, but rather as a set of heuristics, that is, strategies based on previous experience that have proved useful on previous occasions, but which might need to be adapted to present circumstances. In particular, my intuition as an L2 writing teacher is that the framework could be used during discovery activities designed to sensitize MA and PhD students to the different features of methods sections in their own chosen field. At a later stage, emergent L2 writers might find it useful as a checklist that will help them examine whether their own methods sections include enough detail on aspects such as researcher identity and reflexivity, the complexity of relations with participants, or the difficulty of data collection, which are peculiarly salient in many kinds of qualitative research.

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6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reopened the subject of support for L2 English users working within the qualitative research paradigm, addressing the key area of methods sections. On the basis of an empirical study of 120 methods sections from journals specializing in qualitative social science research, Lim's (2006) framework for moves and steps in methods sections has been revised, and an adapted framework for moves and steps in qualitative methods sections has been developed. The revised framework contains one new obligatory step (stating ethics clearance) and five new optional

steps involving different types of reflexivity (reflecting on the researcher and participants in the data collection procedures; reflecting on the difficulty or complexity of the data collection procedures; reflecting on the researcher's role in the data analysis procedures; reflecting on the complexity of the data analysis procedures; and stating any additional measures taken to protect the subjects). These moves have been analysed in depth, and illustrated by a large number of examples in each case.

The present study thus adds to the growing body of knowledge on academic genres and practices outside the more clearly defined preserves of quantitative research. But more importantly, it contributes to filling the gap that still exists as far as support for academic writing within the qualitative paradigm is concerned. It is to be hoped that in the future more L2 writers will take up the challenge of publishing qualitative studies in English, and that academic writing teachers will be able to provide reliable guidance and support.

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