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*QRC Report
January 14, 2014*

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Qualitative Research Commission Report

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In August 2012, the *Journal of Marriage and Family (JMF)* published an exchange on qualitative research (LaRossa, 2012a; with comments by Lareau, 2012; Matthews, 2012; Roy, 2012; and a reply by LaRossa, 2012b). In the exchange, LaRossa recommended that a qualitative research commission (QRC) be formed to facilitate a conversation about the qualitative-research culture of *JMF* and the culture of qualitative family research overall. The idea for a QRC grew out of several overlapping issues: (a) the feeling that considerable confusion exists over what constitutes good qualitative family research; (b) a concern that an assortment of scholars were choosing not to submit their qualitative manuscripts to *JMF*; (c) questions about the number of qualitative articles in *JMF* being relatively low; and (d) the possibility that some of the most innovative qualitative family research may not appear in the journal.

Central to the creation of a commission was the belief that individualized solutions (e.g., encouraging authors to read and obtain advice on how to write for publication), though certainly helpful, are not sufficient to remedy what seems to be an entrenched problem. Necessary, in addition, is a structural approach, one that critically examines the social fabric of the publication culture of *JMF* and that openly acknowledges the obstacles that qualitative researchers sometimes confront (cf., Mills, 1959). Thus, while we appreciate the value of educating authors about the expectations for publication in *JMF*, we also want to underscore the importance of carefully considering and evaluating what those expectations are.

¹ Authorship (except for the first author) was determined by alphabetical order.

The five of us have come together--as principal members of the QRC--to continue the conversation that was initiated in the exchange. During a series of monthly discussions, most of which were conducted via conference call, we talked about the nature and scope of qualitative research and the challenges that researchers face in trying to get their qualitative studies published in *JMF*. Troubling to us was the fact that, over the past 50 years, only a small fraction of articles in *JMF* have been qualitative in design. Even in recent decades, as enthusiasm for qualitative family research has risen, the number of qualitative articles in *JMF* has only marginally increased (Humble, 2012; LaRossa & Wolf, 1985; Matthews, 2012).

Not every trend is bad. It is encouraging to see the percentage of qualitative articles in *JMF* more than doubling since the early 1990s, from 3.1% (1991-1995) to 8.7% (2006-2010). Still, these absolute numbers seem slight, when placed alongside the numbers that other family journals have posted. Over the same stretch of time, the percentage of qualitative articles in the *Journal of Family Issues* increased from 10.1% (1991-1995) to 19.6% (2006-2010), while the percentage of qualitative articles in *Family Relations* jumped from 15.7% (1991-1995) to 28.3% (2006-2010) (Humble, 2012). Admittedly, the three journals do not have identical missions, but they are similar in that they all are dedicated to publishing high-quality family research.

Why, we asked, with so many qualitative family researchers across the globe, are so few qualitative articles published in *JMF*? And why has this pattern persisted for as long as it has? (The percentage of primarily qualitative articles in *JMF* today is about what it was in the 1960s and 1970s [LaRossa & Wolf, 1985].) Lastly, what concrete steps can be taken to turn this situation around? These are the chief questions that guided the commission's work.

Because we believed it was essential to have a variety of voices contribute to the conversation, we assembled a 20-member advisory panel from whom we sought guidance (in one-on-one interviews) and who were asked to read a draft of our report and offer constructive feedback. For the advisory panel, we aimed to include: (a) the current and former editors of *JMF*; (b) researchers who have published in *JMF* and those who have published in other journals; (c) scholars who could represent diverse modes of qualitative research; and (d) people with different disciplinary ties (see Appendix).

In addition, we placed notices about the QRC in selected outlets (e.g., in the National Council on Family Relations' [NCFR] *Zippy News* and in one of the American Sociological Association's Family Section's monthly e-mails), and requested that people consider offering input (to a gmail account that was specifically set up for this purpose) on issues that they felt needed to be part of the commission's work. A draft of the report also was posted on an NCFR website in October 2013, so that individuals could read it and provide comments. Lastly, open-ended discussions on the mission of the QRC and the publication culture of *JMF* were held at sessions at the 2012 and 2013 NCFR annual meetings.

The opinions that we received from these various forums were heartfelt and reflect the experiences of not only the people we directly talked to (or heard from) but also the experiences of others whom our informants knew (e.g., some individuals told stories about students and colleagues who did qualitative work).

In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of what we have learned from the feedback and discussions. We then move on to offer a number of recommendations, generated from the feedback/discussions, which hopefully will lead to positive changes in the publication culture of *JMF*. Our report is not intended to be the final word on the subject, but represents one phase in a conversation and a process that we hope will continue.

OVERVIEW OF FEEDBACK/DISCUSSIONS

Qualitative-Research Culture of *JMF*

A complaint that, perhaps more than any other, was registered is that *JMF* **may not be as open as it should be to publishing qualitative work**. Some scholars felt that they had a better chance of receiving fairer and more constructive reviews from other journals (with *Family Relations* and the *Journal of Family Issues* being two of the journals mentioned). More than a few individuals had decided (long ago, in several instances) not to submit their manuscripts to *JMF*. This hesitancy to submit suggests that one of reasons that the percentage of qualitative articles in *JMF* has been low is that the number of qualitative manuscripts submitted to the journal has been low. To the extent that highly-qualified qualitative researchers have been among those choosing not to submit manuscripts to *JMF*, it is possible that the aggregate quality of qualitative submissions has suffered.

Asked about the qualitative-research culture of *JMF*, many said that it was **unduly narrow**, with a bias toward research that adhered mainly, if not exclusively, to positivistic or postpositivistic standards. In the minds of some, there seemed to be little room in *JMF* for publishing cutting-edge qualitative research that employed critical approaches or postmodern approaches. Contrary to *JMF*'s mission to showcase the best family research, some of the best qualitative family research may not appear in *JMF*.²

To be sure, authors have a responsibility to make the strongest possible case for why their designs are well suited to the research questions they pose. But reviewers also have a responsibility to judge each design on its own merits, and to use **appropriate method-sensitive and epistemological-sensitive standards** in doing so. This maxim applies to quantitative researchers who occasionally review qualitative manuscripts and qualitative researchers who routinely review qualitative work. (In the feedback we received, we heard accounts of the ways that qualitative researchers could sometimes be the harshest critics, insisting in their reviews that this or that approach "is not *the* way qualitative research is done.") A feeling expressed, and one that we share, is that *JMF* would benefit from a more expansive attitude toward qualitative research, one that not only acknowledges the intrinsic worth of qualitative research but that also respects and encourages different approaches to qualitative research.

² An important question to ask, but one for which there is no simple answer, is whether qualitative submissions to *JMF* have a lower acceptance rate than quantitative submissions. To our knowledge no has carried out a multivariate analysis that systematically took into account not only research design, but also the gender and academic rank of author, as well as other factors. An analysis of this kind was done on submissions to the *American Sociological Review* (Bakanic, McPhail, & Simon, 1987). We suggest that a similar kind of analysis be carried out for *JMF* (LaRossa, 2012b; Roy, 2012).

For example, a key issue that repeatedly came up, both in the feedback we received and in our own discussions, was **sample size**. Individuals said that some *JMF* reviewers had a tendency to automatically mistrust small samples, using numbers alone as a fundamental marker of the quality of a manuscript; and some *JMF* reviewers also appeared insensitive to the fact that, in qualitative work, a study of 10 carefully-chosen family groups might constitute a stronger design than a study of 100 randomly-selected individual family members. (Bigger is not, *de facto*, better.) Likewise, interviewing/observing a small set of individuals/families multiple times might constitute a stronger design than interviewing/observing a large set of individuals/families just once.

Manuscripts submitted to *JMF* are expected to make an important **contribution** to the literature, but in qualitative work, perhaps more so than in quantitative work, the definition of a contribution can vary widely and be open to (sometimes spirited) debate. Here, too, some of the individuals we spoke with were of the opinion that the culture of *JMF* was excessively narrow, with reviewers often applying standards that were more applicable to judging quantitative research (e.g., automatically rejecting a qualitative inquiry because its sample was not representative of a varied population, or not seriously considering some of the unique features of qualitative research).

What kind of contributions might qualitative research make? It might offer compelling detail through attention to family processes or revelation of dynamics that cannot be gained with other methods. These details might distinguish talk from action and reveal contradictions and situated meanings. It might not stop at confirmation but go on to promote discovery and develop concepts and hypotheses, along with theories, in different forms. It might problematize and question the accepted or obvious in family life, and illuminate gaps in our understanding. It might offer innovative and original thinking about new areas of research, all the while addressing the core questions that drive the community of family scholars and raising issues that are framed by these core questions. Individuals indicated that each of these contributions could be "value added" to literature, theory, practice, and policy in *JMF*. They insisted that qualitative research should not be dismissed for having missed the methodological bar of a certain sample size or for not having adhered to a popular, though not necessarily suitable-to-the-task, analytic strategy.

Linked to the notion of contribution is the belief (or, for some, taken-for-granted assumption) that a qualitative manuscript should engage in **theorizing** and/or advance a particular **theoretical perspective**. From what we have been able to discern, however, frequently left unspecified, in reviewers' comments, is the meaning of *theory* from the reviewers' point of view. If and when a definition of theory is articulated, it most often is equated with causation and explanation. The multiple ways of thinking about theory typically are not entertained or explored (see Abend, 2008). Theoretical work in *JMF* thus can be a constricted exercise that relies on rigid criteria. On this count, too, *JMF* would benefit from a more flexible mindset. Diverse modes of theorizing should be supported and applauded.

Culture of Qualitative Family Research Overall

As the premier journal in family social science, *JMF* is not simply a publication outlet. People pay close attention to articles in *JMF*, and they take note of what is not published in the journal. (*JMF* is ranked first among 38 journals in the Family Studies category. From 2011 to 2012, its impact

factor rose from 2.028 to 3.006 [Wiley Blackwell to NCFR, personal communication, June 19, 2013].) It could be argued that, for many, *JMF* is a prism through which the family field is defined.

Very good qualitative articles certainly have appeared in *JMF*. They just have not appeared as often as many people think they should have. Numbers alone, however, do not tell the whole story. The fact that *JMF* has a reputation for not publishing a fair share of qualitative research is a serious impediment to the professional fortunes of family scholars. Some academics may not be hired, tenured, or promoted because their work has not been published in the top journal in their field. If this pattern were to continue, a good deal of significant work might not be carried out at all, because family scholars and their students might perceive that it would have little chance of appearing in the journal where, from the point of view of hiring/tenure/promotion committees, their work *must* appear. Looked at even more broadly, it is not just that some qualitative work is not being published in *JMF*, it is that some *groundbreaking* qualitative work is not being published in *JMF*.

Over the years, qualitative researchers have produced important insights on some of the most pressing issues of the day. If qualitative researchers were to choose not to provide a valuable angle of vision on these issues, much that needs to be known about these issues might never come to light. Imagine how detrimental it would be if the study of physical and sexual abuse were limited to quantitative approaches or to a very narrow set of qualitative approaches. What might be overlooked? What family dynamics might not be uncovered? Who might not be studied, or listened to, or helped?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Encouraging Submissions of Qualitative Manuscripts

Some scholars are not submitting their qualitative work to *JMF* because they feel that *JMF* is not as open as it should be to publishing that work. As a result, the aggregate quality of the qualitative manuscripts that *JMF* receives may be lower than what would be ideal. This is a situation that must be directly addressed. Scholars should have little doubt that *JMF* welcomes qualitative research.

To encourage qualitative submissions to JMF, we recommend a pro-active "reach-out" program that communicates that everyone involved with JMF, from the publisher and executive editor on down, is committed to increasing the percentage and quality of qualitative articles in the journal. A multi-faceted approach is needed. A JMF editorial essay that further broadcasts and reinforces the journal's commitment to publishing qualitative work would be helpful. (Essays encouraging a broad range of submissions to JMF have been published before, though not all necessarily referred to qualitative research, per se [e.g., see Booth, 1986; Coleman, 1992; Demo, 2008; Milardo, 1996; Raley, 2013; Sprey, 1982; Walker, 2002]. In 1996, the mission statement for JMF was revised to communicate that qualitative submissions were welcome (R. Milardo to QRC, personal communication, October 28, 2013]. Several years ago, the Gerontologist ran an editorial essay, encouraging the submission of qualitative work and "confirming that a wide array of substantive and methodological approaches are considered appropriate for publication" [Schoenberg & McAuley, 2007]. Recently, the Journal of Gerontology did the same [Warren-Findlow, 2013].) Qualitative articles also could be regularly highlighted, by making them lead articles or by singling them out for media attention. A "call for papers" for a special issue or a

special section of an issue devoted to qualitative family research, as the Journal of Family Theory and Review did in June 2012 and is scheduled to do again, would also be a good idea, especially if the "call" was widely publicized in a variety of newsletters and online forums. (To our knowledge, the August 2012 exchange on qualitative research is the only time JMF has set aside a section of an issue devoted to qualitative research, though JMF editors have invited articles on qualitative research for the decennial issues on theory and methods.) The executive editor and deputy editors could actively seek out qualitative manuscripts, by sending e-mails to qualitative family researchers and inviting them to submit their work. (An invitation need not be a guarantee that the work will be accepted.) Executive editors, deputy editors, and editorial board members might, in addition, be on the lookout for groundbreaking work. Hearing a compelling presentation on a qualitative study at a professional meeting could prompt a suggestion that the author submit a qualitative manuscript to JMF.

Education and Training for Reviewers of Qualitative Manuscripts

When educational programs on qualitative research are developed, they generally focus on what researchers can do to get their work into print. Thus, *JMF* has periodically published articles on how to write up one's research (e.g., Matthews, 2005), and NCFR conference organizers often schedule sessions on how to navigate in the world of publication.

Not as commonly found, but also needed, are educational/training programs on reviewing manuscripts. *JMF* does offer reviewer guidelines (see Bengtson & MacDermid, n.d.), which are helpful, but given the present situation with respect to *JMF*, we believe it would also be helpful if there were a series of open discussions on reviewing qualitative manuscripts for the journal.

To ensure that qualitative manuscripts submitted to JMF are fairly reviewed, we recommend that sessions on "Reviewing Qualitative Manuscripts for JMF," led by the executive editor and one or more deputy editors who render decisions on qualitative manuscripts, be a regular feature at NCFR meetings and an occasional feature in other forums (e.g., international conferences, webinars, and live chats). These sessions would cover key issues, such as judging sample size, assessing diverse qualitative techniques and epistemologies, evaluating different kinds and levels of theorizing, and appraising a manuscript's overall contribution. In addition, editors could encourage exchanges between reviewers on manuscripts with challenging methodological or theoretical issues, and these exchanges could then be abstracted for distribution to a larger pool of reviewers of qualitative manuscripts. Finally, consideration should be given to preparing reviewer guidelines that speak directly to evaluating qualitative manuscripts. Invitations to review a qualitative manuscript would include a reference to these guidelines.

Reviewer Expertise

Besides setting the overall tone for a journal, editors are the ones who decide which submissions should be accepted. Because the recommendations they receive can be significantly different from one another and of variable quality, editors have the authority (and responsibility) to independently judge whether a manuscript should be published. With each submission, they strive to make what they hope are "the right calls." The reviewers for a journal, however, make an enormous difference, too. Although it is certainly within the power of an editor to offer a "revise-and-resubmit" or an "acceptance" on a manuscript where, for example, two of three reviewers have strongly

recommended "rejection," an editor is less likely to do so for a journal that receives a large number of submissions and is very competitive. *JMF* falls into this category. Its editorial office receives over 700 manuscripts per year. Of these, only about 15% are accepted for publication, after one or more revisions (About *JMF*, n.d.)

The influence of reviewers at any journal, but especially at a journal like *JMF*, underscores the importance of having skilled scholars in the reviewer pool and the necessity of ensuring that reviewers are qualified to evaluate the manuscripts they are sent. With *JMF* receiving so many submissions, the logistics of the reviewer-selection process can be daunting. Still, for the editorial process to be fair, good matches must be made.

The first step in selecting reviewers for submissions is made by the *JMF* editorial staff. Often, the staff may be faced with choosing among reviewers with limited or unknown expertise in a specific qualitative approach. To ensure a better fit, we encourage the staff to consult frequently with the executive editor or a deputy editor about reviewer selection.

One piece of information that the *JMF* editorial staff uses to link reviewers with submitted manuscripts is the Areas of Expertise listing on the Scholar One website. When reviewers register, they must identify the areas in which they feel they are qualified to judge their peers. Reviewers who would like to review qualitative manuscripts currently have seven categories they may check: Content Analysis, Ethnography, Field Research, Grounded Theory, Participant Observation, Phenomenology, and/or Qualitative Research. Although these might seem to be a reasonable set of possibilities, the seven categories are far fewer than the 30 some-odd categories that quantitative researchers might choose from; and they do not capture the full range of qualitative techniques or epistemologies upon which researchers might rely. For example, Narrative Inquiry, Personal Document Analysis, Historical Methods, and Mixed-Methods are not on the list. Neither is Analytic Induction, Case Analysis, Extended Case Methods, or Feminist Methods (though under Theory one may check Feminist). Also, In-Depth Interviewing is not listed (yet quantitative researchers may choose Survey Research, separating it from Observation). There is a listing for Grounded Theory Methods (GTM), which might be sufficient to cover the methods, were it not for the fact that multiple (and sometimes conflicting) versions of GTM exist (e.g., Glaserian Approach, Straussian Approach, Constructivist Approach, Situational Analysis Approach), which leaves room for a serious mismatch between an author and a reviewer on a GTM-based manuscript.

To better represent the complexity of qualitative research, we recommend that the Area of Expertise listing for reviewers be expanded so that it includes a fuller range of methodological and epistemological approaches. Having an expanded Area of Expertise choice will facilitate a better match between reviewers and authors. Upon the submission of their manuscripts, authors would be directed to the Area of Expertise listing and be asked to check any and all categories that apply to their work. They also could mention the categories in their cover letters. This category-selection process will help to better convey where authors place their manuscripts in the field. Along with these changes, reviewers periodically would be asked to update their Areas of Expertise profile.³

³ When manuscripts are ultimately accepted, authors are required to select a few keywords that will appear at the bottom of the first page of the article. The expertise selections that we are talking about here pertain to the review process and are separate from the keyword choices that are made at the time of publication.

Reviewer Pool

Every journal must rely on its editorial board and on its *ad hoc* reviewers. The editorial board is especially important, because the members of the board review quite a few manuscripts each year. (Generally, at least one member of the *JMF* editorial board is asked to serve as a reviewer on new submissions.) Although the *JMF* editorial board has over 110 members, some of whom are experienced qualitative researchers, the expertise of the board members may not represent the full range of methodological and epistemological approaches (see above).

Worth examining also is whether a small pool of qualitative researchers is repeatedly being asked to review the qualitative manuscripts that are submitted to *JMF*, and whether highly-skilled qualitative family researchers are not in the reviewer pool at all. If this is the case, authors may not be receiving the best evaluations possible (positive or negative), because the most qualified person to review a particular manuscript may not be among those asked to do the review.

To better represent the complexity of qualitative research, we recommend that the number of editorial board members who are experienced qualitative reviewers be expanded and that every effort be made to identify candidates with expertise that complements the methodological and epistemological expertise of the current members of the board. In conjunction with this, the pool of ad hoc reviewers should be expanded so that the overall pool of reviewers with qualitative experience is as large and as diverse as it can be.

Deputy Editors

Since the late 1990s and accelerating in recent years, *JMF* has employed a system in which the deputy editors (generally four in number) are designated as action editors along with the executive editor (Demo, 2008; Milardo, 1996). From the beginning of the transition, there has been one deputy editor who had expertise in qualitative research. Generally, most of the qualitative manuscripts submitted to *JMF* are assigned to this deputy editor.

Since the vast majority of the manuscripts that *JMF* receives are quantitative in design, it seems to make sense for there to be at least three action editors (if not four, counting an executive editor with expertise in quantitative research) who are qualified to review these manuscripts. Since comparatively fewer submissions are qualitative, it may seem also to make sense to have one action editor to review them. A shortcoming of this system, however, is that it assumes that the deputy editor for qualitative research is sufficiently qualified to render decisions on all qualitative submissions, regardless of the techniques used and regardless of whether s/he has personal experience employing those techniques. This certainly is not what is assumed when it comes to assigning quantitative manuscripts to the other deputy editors. For example, the fact that a demographer is recruited to fill one of the *JMF* deputy editor positions is a tacit, if not explicit, acknowledgment that demography manuscripts should be assigned to a demographer and not to, say, an experimentalist.

To better represent the complexity of qualitative research (and to create opportunities for discussions between or among editors about qualitative submissions), we recommend that there be at least two deputy editors who are experienced qualitative researchers. Given the number of qualitative manuscripts that JMF receives, there may not appear to be a need (at least at the moment) to have two deputy editors who primarily make decisions on qualitative manuscripts. But it is possible for one of the other deputy editors to be skilled in both qualitative and quantitative research, and for that deputy editor, along with the deputy editor for qualitative research, to be assigned a proportionate number of qualitative manuscripts. Preferably, the qualitative techniques with which each of the two deputy editors would be familiar would not be identical. Thus, one of the deputy editors might be particularly skilled at evaluating ethnographic and participant observation research, whereas the other deputy editor might be particularly skilled at evaluating in-depth interview projects and feminist-based methods. Ideally, one or both of the deputy editors would have experience with mixed-methods approaches, and one or both would have a deep familiarity with the debates on the methodology and epistemology of qualitative research.

Expanding the Number of Pages for Qualitative Manuscripts

It is a challenge for researchers to reduce a complicated study and a nuanced argument to the length of a journal article. But the challenge is especially acute for qualitative researchers, given how much space it takes to present qualitative data excerpts (vs. presenting coefficients in tables). *JMF* recently raised its page limit from 30 to 35 pages to offer more space to both qualitative and quantitative researchers. This is a welcome change, but it may not be sufficient enough to accommodate qualitative work. It is possible that some qualitative researchers are choosing not to submit their work to *JMF* because they find its page limits too restrictive.

To encourage qualitative submissions to JMF, we recommend that the page limit for qualitative and mixed-methods (qualitative/quantitative) submissions be raised to 40 pages. This is more in line with the length of many of the manuscripts that, after revision and addition, are ultimately accepted for publication in JMF. Little would be lost and much might be gained, if the extra pages were offered at initial submission.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the QRC was to investigate concerns about the qualitative-research culture of *JMF*, to carefully consider these concerns, and to present a series of broad-based recommendations. Our work was intended to take seriously issues arising from the limited visibility of qualitative research in the journal. We reached out to a 20-member advisory panel as well as to many others. Considering the input we received, we developed specific recommendations, which we offer here as a (partial) response to the concerns we have experienced and heard. Our sincere hope is that this report will encourage further dialogue.

We close by underscoring the palpable support and deep investment a wide variety of family scholars have in qualitative research and in the field of family studies. The overriding sentiment is one of encouragement and excitement, and we optimistically look forward to what lies ahead.

APPENDIX: ADVISORY PANEL MEMBERS

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