

## **Editorial**

### **Researching outside the box:**

#### **Welcoming innovative qualitative inquiry to Nurse Education Today**

I would like to begin by thanking Billy Lauder for inviting me to write this editorial, following my recent appointment to the NET International Advisory Board. My first aim in what follows is to make some critical comments about trends I have seen in published qualitative research articles over the years of my involvement with NET and other mainstream international nursing journals. In this regard, I speak as a qualitative research teacher, supervisor, article and book writer, and peer reviewer and past editorial board member of journals in and beyond the discipline of nursing.

On the basis of these critical comments, my second aim is to argue the need for an increase in innovative qualitative articles in NET. This will bring our journal more into line with the developing state of the art global picture of qualitative inquiry, evident in recent years in journals informing wider interdisciplinary fields in the social and human sciences and the humanities. I believe that such a broadening of scope can only enhance the status of NET as a world leader in creative nurse educational research and scholarship.

In the light of these two aims, again responding to a request from Billy, I will end my editorial by describing related amendments to the journal's article guidelines for authors on structuring innovative qualitative articles, and a corresponding increase in peer reviewers, appropriate for the task ahead.

#### **Methodological and representational normativity**

It seems to me that published qualitative inquiry in the major mainstream international peer reviewed nursing journals is frequently, but not exclusively, normative at methodological and representational

levels – a state of affairs which I have previously critically commented on and debated in the mental health nursing press (Grant, 2011, 2012; McKenzie, 2012). Such normativity constitutes a tacit appeal for authors and peer reviewers to conform to an assumed correct set of onto-epistemological assumptions and related writing, editorial and publishing practices.

At methodological levels, I have seen a decades-long trend in mainstream nursing journals of articles revealing authors' aspirations to maintain a kind of safe and conservative fidelity with the 'big three' root approaches – Phenomenology, Ethnography and Grounded Theory – either explicitly, or when method-focused and theory-silent, implicitly. At representational levels, such articles tend to be structured and written according to realist and positivist expectations, standards and rigour assumptions.

These representational trends are also apparent in this journal in the very few examples of new generation ethnographic variants, such as autoethnography. The work of O'Keeffe (2015) is a case in point: while being interesting and original in terms of content, it is written and presented in a way that simultaneously fulfils normative structural conventions while appearing singularly at odds with writing and textual structuring practices in the broader contemporary interdisciplinary autoethnographic communities (Grant et al., 2013; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Sparkes, in press). This begs the question of the extent to which the normative structuring that work such as this conforms compromises its creative and emotional potential and impact.

Methodological and representational normativity has been given added legitimacy in this journal in recent years, in calls to prioritise rigour in the context of governing theoretical principles (eg Ball et al., 2011), and in the need to provide specific item checklists for the authors of qualitative articles (eg Salzmann-Erikson, 2013). Clearly, as Long and Johnson (2005) argued over a decade ago, there is an indisputable ongoing need to prepare future nurse educational researchers to undertake qualitative

inquiry. However, these trends and their legitimising principles and checklists inevitably all work towards influencing NET qualitative article writers' authors conformity to realist-positivist ontological principles, assumptions and representational practices.

The need to report on 'findings', for example, implies worlds which are discovered rather than made. This leads to articles that privilege propositional, or 'head', knowledge, written to instruct and contribute to the cumulative story of 'what we know'. Unfortunately, what is de-privileged and implicitly excluded in this state of affairs is work which proceeds from implicational, or 'heart', scholarship, whose purpose in contrast is to connect with readers in ways that allow them to move their own storied lives forward.

Now, of course there is nothing in principle wrong with nursing scholars maintaining long-standing methodological and representational trends in an editorial and publishing context that respects a broad and developing range of methodological, paradigmatic and writing approaches and practices. However, an insufficiently scrutinised, almost exclusive adherence to normative methodologies and related conventions, coupled with a relative neglect of non-normative qualitative approaches, signals scholarly and paradigmatic insularity.

### **Towards encouraging innovative forms of qualitative inquiry**

It seems obvious to me that such adherence is regressive. It discourages nurse educators and their students from exploring and gaining expertise in innovative approaches and practices that inherently trouble received and perpetuated wisdom, around what counts as qualitative inquiry and how it should be presented (Short and Grant, 2016; Grant et al., 2013). 'Innovation' in this context does not imply a lack of theoretical- and paradigm appropriate rigour. It refers to the kinds of rigour-evident, methodological and representational adventurism and experimentation that can be routinely found in interdisciplinary qualitative journal such as *Qualitative Inquiry* and *TQR* (The Qualitative Report).

Establishing and encouraging innovative approaches, principles and practices in nurse education may prompt other welcome developments in undergraduate and postgraduate curricula and teaching. These include students being helped to engage with qualitative inquiry in more emotionally-focused ways, in contexts of expanding fields of methodological and paradigmatic pluralism, with a correspondingly reduced emphasis on onto-epistemological certainty. An example of my own co-written work which hopefully illustrates this has recently been published in NET as a 'Contemporary Issue' (Short and Grant, 2016). However, work such as this needs a more secure future home in the journal as original research.

### **Researching outside the box**

In my view, it is therefore timely for qualitative inquiry in nurse education to explore and embrace the following, continually developing trends, apparent in the wider qualitative communities beyond nursing. With co-researcher colleagues from nursing and other disciplines, and the mental health survivor communities, I have for several years been associated with a standpoint position that values critical, poststructural and highly reflexive forms qualitative inquiry (Grant, 2014, Grant et al., 2013, Short et al., 2013).

At a general level, this standpoint takes issue with assumptions of the sufficiency and coherence of the literal voice, and individual and group identities of participants and researchers, which are evident in normative qualitative designs (Grant, 2014). This has implications for representing such identities: the ambiguity and contradictions within and between individuals and their lives makes any assumed gross similarities between research participants problematic, confounding the forms of colonising representational and thematic practices routinely found in normative qualitative papers (Grant, 2014).

Poststructural qualitative researchers also write in ways that display the historical, contextual and discursive forces impacting on all stakeholders in research designs (Grant et al., 2013). Moreover, the critical and reflexive sensibilities that accompany the poststructural standpoint alert researchers working within this paradigm to the ways in which they and their participants are inevitably always inscribed within social and material structures of power.

Critical, poststructural and reflexive transdisciplinary qualitative inquiry calls for never-ending related developments and shifts in representational practices. This includes writing that proceeds from narrative and autoethnographic inquiry as poetry (eg Galvin and Prendergast, 2016; Pithouse-Morgan, 2016; Short and Grant, 2016; Tilley-Lubbs, 2011), fiction (eg Caine et al 2016; Henson 2016), and ideological critique of pedagogic practices (Grant and Radcliffe, 2015).

In recent years, embracing contemporary representational practices has also allowed myself and colleagues to write experimental autoethnography, in columnised, rather than linear, narrative form (Short et al., 2007); to celebrate innovation in contemporary autoethnographic inquiry in the UK (Short et al., 2013); and to move the international agenda forward for autoethnographic research and practice, around issues such as voice, authorial intent, reader response and writing practices (Turner et al., in press). This work illustrates and reflects the experimental, reflexively-sophisticated 'messy text' turn that signalled new directions in transdisciplinary qualitative inquiry three decades ago, away from realist-positivist allegiances (see eg Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fisher, 1986).

As contemporary developments in, and exemplars of, qualitative inquiry, the above work clearly confounds representational and editorial assumptions and strictures on an assumed 'correct way' to present qualitative research journal articles.

**Revisions to NET author guidelines and an expanded peer reviewer strength**

In the light of my editorial argument, with a view to encouraging the future submission of qualitative articles that challenge the exclusivity of normative methodological and representational practices, corresponding changes have been made to this journal's author guidelines. The peer reviewer strength of the journal is also in the process of being expanded to enable a fair and appropriate reviewing process for such contributions. This growing list, of new transdisciplinary peer reviewers, already contains international scholars from education, sociology and nursing.

In line with our journal's stated intent to publish work that demonstrates originality and is constructively critical of current initiatives, it is my hope that this will encourage and hasten the publication of a much needed, broadened range of creative and innovative qualitative research papers. This will accord appropriate respect to the communication- and emotion-rich, creative human discipline that is nursing, and hopefully prompt similar developments in other mainstream nursing journals.

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