

Editorial

Increasing gerontological communication

I am pleased to report new appointments to the editorial team and plans for expansion of the journal. Last summer Miles Lambert succeeded Jean Wilkinson as the Editorial Assistant, and to the great credit of them both, the transition caused practically no delay in the handling of the submitted papers. Then in November 2006, Mima Cattan of Leeds Metropolitan University was appointed as the journal's first Associate Editor. Mima's academic roots are in medical sociology and anthropology. I find her magnificently thoughtful and constructive, not only about the practicalities and responsibilities of an editor's trade, as with concern for the novice author when they receive an unfavourable decision letter, but also about broad epistemological issues in the production and communication of gerontological understanding. Mima's presence will be creative, stimulating and welcome support. Her appointment is to enable more papers to be published, to which I now turn.

The demand for space in the journal and the quality of the accepted papers continue to rise. These trends have been evident for 12 years, and the response of successive editors has been to expand the annual volumes. In 1995, the last year in which the journal comprised just four issues, there were 592 pages and 19 main papers were published. In the following year, 26 papers were published in the six issues. Since then, the annual page length has increased from around 800 to 960, and the number of published main papers has risen to over 40 (the average length has fallen). Put another way, since 1995 the number of papers published each year has approximately doubled, but the number of submissions has increased approximately one-and-a-half times. An eight-year to date trend of rising submissions began in 1998, when 65 papers were received compared to 57 in 1997 (Figure 1). Every year since the number of submissions has increased, to 136 in 2006. The growth has not been in inappropriate or lazily-prepared papers; indeed, my firm view is that, at least over the last five years, average quality has increased. We receive more papers based on large, rigorous national and special-topic databases, more papers from multi-disciplinary research teams, and more reports from concerted and well designed in-depth studies. The share of the published papers by

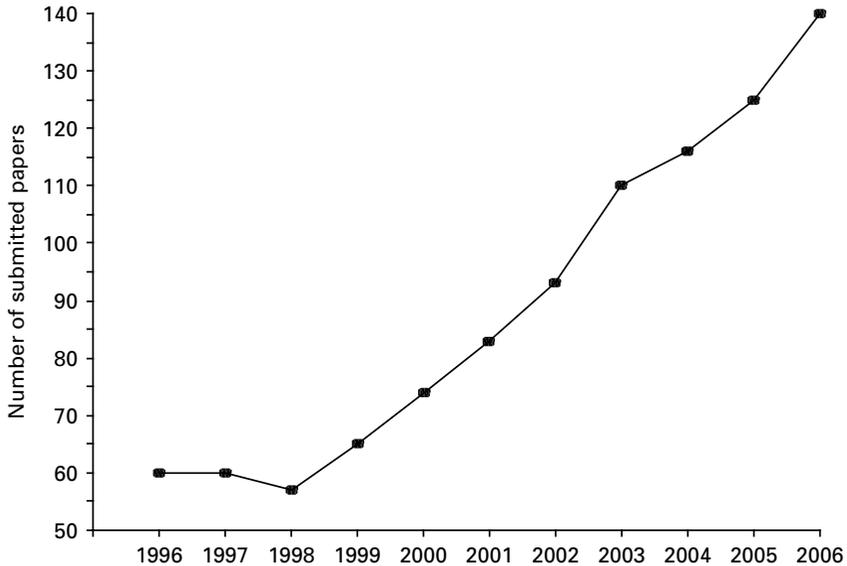


Figure 1. The number of papers submitted to *Ageing & Society*, 1996–2006.

non-UK first authors increased from 33 per cent in 1998 to 68 per cent in 2006, while between 2004 and 2006, more UK-authored papers were published each year than ever before (this is not inconsistent).

Given the discrepancy between the increases in submissions and in available pages, inevitably the final acceptance rate has fallen, to around 33 per cent. The case for expansion was clear and has been supported by our International Advisors, the Editorial Board and Cambridge University Press. *Ageing & Society* will expand to eight issues each year from 2008. The page length will increase to 1,280, enabling around 56 papers to be published (hence the need for an Associate Editor). Another imminent change is to full electronic management of the paper evaluation and decision-making process using Manuscript Central. The requirements of a paper acceptable to the system have been specified, but involve no substantial changes in the guidance to authors. Papers will have to meet certain style formats, *e.g.* a maximum word length for the Abstract, and we will continue to consider (although generally discourage) unusually long papers, and to accept both Harvard and Endnote referencing styles (although few now use the latter).

The analysis and reporting of text and speech

To leaven these quantitative reports, I add a commentary on the submitted papers. Previously I have noted topics of rising interest, but here

remark on the communication of gerontological (or indeed any) understanding from in-depth or qualitative evidence. It must first be said that I am not expert in any of the many variants of qualitative data collection and analysis, and do not here attempt to evaluate or resolve the different practices evident in, say, socio-linguistics, social anthropology and medical sociology – except for one comment that will be controversial. I have observed that when qualitative methods are used in health services research, many authors are tempted to use the attributes of the subjects as evidence of their prevalence in wider populations. This is surely misguided, particularly when the sample size is small. Even if much trouble is taken to ensure that the sample is representative on basic socio-demographic or morbidity characteristics, the common focus in qualitative research on attitudes, aspirations and opinions introduces other sources of variability for which there are no sample frames.

The main intention is however to prompt debate about the last stage in the qualitative research process, the communication of the evidence and the author's understanding to the reader. Having now worked on many qualitative papers, I find the following rule-of-thumb generally reliable. If, in the sections that report results, the space given to quotations exceeds that for the author's analysis and interpretation, then the contribution to understanding of the material is usually low. Sometimes it is as if the author has left the analysis and interpretation to the reader. Sometimes multiple quotations become repetitive and even tedious – and encourage the eyes to jump ahead – counteracting the vividness and epistemological value of the extracts. Any rule can be usurped, as a strong argument or a compelling discussion will do. At root, my view is that the understanding generated from in-depth research is partly dependent on the correct administration of a systematic method of analysis, which is a prerequisite, but primarily a function of the depth and subtlety of the prior knowledge and perceptiveness that the investigator brings to the task.

Nonetheless, the positivist principle of replicability still applies. The author should, in my opinion, give a full account of how the subjects were recruited, their characteristics, what the research questions were, how the instruments of data collection were designed and implemented, and how the data were analysed and interpreted. The weakest reports tend to declaim the final 'emerged' themes without adequately reporting how they emerged; occasionally it is clear that they were in the author's mind before the analysis began. Having appraised around 100 qualitative papers, it is telling that on only a handful of occasions have I read of a strong disagreement between two coders and how it was resolved, and have rarely been informed about discarded, collapsed and amalgamated categories. The intrinsic taxonomic processes, of aggregating thinly

represented and analogous or overlapping themes, and of disaggregating (or ‘unpacking’) an initially too broad concept, are rarely specified.

I am dismayed that the relative frequencies of the different themes and sub-themes that are coded from narrative data are so rarely presented. One author recently told me that ‘tables are not appropriate in a qualitative paper’. Is this any more sensible than saying that steel rules should not be used in wood-working? Even with the smallest samples, the investigator can be faced with thousands of ‘text-bits’ or expressions. Their analysis requires as its foundation the identification of central or modal tendencies, deviations and distributions. This is generally an iterative process, as recommended by the grounded-theory approach, but in that is analogous to the sequential specification of variant and more refined models in regression analysis. Quantitative papers frequently report the exclusion of variables on the grounds of co-variance, and inform the reader about discarded and re-run models, through which the statistically significant factors ‘emerge’. In both qualitative and quantitative reporting, which steps of an iterative analysis it is useful to report and which it is tedious to mention requires fine judgement. My own view, however, is that many reports of qualitative analysis require a fuller account of the iterative steps. If the evidence and analysis is inadequately described, the author’s interpretations and conclusions have little authority. The ‘emergence’ of the factors of interest should surely be shown as a rational and replicable process, not presented as alchemy that defies explanation.

Should it be thought that I rate qualitative reports less highly than quantitative contributions, not so, for I have many criticisms of the standard of communication in quantitative papers. Some weaknesses are obvious and abiding, such as the obfuscation of unexplained rare technical procedures, the unreadability of dense numerical reports, and the high frequency of lazy, ill-designed, too-large tables. There are other, less familiar weaknesses that I cannot yet specify well, some to do with uncritical interpretations of statistical significance (as opposed to the strength of relationship or substantive meaning) in the analysis of large samples. But allow me to leave a fuller account to another occasion, and let us first discuss best practice in reporting qualitative research. I invite readers to respond pithily to these remarks. Strong, informative contributions could be published as letters in a future issue.

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