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Challenges and opportunities for Qualitative Social Work: An inaugural perspective

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Making a decision to take on the co-editorship of *QSW* has required some serious consideration. Although the founding editors and more recently Karen Staller have established an excellent international journal with a resoundingly positive reputation, there are challenges ahead for academic publishing that are yet to be fully realised. As Stanley Witkin (2013) described in a recent issue of *QSW* (and putting difficult conversations aside), academic scholarship and publishing are characterised by an ‘ever accelerating pace of change’ (p.730). The combination of changes and rapidity with which they are occurring do indeed create uncertain times for the new editorial team. The most obvious challenge stems from an increasingly competitive global academic market that undoubtedly consolidates the position of mainstream, high-impact journals, but threatens those that are smaller and more specialist. As universities and their scholars are measured and ranked in line with competitive corporate agendas, academic identities and priorities are accordingly shaped. By way of inaugural confession, I should disclose that following my recent appointment to a post within the Faculty of Medicine and Human Sciences at the University of Manchester, a first priority was to send a short article to the *British Medical Journal*! Thus, we all succumb in different ways to altered conditions that appear to shape our publishing choices.

Linked to global competitiveness is the shift towards Open Access publishing. Many academics have been firm supporters of the principle that peer-reviewed work should be made freely available, but this shift has a dark side where article-processing fees are required. At present, a mixed economy of Green (e.g. author self-archives in university repositories) and Gold Open Access options enables something of a level playing field. *QSW*’s current position includes *inter alia*, that authors can post the final version of an article accepted for publication on any non-commercial repository or website, 12 months after publication.

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However, where the global market gives weight to Gold Open Access and fee-based publishing takes further hold, there is concern that this will increase academic inequality both within and between institutions. In the UK, government funding to support Open Access has been distributed amongst a select number of research-intensive institutions rather than universally. Within these privileged institutions, allocation of funding also creates further divide, because resources made available cannot meet publication costs for *all* scholars. Distribution criteria will inevitably consider not just the quality of any article but also where it is accepted for publication. Although there is clear resistance within academic debate to the further institutionalisation of impact rankings, in reality, high-impact journals are gaining further ground.

In this context, the question of how *QSW* will fare is an interesting one and the journal's future prosperity will undoubtedly be linked to the agility of the editorial team to respond to a prevailing climate of change. At present, *QSW*'s intellectual, political and experimental mission sits comfortably alongside dominant discourses that influence definition and practice of good/legitimate scholarship and publishing – but a more incongruent position may lie ahead. Of course, these kinds of questions are not particular to *QSW* but concern the majority of academic journals; it is only the mainstream giants that can be confident of the road ahead. At present, overall citations for articles published in *QSW* are showing a marked upward trend bringing the journal in line with competitors in social work. In addition, the journal will receive its first impact factor during the coming months, having been accepted into the ISI Web of Knowledge database. This is all remarkable progress for a journal still in its (relative) infancy.

Turning to opportunities, *QSW* is a successful international journal achieving six issues a year and with substantial global reach. At the outset, a series of planned steps laid the foundation for the journal's international qualitative mission, not least that a strategic decision was taken to ensure a balance of scholars drawn from diverse international contexts on the editorial board. In addition, reviewers are assigned to ensure international appraisal of submissions and this counters any tendency towards methodological nationalism. *QSW* is through and through a vehicle for global dialogue and exchange. This is important because research increasingly results from an interconnected global community of scholars, who benefit greatly from co-operation across geo-political boundaries. Inter-disciplinarity has also been at the heart of *QSW*'s mission, with the former editors actively seeking submissions from authors both within and without the discipline of social work. A continued commitment to inter-disciplinarity will be critical in ensuring the sustainability of the journal. Thus, the foundation upon which Karen Staller and I will build is at present, secure and we are ready to respond with enthusiasm to challenges ahead.

For Karen and I there is more work to be done to review the features of the journal which have been defining of its mission and which can benefit from further invigoration. In particular, we plan a re-launch of the 'New Voices' section and we actively seek suggestions/potential editors for Special Issues. A new feature will

also be an 'Editor's Choice' section, which may further entice authors by giving greater coverage to topical and innovative articles. Thus, with these first steps we hope to continue to grow submissions, readership and impact. Perhaps above all, Karen and I will ensure that the quality and creativity of published articles serve to define *QSW*'s mission. I would certainly agree with founding editors that authors must give substantial consideration to the description and explanation (Shaw and Ruckdeschel, 2002) of their methods to secure a place in *QSW*. I would urge readers to dip into the excellent article by Karen Staller and Michal Krumer-Nevo (2013) that went to print last year, offering readers 'cautionary advice' about what constitutes a 'successful qualitative article' (p.247). On that note, I now turn to consider both the range and the richness of this issue's papers.

In this issue of QSW

Articles included in this issue are loosely connected around the topic of health and all speak to important international concerns. In addition, they illustrate the diversity of methodological approaches that make qualitative research so celebrated. That all authors have included substantial discussion of theoretical and methodological choices renders this collection particularly useful for the novice and experienced scholar alike. The lead article is by Terry Koenig and colleagues and carries the title: *Older adult and family member perspectives of the decision-making process involved in moving to assisted living*. For older adults, the decision to move into what the U.S. based authors describe as assisted living (AL) is life changing. In this context, the decision-making process warrants detailed investigation through a qualitative lens. There are many important emphases within this paper, not least that the authors foreground the involvement of the wider family network in terms of how AL decisions are negotiated, agreed or disagreed. Reflecting contemporary thinking within the gerontological literature that a multi-generational perspective matters, 22 older adult and family member dyads were engaged in the study. Family members' diverse emotional and logistical concerns are highlighted and, in addition, that conflict of opinion was an issue for a significant number of families. Key conclusions drawn from this study are of significant international concern, in particular, that a lack of agreement within family networks in decision-making impacts on an older persons' subsequent adaptation to an AL environment.

The second article by Sarah Dykeman, Allison Williams and Valorie Crooks in Canada illustrates the value of a qualitative approach for addressing very practical, policy-focused issues. In a paper entitled: *Pre-implementation knowledge tool development for health services providers: A qualitative study of Canadian social workers*, the authors focus on the low uptake of Canada's Compassionate Care Benefit (CCB). CCB is a benefit that was very much welcomed when introduced in 2004, because it allows workers to secure paid leave to undertake the very important role of providing informal care for dying individuals within community settings (Service Canada, 2011). Given its evident value, the issue of low uptake is curious and of

significant research interest. Following national indications that a lack of public awareness of CCB is at the heart of low uptake, Dykeman and colleagues set out to evaluate the impact of a targeted knowledge translation (KT) campaign, focusing on the social work profession's potential role in awareness raising. It would be a mistake to assume that this article's relevance is confined to Canadian CCB; on the contrary, the authors cover important generic concerns that include research translation and the development of knowledge tools for professionals.

The issue of methodological pluralism has been much debated in back issues of *QSW*. In 2012, Thomas Schwandt remarked on the scientific value of multiple ways of understanding the phenomenon of social work (p.129). In a similar vein, our third paper from U.S. author Emily Nicklett initially provides a discussion of the value of contrasting methods of quantitative and qualitative research for understanding social disparities in health and disease with a particular focus on diabetes. Quantitative research indicates sharp socioeconomic differences in health outcomes for individuals with this condition. Through a qualitative lens, Nicklett offers a contrasting perspective by focusing on how subjective social status (SSS) contributes to the *experience* of diabetes. Drawing on the theoretical literature on 'constrained choices', the author offers a rich qualitative account of how SSS impacts on diabetes diagnosis and management. Following in *QSW*'s tradition of publishing articles that afford significant methodological detail, the paper describes an interpretive phenomenological approach. The authors offer important insights into coding data, not least, how the potential for 'coder fatigue' can be managed.

Sensitive topics and social work frequently go together. This is certainly the case with the fourth paper in this issue by Daz Geenop and Sheila Glenn from the UK which is: *Self-care at the margins of healthcare: 'Malingering' and 'self-neglecting' cystic fibrosis patients*. For patients with cystic fibrosis (CF), routine treatments are complex and time consuming. In addition, 'self-care is often still further complicated', as the authors write, by 'the need to manage co-morbid conditions such as CF related diabetes' (p.2). As with many excellent research projects, the focus of this study arose from the first author's direct engagement with patients with CF in his former role as a medical social worker. In identifying and recruiting CF patients for this study, conventional concerns around sampling bias are discussed, but equally the authors highlight that a highly personal approach to recruitment led to an 80% response rate. Narrative interviewing was chosen to gain a window into the sensitive topic of self-care with a particular interest in identity. The authors compare and contrast 'controlled narrative' versus 'chaos narratives' delving into the vast literature on narrative analysis to produce their own unique take on participants' stories. The authors conclude by arguing that CF patients' refusal to actively self-care 'needs to be understood within the wider context of their experience as outsiders' (p.15). In addition, they draw parallels between their own work of reaching out to CF patients ('however opportunistically or imperfectly', p.15) and the possibilities for social work practitioners to do the same with this potentially 'hard to reach' population.

Finally, I have grouped together two single-authored papers, the first by Ulrika Börjesson and the second by Andrew Bolger. Both papers contain considerable personal reflection upon engagement with the field in qualitative research and utilise ethnographic methods. Börjesson's style, from the outset of her paper, is very much a personal, reflective account concerning her practical 'induction' into ethnographic research in Sweden. Describing detailed observation in two eldercare units, she takes issue with approaches that seek to tie down or categorise participant observation and references Gold's (1958) classic work. She argues instead that the experience of doing participant observation is far more *fluid*. Roles and actions of the observer are co-constructed in and through interaction with the field. In some instances, workers in the eldercare units refer to her with some seeming affection as 'the Shadow' leaving her to take notes in the background, whereas others consider it appropriate to engage the researcher in the everyday practical chores of eldercare. There is little that is singular about how eldercare workers adapt to her presence. Börjesson claims that it is the process of engagement in the field that has been most instructive and she contrasts her experiential learning with countless readings of textbooks, which appear to fall short in teaching her the craft of ethnographic observation. The second article is by Andrew Bolger in the UK and holds the intriguing title: '*The assessment is in chat*': *Analysing conversations in community care*. As the title hints, this study examines informal social worker–client conversations that take place during the home visit. At the outset of this paper, Bolger rightly highlights the paucity of studies of home visiting, which serves to maintain social work's status as 'an invisible trade' (Pithouse, 1987). Bolger presents data from an ethnographic study of a team of social care workers tasked to co-ordinate community care in a small English town. Analysing transcripts of audio-recordings of visits made by social care workers to their clients, this paper contributes to an understanding of how such interactions are performed. This is a small-scale but nevertheless detailed study of nine home visits – which are rarely captured.

Turning finally to Book Reviews, Debbie Gioia once again delivers a set of essays that are a 'cut above'. In her own essay, Gioia offers: *Winter musings on early childhood outcomes*, opening with a lively reflection on the city of Baltimore encased in heavy snow in 2010. A small boy called Stanley appears in the essay, and Gioia's depiction of this adopted child paves the way for the book review essays that follow which are focused on international adoption and children's development. So, all in all, a thoroughly enticing collection of material in this May 2014 issue.

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