



Prof. Karin Hannes: COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies)

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Editor's note

In March 2021, AME Publishing Company translated the book “*Guidelines for Reporting Health Research: A User's Manual*” into Chinese and completed the work in June 2021. While the Chinese edition is now beginning official publication, the AME editorial office launches alongside its publication interviews with the book editors and authors, hoping to highlight some updates on the status and trends of the reporting guidelines in the Chinese edition.

We take pleasure in interviewing Dr. Karin Hannes to share her insights based on the book. Dr. Karin Hannes is a chapter author of the book and her chapter title is “COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies)”.

AME: *COREQ mainly covers the qualitative studies using interviews and focus groups. But we know that qualitative research has some other common methods, such as participant observation, documentary approaches and action research. Why does COREQ mainly focus on interviews and focus groups?*

Prof. Karin Hannes: The initial developers of the instrument came from a public health or clinical background. In this field interviews and focus groups are among the most popular methods in the qualitative research tradition. This is most likely the reason why they have been prioritized. Also, these data collection methods are built on the same principle of interviewing people in a predefined setting, with relevant questions and topics to address prepared by the researcher in advance. While the level of detail in reporting may differ, study designs using

interviews or focus group follow a similar structure. Focus group reports may perhaps pay more attention to variations of who speaks at what point in time, both in verbal and non-verbal terms. Dynamics may differ, but authors tend to reconstruct the logic of the conversations into a coherent narrative report.

AME: *Among all the items, do you have any prioritized items?*

Prof. Karin Hannes: Rather than saying I have a preference for one or more criteria, I would argue against the general use of design specific criteria. Qualitative researchers work in different traditions of inquiry. One cannot impose the criteria from one type of research design on another when this is considered inappropriate.

For example, people often confuse a design with a data collection or analytical technique. Action research is a design in which interviews and focus groups may have a place as collection techniques, but it would adhere to a different set of rules or reporting criteria compared to a thematic analysis or a cross-case/within case analysis in which the same methods are used. Action researchers want to transform a situation, while thematic and cross-case analysts try to understand a situation. One can imagine that for action researchers it would be important to co-construct content and report on the empowerment levels reached at the end of the research process, while for thematically inspired interview/focus group studies a detailed and rich description would be more important. One can imagine that for a discourse analysis it would be important to clarify how the texts are analytically approached (content wise and with key-word counting

or inspired by a social justice lens or...) while this would be less crucial for a bottom-up, interpretive qualitative study. Reporting on a saturation point in ideas is indeed relevant for those engaged in grounded theory studies. It is not something phenomenologists would engage with, as their mission is to strip concepts down to their essential characteristics. Markers for reporting may differ across study designs.

Most people tend to be reluctant towards very strict and rigid criteria, even if they are based on theoretical principles outlined for the particular design they use. The preference of many authors to work with a generic set of criteria that cuts across different approaches suggests that they feel more comfortable with RGs that allow for a flexible interpretation of an item. Flexibility means that the criteria selected for RGs should enable us to respond to methodological changes as well as the nature of qualitative researchers to adapt methods and techniques in order to create a better fit for purpose for the often complex questions that need to be answered. For example, conventional criteria such as “has a saturation point been reached” may work well for authors that claim to produce a theory that is transferable to similar settings as the ones discussed in their own research paper, but it may be counterproductive for studies that present detailed narratives of one individual. In such cases, a more general criterion evaluating thickness of description might work better.

AME: How is the status of COREQ's endorsement by journals?

Prof. Karin Hannes: I personally don't know this as I seldom review for journals that promote a standard reporting strategy. My primary research work is situated in the arts and design sector and is transdisciplinary in nature. It is a lot more complex to promote the idea of reporting criteria in a domain that is multimodal in nature and moves beyond the written word in the outcomes produced.

AME: How compliant are relevant articles with COREQ?

Prof. Karin Hannes: I personally haven't studied this in detail, nor am I part of an editorial board in a journal that promotes COREQ to authors. In the field of health care, reporting guidelines are highly cited. This suggests that many scholars consult them in their attempt to finalize their articles.

AME: Compared with other guidelines for qualitative studies (e.g. SRQR, ENTREQ, etc.), what do you think are the most prominent characteristics and advantages of COREQ? What is the main reason why it can be recommended by the EQUATOR Network on the home page?

Prof. Karin Hannes: Different instruments have different purposes. COREQ is primarily developed for the reporting of primary research studies. ENTREQ has been developed for the reporting of qualitative evidence syntheses. In the slipstream of ENTREQ, guidelines such as EMERGE have been developed for specific approaches within the qualitative review community, in this case meta-ethnography. I expect the number of design specific reporting guidelines to increase over time.

COREQ has its strengths in the field. A particular strong feature of COREQ is that it claims to target specific data collection methods, which makes it focused. While the authors claim to support researchers using focus group and interview techniques for data collection, it precludes generic criteria that are applicable to all types of research reports. It invites researchers to report on their personal characteristics and relationship with participants and to make their theoretical framework explicit. It further emphasizes the importance of providing information on the participant selection, setting, data collection, and analysis. Overall, it does a good job in guiding researchers toward transparency of reporting. However, I personally feel more attention could go to the identification of criteria that may be more central to the qualitative research tradition and may truly empower researchers to defend themselves against criticism. Examples of such criteria include resonance with the readers of qualitative research reports, theoretical sensitivity, or the researchers' ability to relate findings to the existing knowledge base, and the disclosure of personal values, assumptions, and motivations for choosing a particular design or approach (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). This is different from just revealing your personal impact on the research procedure or from stating potential conflicts of interest (e.g., as promoted by O'Brian and colleagues in the SRQR).

Initially, the COREQ statements may not have been subject to a formal consensus procedure among experts in qualitative research. This may have hampered their uptake by journals in the aftermath of the publication. Hence adoption by researchers and major journals could be implicated by this. I see no clear reason for why some guidelines like COREQ are featured in EQUATOR and



Figure 1 Photo of Prof. Karin Hannes.

others are not, other than the fact that most authors who produce them are somehow linked to EQUATOR and its partner networks. EQUATOR initially catered for health sciences and is slowly opening up to other disciplines. EQUATOR might not be known well enough in other domains, because of its particular history in health care and evidence-based practice. It requires some effort to reach out to other disciplines. Academia is moving into an era of inter- and transdisciplinary work. It is only logic that our academic networks start embracing the idea of a plurality of voices.

Now that alternative formats such as videos of research results and visual abstracts have become more acceptable, the discussion on the relevance of reporting guidance will most likely intensify. How much detail or how much liberty do we want as an author to choose our own reporting structure, and our own output structure? And how much liberty will the traditional journals offer us? A Delphi study conducted in 2015 clearly indicated that most qualitative scholars did not want guidelines to be too rigid. So how will we ever convince those in the art and design sector and scholars promoting creative research dissemination strategies of the value of standard reporting guidelines?

Expert introduction

Karin Hannes (*Figure 1*) is associate professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Leuven. She coordinates research group SoMeTHin'K (Social, Methodological & Theoretical innovation/Kreative). SoMeTHin'K actively pushes towards the development of

methods and models for positive change in society. Prof. Hannes tests, evaluates, implements, and improves existing methods, techniques, models or data sets generated in fields such as urban development, public health, the art & design sector, community-based, social welfare practice and global sustainable development. Where necessary, she re-appropriates methods developed in other disciplines (art for use in the broad field of humanities, or develops her own innovative approach to respond to emerging social challenges, whilst remaining sensitive to quality control and empirical grounding. Her research perspective is multimodal in nature, combining numerical, textual, sensory and/or arts-based research methods to study complex social phenomena. She develops theoretical frameworks as a basis for how such phenomena can be understood and organized. Prof. Hannes is most known for her academic contributions to the area of qualitative evidence synthesis. She contributes to theoretical discussions on quality assessment of research, the role of qualitative and artistic research in an evidence-based discourse and the potential of creative research dissemination practices for academics. Prof. Hannes chairs the European Network of Qualitative Inquiry and partners KU Leuven's Institute for the Future. She is involved in the Interdisciplinary Arts-Based Research Global Consortium and the Qualitative Evidence Synthesis Methods group from the Campbell Collaboration.

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Footnote

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