

***BETWEEN RIGOR AND FREEDOM: EPISTEMIC CHALLENGES OF SCIENTIFIC WRITING  
IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH***

***ENTRE EL RIGOR Y LA LIBERTAD: DESAFÍOS EPISTÉMICOS DE LA ESCRITURA  
CIENTÍFICA EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA***

***ENTRE O RIGOR E A LIBERDADE: DESAFIOS EPISTÊMICOS DA ESCRITA CIENTÍFICA  
NA PESQUISA QUALITATIVA***

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In contemporary science, the academic field has been permeated by a silent yet profoundly transformative process: the increasing alignment of knowledge production with editorial requirements. This phenomenon has particularly strong effects on qualitative health research, especially studies grounded in the human and social sciences, placing tension on how scientific knowledge is conceived, narrated, and legitimized.

Researchers committed to understanding health beyond classical biomedical determinants, incorporating symbolic, cultural, subjective, and ethical dimensions, frequently encounter an obstacle that is neither theoretical nor methodological, but structural. In the name of quality, standardization, and internationalization, scientific journals often impose homogeneous models of writing and scientificity, reducing epistemological plurality to formats already recognized as legitimate.

This tension between rigor and methodological freedom resonates with what some authors<sup>1</sup> describe as working within the fissures of qualitative research, an effort to resist processes of normalization and epistemic domestication. Within post-qualitative perspectives, scientific writing is understood as an ethical-political practice, in which creativity, reflexivity, and investigative plurality should not be sacrificed to editorial conformity<sup>1</sup>.

The experience of submitting manuscripts to high-impact journals reveals a recurring paradox. While interdisciplinarity and epistemological diversity are celebrated rhetorically, in practice there is a marked homogenization of writing styles and argumentative forms. Manuscripts originally rooted in singular theoretical and methodological projects undergo successive rounds of revisions that, if unmet, often result in rejection. Texts once situated and authorial are gradually transformed into generic products shaped by editorial expectations.

This process undermines the researcher's epistemic autonomy and shifts the focus from scientific relevance to formal acceptability. The patchwork produced by editorial demands is not merely an aesthetic issue but an ethical and political one. What is published is often what fits dominant parameters, not necessarily what best captures the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation.

In the health sciences, particularly in nursing, where dialogue with the human sciences has intensified, this tension becomes even more pronounced. Qualitative research, oriented toward the interpretation of meanings and experiences, is frequently evaluated according to criteria derived from the quantitative paradigm. Analytical depth, internal coherence, and theoretical consistency are overshadowed by structural standardization and conceptual translation into forms more acceptable to the biomedical field.

This context reinforces the need to distinguish rigor from methodological rigidity<sup>2</sup>. Rigor in qualitative research is associated with coherence among objectives, theoretical framework, methodological pathway, and interpretation, rather than with the uniform application of prescriptive models. Epistemic substance emerges from the researcher's ethical and reflexive commitment, not from formal adherence to checklists<sup>2</sup>.

Recent reviews on quality criteria in qualitative research<sup>3</sup> caution that, although standards of rigor are important, insistence on universal technical lists may suffocate methodological and interpretive diversity within the qualitative paradigm<sup>3</sup>. Reporting guidelines such as the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) and the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) enhance transparency, but become problematic when they retrospectively shape study design, impoverishing reflexivity and interpretive depth<sup>3</sup>.

Within the peer-review system, this logic aligns with the culture of publish or perish and productivity metrics, favoring low-risk research agendas and methodological choices. This dynamic has been interpreted as a form of epistemic coloniality, whereby hegemonic standards from the Global North impose themselves upon local epistemologies and emerging modes of knowledge production<sup>4</sup>.

From an ethical-epistemological standpoint, this process is closely linked to the notion of epistemic injustice, as situated narratives, interpretive knowledges, and the voices of vulnerable populations tend to be discredited or deprioritized by editorial standards that privilege quantification and

normativity<sup>4</sup>. Editorial neutrality thus proves illusory, since every evaluative process is permeated by values, beliefs, and power relations.

If, in the human sciences, knowledge is produced through encounter, language, and the polysemy of meanings, dominant editorial models appear to operate in the opposite direction, prioritizing control of form over density of content. Scientific writing loses vitality and becomes an exercise in adaptation, in which authorial voice is progressively silenced.

What is at stake is not merely the acceptance of manuscripts, but the symbolic configuration of science itself. When qualitative studies are reformulated to satisfy editorial expectations, they risk becoming simulacra of scientificity, distanced from lived experience, empirical listening, and their original theoretical grounding. The question that emerges is how many published articles still preserve the authentic voice of their authors.

In response, institutional adjustments to editorial processes are proposed, including the pairing of reviewers with expertise in the adopted theoretical-methodological framework, prioritization of internal coherence over prescriptive criteria, explicit justification of methodological demands in peer reviews, and a declared commitment to epistemological plurality. At the manuscript level, strengthening reflexivity, explicitly justifying methodological design, and using checklists critically as reporting tools rather than methodological templates are recommended.

Quality and diversity are not opposing values. Health science is strengthened when it embraces multiple forms of evidence, provided they are internally coherent and ethically responsible. Editors and reviewers are called upon to uphold rigor without imposing rigidity, while authors must defend the integrity of their choices with clarity and responsibility. Between science and conformity, let science prevail plural, situated, and committed to a deep understanding of care.

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**Funding and Acknowledgements:**

Nothing to declare

**Authorship Criteria (Authors' Contributions)**

Both authors contributed as follows: 1. substantially to the conception and/or planning of the study; 2. to the obtaining, analysis and/or interpretation of the data; 3. as well as to the drafting and/or critical review and final approval of the published version.

**Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

Nothing to declare

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