

More rigor, not more barriers: A dialogue

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More rigor, not more barriers: A dialogue

Patrick Lavoie, Lisa McKenna, Katharina Fierz, and Sally Thorne

Editor's Note: I received this Letter to the Editor from Patrick LaVoie in response to McKenna's article on Translation of Research Interviews.¹ I thought this was worthy of a conversation so I invited responses from the author, Lisa McKenna; a Swiss researcher, Katharina Fierz; and a journal editor, Sally Thorne. I have compiled these together for this article in *Nurse Author & Editor*.

Dear Editor,

As a nurse researcher whose first language is French, I read the article by McKenna¹ with great interest. I entirely agree that we need to reflect on the rigor of presenting qualitative research in English when data have been collected and analyzed in another language. I also agree that this is a problem for which responsibility must be shared between researchers, reviewers, and editors, especially as it raises diversity and equity issues in publishing.

As McKenna¹ aptly points out, academics are under pressure to publish their work in the best international journals to obtain academic promotion and research grants. However, the number of nursing journals in languages other than English remains modest, and these journals do not receive the same exposure as those in English. For the work of non-native English speakers/writers to have an impact and reach, we are under additional pressure to publish in a language that is not our own. We must not only master the conceptual and methodological realms of our discipline but also develop language skills in “English for academic purpose.” Said otherwise, the adage “publish or perish” would be more accurate if it read “publish in English or perish.”

Such a requirement is not without its challenges. Many of the researchers I work with devote significant financial resources to language issues in preparation for publication—the cost of professional proofreading or translation of a research paper can easily range from CAD 500 to 2,500 (\$400 to \$2000 USD), which is close to the cost of open access in some journals. Those who write directly in English may have to work harder to produce the same amount of output as their native English-speaking counterparts. In both cases, publishing in English requires additional resources that may become barriers to publication and scholarship. In that sense, scholars whose first language is English are linguistically privileged compared to non-native speakers/writers. Such privilege means that it is easier for them to publish in academic journals and that reviewers and editors may be biased in their favor.²

There is no doubt that greater transparency in reporting on the translation of qualitative research findings would improve publication quality and rigor. Yet, we must remain mindful of the resources required and the impacts that such requirements would have on non-native English speakers/writers and the publication of their research work. In her text, McKenna¹ presents a series of options in the name of rigor, including having language experts on research teams, translating data into English before analysis, or reporting translation decisions using a framework of seven questions (i.e., why, when, what, who, how, where, and by what means). Based on my experience in translating research instruments, I would argue that some of these solutions are

impractical, time-consuming, costly, and require a rare combination of expertise in a research field and understanding the subtleties of the language of that field.

Suppose new standards, guidelines, or frameworks for reporting are to be proposed. In that case, researchers, reviewers, and editors need to engage in a constructive dialogue to define what constitutes a rigorous translation of qualitative research and how each party can contribute to improved rigor and transparency. I think it would be a mistake to put all the responsibility on researchers for translating or back-translating data or research findings. I wonder what role reviewers and editors can play. Should we have a more generous word limit if we are expected to address our translation decision-making? What information would be relevant to report if, for example, the reason for translation almost always comes down to academic expectations? If we want to make a case for the rigor of our work and findings, what alternatives to quotations or member checking would be best practices in cross-language research reporting? Is there room for the publication of original quotes in addition to the translation that authors propose? Most importantly, non-native English speakers/writers must be part of this discussion if the publishing world is to become truly inclusive, promote diversity, and mitigate the effects of English hegemony.

Sincerely,

Patrick Lavoie, RN, PhD

Response from Lisa McKenna

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Lavoie for the very considered comments in response to my previous article and generating such a healthy debate on this topic. It is too infrequent that we have such rich conversations. Along with the additional commentaries, it is clear that the translation of cross-cultural qualitative data continues to present a conundrum between practicality and accuracy for editors. I am in agreement with Dr. Lavoie that we do want to encourage research publication from around the globe and not necessarily create additional obstacles to promoting that. Certainly, researchers hold an ethical responsibility to their participants to ensure their translated words retain their original meanings and ensuring that should be of utmost importance. Rather than imposing strict rules, ensuring better education of qualitative researchers may come some part of the way to addressing the issue.

The second dilemma around this issue sits at the level of journal editor. Over recent years, we have seen marked increases in the numbers of manuscripts journals receive and that has resulted in subsequent increases in desk rejections. As an editor of a society journal that has space limitations, many difficult decisions need to be made regarding which manuscripts will progress to peer review. It would be disappointing if qualitative manuscripts are subsequently being rejected by journal editors for perceived lack of translation and reporting rigor. I do appreciate that improving rigor in this space is not without its challenges, but it could actually serve to increase the numbers of these types of manuscripts that result in being successfully published. As a researcher who works with research teams whose primary language is not English, I welcome ongoing discussions about how we can strengthen reporting rigor and increase the geographical diversity of our publications.

Commentary from Katharina Fierz

Dr. Lavoie raises an interesting position putting his emphasis on difficulties of non-English-speaking researchers publishing in English. However, a rigorous translation process also has advantages and may contribute to intercultural/intersectoral understanding. Diving into peculiarities of cultures and semantics might represent a chance to discover inequalities which a native speaker does not discover due to their bubble.

Financial costs should not be an argument for not following a translation procedure—costs pay off, I think, by doing justice to the interviewee and their worldview. Indeed, it might, as mentioned above, enable readers and researchers to gain increased intercultural insights.

Translation problems or stumbling blocks to translation, such as metaphors, as an example, can be noted in a separate protocol explaining cultural peculiarities. These don't need to be part of the main text.

It is a challenge—I agree with Patrick, yes! Interculturality never is without them.

I think, finally, it is rather a discussion about inclusiveness and cultural integration than translation, as Dr. Lavoie points out at the end of his letter, as translation of a text is almost always—specifically in qualitative research—a cultural translation. The discourse about culturally inclusive translations is ongoing and it might be an idea to draw from intercultural competence frameworks for further development.

Commentary from Sally Thorne

I am delighted to add my voice to the lively discussion launched by Patrick Lavoie in response to the recent article by Lisa McKenna on rigor in translated qualitative interview studies. McKenna describes a conundrum that journal editors often face, reading manuscripts in which the findings are reported in a language other than the language of study, and illustrated by “verbatim quotes” that themselves have been transformed for the benefit of an English language reading audience.¹ How are the reviewer and editor to judge the veracity of what is being reported and interpreted without being able to see even illustrative excerpts of what was actually stated? Among the various recommendations McKenna makes for processes that might make the original data sets of these researchers more transparent and auditable to a reading audience are options that Lavoie believes would add another fairly significant layer to the substantial added effort that scholars trying to publish outside of their original language already face.

While McKenna’s aims are unquestionably laudable, given our increasing concern for making data sets available and ensuring that we reduce the chance of fraudulent representations in published research in our discipline, Lavoie’s arguments about the burden this direction in developing our publishing standards could place on a struggling sector within our intellectual community in nursing are equally compelling and worthy of careful consideration. If we simply regard these issues as matters of research integrity, applicable across the board to all scholars, we are falling head first into the faulty line of reasoning that sustains English language fluency as the dominant and normative scholarly form.

The international community of nursing editors is in a particularly influential position to shape the direction that this conversation will take going forward. We know that, if we simply add an additional burden of proof on all authors whose data gathering and original thinking began in a

language other than English, we will further disadvantage their capacity to join in the global conversation about the ideas that shape our discipline. In a 2012 gathering of the International Academy of Nursing Editors in Montreal, nursing editors debated these issues in a half-day plenary session entitled *Conceptual and Idea/Logical Colonization: Ideational Practices in the World of Journal Editing*. Papers arising from that session illustrate the manner in which the community of nursing editors asserts control over who gets heard and who gets silenced,³ how Western-centric thinking is privileged and taken-for-granted as superior to alternative thinking approaches,⁴ how the notion of appeal to an “international audience” is used as an exclusionary frame of reference,⁵ and how difficult it can be to balance ‘inclusion-friendly’ editorial practices with the maintenance of scholarly and scientific writing standards.⁶ Clearly, in the intervening years, we have not made much progress toward resolving these complexities.

I personally land on the side of striving toward inclusion to the fullest extent possible by resisting what may be somewhat arbitrary ‘rules’ in the publishing world and trying to welcome the voices of difference within our collective body of published ideas. While I am not opposed to rigor, I do find that the increasingly technical and routinized mechanisms for ascertaining it—including many that are becoming codified within our publication author guidelines, checklists and software systems—to function in a manner that is counter to the wider aim of exposing ourselves to a wider world of ideas than has traditionally been accessible in English language journal publication. All too often, these systems initiated with the intent of regularizing scholarly products serve to further privilege those whose native language fluency allows for smooth navigation and exclude those whose does not.

I call on the nursing editorial community to keep trying, to keep raising these challenges, and to keep on searching for better ways to expand our exposure to excellent thinking in a variety of forms and fashions. If the original spoken expressions of interview subjects used to illustrate the logical line of reasoning that an author has developed in coming to conclusions about findings in a qualitative research report are not directly accessible to the reader, perhaps we can create some ‘lower bar’ approaches to data transparency. And perhaps there is some responsibility on the part of the reader to be willing to do a little work to ‘hear’ expressions that are a bit awkward in syntax, or communicated in a manner that does not quite sound like a native English voice. It is often these steps forward that will allow us a window into the marvelous diversity that makes the ideas of our discipline so fascinating.

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