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Working With Pluralism

Determining Quality in Qualitative Research

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This Feature Topic contains four articles that address the determination of quality in qualitative research by exploring the use of criteria from the perspective of reviewers, editors, and/or authors. In this introductory article, the authors assert that these explorations represent an important move away from employing listings of static criteria to adjudicate and develop qualitative research. In its place, we see the making of quality as situated in methodological pluralism that occurs both in comparison with quantitative research and also within qualitative research. This fact complicates and enriches the task of determining quality and also suggests ways forward for the academic community.

Keywords: *qualitative research methods; pluralism; journal editors; faculty development; criteria of quality*

On what basis will submissions based on qualitative research be adjudicated in the review process? More significantly, how can we recognize high-quality qualitative research? What methodological practices go into its production? What dilemmas and trade-offs must researchers negotiate to achieve it? Questions such as these that recognize the practice and plural domain of qualitative research form the context for the feature topic on “Determining Quality in Qualitative Research.”

In response to the call, we received 33 proposals; of these, 22 were invited to submit full articles for double-blind review, from which 4 were finally selected for publication. Savall, Zardet, Bonnet, and Páron (2008) examine the perspective of reviewers conducting the work of determining quality in qualitative research; they disclose implicit and changing criteria in 474 reviews of qualitative work produced by 56 reviewers in a European

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journal. Pratt (2008) discloses the different evaluative criteria in use and associated publication tension within the community of researchers who have published qualitative research in North American journals. Amis and Silk (2008) explicate three research orientations in use for determining quality and examine the problems that emerge in the adjudication process when quality indicators derived from one orientation are used to judge empirical work conducted from a different orientation. The fourth article, by Fendt and Sachs (2008), reflects on the difficulties that arise when attempting to conduct and adjudicate quality work when pursuing a particular methodological approach, grounded theory, in its orthodox form.

In our editing process, we sought to have the authors illuminate the tension between the contingent, context-dependent nature of quality as enacted and the prescription and standardization implied in the idea of evaluation. The four accepted articles accomplish this by moving away from static categories of quality and toward the work of determining and ensuring quality undertaken by reviewers, editors, and authors. Each article underscores that qualitative research is a methodologically plural domain and explores the issue of quality in terms of the actual work of quality making from the perspective of researchers prosecuting their studies and pursuing publication and of reviewers and editors deciding the disposition of projects.

In this introductory article, we suggest that within the qualitative research domain, the work of determining quality represents the methodological pluralism in our field, both within qualitative research and in comparison with quantitative research. Significantly, a focus on the work of determining quality in a plural domain both complicates and enriches the task of determining quality by moving away from employing listings of static criteria. Although it is tempting to produce definitive lists of criteria by which to adjudicate quality, it is our contention that the closer one gets to the actual practice of trying to determine quality, the less adequate are the lists. Although we continue to use such criteria as reference points, they need to be augmented with more permissive guidelines if we wish to examine if and how authors do qualitative research well. To develop this point, we begin by describing methodological pluralism in qualitative research and then move to quality making. We offer some ways forward to enhance our capability as an academic community to develop and assess quality in qualitative research.

Methodological Pluralism in Qualitative Research

The development of qualitative methods in management and organizational research not only parallels but also emphasizes the expansion of variety and plurality within the field in general (e.g., Buchanan & Bryman, 2007; Knudsen, 2003). Indeed, the range of types and forms of qualitative methods is, depending on your perspective, exhilarating or exhausting (Page, 2000; Patton, 2003). Three major methodological milestones have expressed this plurality.

First, the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was a major event for the social sciences because it relegitimized alternative methods and research designs that emphasized the creation of theory out of data. Its arguments for an alternative to the dominant hypothetico-deductive approach to theory generation and its

procedures for generating theory soon were expressed in the work of organization theorists (e.g., Hobbs & Anderson, 1971; Reeves & Turner, 1972) and continue to this day. Other qualitative method publications on evaluation research in the 1970s and 1980s (Deutscher, 1976; Guba, 1981; Hamilton, 1976; Patton, 1978; Stake, 1978) supported this argument and further elaborated alternative approaches. This work encouraged researchers to ignore external a priori research objectives and instead to understand social systems from the perspective of active participants.

The second milestone was the special issue devoted to “reclaiming qualitative methods for organizational research” published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* almost 30 years ago. At that time, the guest editor pointed out the need for organization researchers to pursue approaches that would allow them to portray more closely the phenomena they wished to understand. In arguing the need for qualitative research as an alternative to the quantitative theoretically derived approach that had an almost monopolistic hold on the production of knowledge in management and organization research, he emphasized the plurality and variety present in qualitative methods themselves (Van Maanen, 1979). Accordingly, he suggested that the label of qualitative methods is

at best an umbrella term covering a range of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520)

The publication of Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* was a third milestone. It crystallized the variety and plurality of qualitative research in articulating the qualitative landscape as an evolving site of multiple methodologies and research practices. This handbook underscored that plurality stemmed from several sources. For example, different theoretical paradigms such as constructivism, cultural studies, and feminism draw on and inform qualitative research. And qualitative researchers themselves draw on various methods and techniques, including semiotics, action research, narrative analysis, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, deconstructionism, and grounded theory, to name only some. This mapping of the diversity of qualitative research persists, expressed in the scope and details of the contents of various edited collections and handbooks that continue to be published (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Seale, 2004).

In management and organization studies, methodological pluralism has expanded as researchers have found and adopted different epistemologies, different theoretical traditions, and different practice traditions drawn from both the social sciences and the humanities (see Gephart, 2004; Prasad, 2005); a range of theoretical paradigms, methods, and techniques now appear in publications. Thus, qualitative research is a plural domain expressing points of contrast not only between so called qualitative and quantitative methods but also between qualitative methods themselves. The field is thus a site of both fragmentation with little consensus around frameworks and methodological propositions as an increasingly diverse and creative array of techniques and theoretical traditions are employed (Buchanan & Bryman, 2007).

Qualitative methods in all their variety are now firmly established on both sides of the Atlantic, as evidenced by publications from establishment institutions such as the National Science Foundation (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004) and the U.K.’s Cabinet Office (Spencer,

Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003), which have defined criteria for good qualitative research. As well, some leading academic journals that have traditionally seemed to favor quantitative articles have recently made an explicit point of encouraging more submissions of qualitative articles. Encouragement has come in the form of supportive editorials (Rynes, 2004). Zedeck (2003) for example, comments, “we are quite receptive to articles that are based on qualitative procedures. We will gladly entertain research that is based on content analyses, case studies, observations, interviews and other qualitative procedures” (p. 3). It has also come through guest contributions, which have provided advice on how to do, or not do, qualitative research (Gephart, 2004; Suddaby, 2006), and through commissioning special issues, including the present case, where the guest editors have a qualitative background (Gephart, 2006; Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001).

Quality Making in a Pluralistic Field

Given the evolution of methodological plurality in the field, how do reviewers develop and adjudicate the quality of qualitative research? What are the points of connection and divergence in what we expect to see in quality research? How do reviewers put criteria to use in assessing the quality of manuscripts submitted to refereed journals?

There are many expositions of criteria about the quality of qualitative research (e.g., Ragin et al., 2004; Seale, 1999, 2004; Spencer et al., 2003). Our own preference is to avoid being overly detailed, yet there are still features that we expect to see in research conducted by ourselves and others. These find expression in practices and products that reflect careful scholarship that demonstrates detailed and nuanced understanding of existing perspectives on the issues at stake in the research; systematic and demanding process of inquiry leading to well-supported research claims, including transparent links between the two; the creation of distinct value relative to some theoretical and/or applied domain; and an awareness of the impact of the researcher’s identity, experience, and value commitments, including an openness to criticism and debate. And indeed, as the contributors to this feature topic indicate, such features are represented in practice. For example, the studies by Pratt (2008) and Savall et al. (2008) disclose the importance of contributing to theory, writing well, and providing a clear description of the appropriate method.

However, when one looks at these criteria expressed in use, the articles in this feature topic complicate the task of determining quality and point to the challenges of determining quality in practice. The empirical studies that provide glimpses into what reviewers and authors are doing in the work of determining quality highlight the challenges and tensions that arise. For example, apparent points of connection in articulated criteria between qualitative and quantitative research diverge in practice. Specifically, Pratt’s (2008) study shows how criteria may take a different shape for qualitative as compared with quantitative researchers. For instance, although there may be coherence around the importance of achieving a strong contribution to theory, he suggests that qualitative studies may need to demonstrate theoretical novelty. Similarly, the study by Savall et al. (2008) points out how quality criteria shift and change in importance over time, even among reviewers at the same journal.

Points of contrast between qualitative and quantitative and among qualitative traditions also exist. The article by Amis and Silk (2008) shows the different criteria in use associated with

epistemological research orientations. They describe foundationalism, which stresses traditional criteria of validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalizability; quasi-foundationalism, which suggests that quality is determined by the application of appropriate methods; and non-foundationalism, which regards quality as free floating and needing to be embedded in the research design. Even within a single research approach, grounded theory, Fendt and Sachs (2008) demonstrate differences between proponents of orthodox and looser perspectives.

Enhancing Quality in a Pluralistic Field

Given methodological pluralism and the shortcomings of static criteria when put into use, what recommendations can we make about enhancing the quality of qualitative research? We offer recommendations at both the individual and institutional levels, incorporating articles in this feature topic as relevant. In doing so, we hope they will expand our capacity as a field to do qualitative research well and to evaluate with an eye toward developing such quality.

Individual Level

What can individuals do to get good qualitative articles developed and accepted in good journals? Whether as researchers navigating the publication process or reviewers and editors determining the disposition of manuscripts, we need to recognize our position within the methodological plurality and also appreciate that achieving quality involves the continuous making of highly contextualized individual judgments (Van Maanen, 1998). As Amis and Silk (2008) argue, we need to increase our general understanding of different traditions so that whether as author or reviewer/editor we can locate our own perspectives and be informed as to how articles ought to be shaped and judged relative to the traditions from which they emanate.

Authors. For example, as authors, in what traditions do we locate our work? And as Pratt (2008) notes, how do we accordingly cue reviewers? Do we invite them to review our work from an orthodox quantitative perspective because it is dominant? Consider the following: An overriding warrant for qualitative research is that researchers get close to the life worlds of those studied. Thus, we would expect that our data-generating strategies and text indicate that we have made a major investment in attempting to be faithful to the complexity and variability in the dimension of organizational life into which our research inquires (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). This investment in understanding and the associated generation of substantive microlevel data is less likely to be evident in claims such as “transcribed interviews comprised some 1542 pages” than in “presented micro level data that presents the phenomenon of interest in its variety and complexity” (Katz, 2004, p. 83).

Yet in the “Method” sections of published articles, we often see an emphasis on quantity of data collected rather than on proximity to the life worlds of those studied. Statements emphasize researcher objectivity and independence from the phenomena they are studying rather than indicate how closely engaged they were with the social setting and its

members to understand their perspectives, and research procedures are presented as a linear rather than an open-ended, iterative, and contingent process. Presenting these cues in accounts of the research process not only invites inconsistent readings and evaluations of the work, but they also misrepresent key quality-making practices.

Reviewers and editors. As reviewers and editors of qualitative research, given the plurality in the field, we are likely to be asked to review work that is outside of the traditions within which we operate. So how far should we stretch ourselves to understand and make space for traditions different than our own? The methodological choices appropriate for generating an explanatory framework of variables is distinct from generating understanding of how people make meaning, define, and develop lines of action within their situations or from developing structural or historical insights that support emancipation. Within management and organization studies, methodological awareness of different traditions has been expressed in the exploration of quality in work executed from the perspective of different epistemological perspectives (Amis & Silk, 2008; Gephart, 2004; Klein & Myers, 1999; Sandberg, 2005) and from within different research traditions—for example, case studies (Cepeda & Martin, 2005), ethnography (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993; Stewart, 1999), or action research (Reason, 2006). As reviewers, we have the responsibility for achieving a general understanding of quality concerns associated with the traditions and approaches we review, for identifying inconsistencies and incoherencies in submitted manuscripts, and furthermore for applying criteria and associated methodological practices consistent with the tradition in which the work is conducted.

Although there are approaches to qualitative research projects in which the phenomenon of interest and analytic focus are predetermined and fixed (e.g., Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996), such projects are the minority. Most qualitative research in organization studies is directed toward “inductively” developing or extending theory. Accordingly, such studies are open-ended, expressing flexible interaction between research questions, data gathering, and research claims. In such “funnel-shaped” designs (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), the refined focus of the research derives from iteration between the research question, data gathering, and research claims over the life of the project. Although researchers certainly bring to their studies a research focus, that will in all likelihood be abandoned, refined, or reconceived over the life of the project. Thus, the question of “what researchers have a case of” in their research may not be settled until the project, including its write-up, is virtually completed (Ragin, 1992). Within this process, it makes little sense for reviewers to require that interpretations should be confirmed by individuals completely independent from the project (as, for example, in the performance of an interrater reliability check as outlined by Fendt & Sachs, 2008). Instead, in the methodological accounts, they should expect a design that reflects emergent research questions, including an initial sampling strategy that is theoretically purposive (Patton, 2003) and directed toward accessing cases with rich information about the phenomenon of interest. Similarly, the analytic strategy should reflect key choices made by researchers consistent with their emergent understanding. And they might look for processes through which those research claims were subject to alternative perspectives and reexamined in light of them (Angen, 2000; Seale, 1999).

In the presented interpretations, as a result of successive “tacking back and forth” (Maxwell, 1996) between research question, data, and concepts, there should be a close fit

between the research claims and the data that inspired them. Accordingly, reviewers should focus attention on the relationship between the claims made and microlevel details of what the researched said, did, and produced, expecting that the patterns or regularities suggested in the project's research claims be expressed in a range of detailed observations (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993; Katz, 2004).

Institutional Level

At present, the prevailing responsibility for getting qualitative articles accepted in good journals lies with the authors, who need to take their work through various contortions to make it fit with assumed criteria of acceptability. In our view, there is also a responsibility at the institutional level, and we offer some thoughts here about how this challenge might be accepted.

Institutional factors influence research methodology in different contexts; judgments about the quality of qualitative research methods depend on the interrelationship of institutional and technical factors. With regard to technical quality, as we have already noted, there are many lists, articles, and textbooks that define methods for conducting and criteria for evaluating, good qualitative research. One of the most comprehensive is the generic list produced by Seale (2004). This author emphasizes that it is important to explain the aim, the rationale, what's already known, why qualitative methods were appropriate, how the sampling was done, the process of gaining access, how data were recorded, how they were analyzed, the context of the research, and the implications of the findings. In addition, they suggest that qualitative research needs to be open to emergent issues; it should pay particular attention to negative and deviant cases; it must separate evidence and interpretation; the methods should be transparent and contain reflexivity; it should be both faithful to, yet critical of, the data; and it should explore possible relevance/utility to marginal groups.

There is an important contrast in this list because the first group could apply equally well to most quantitative studies, whereas the second group is much more distinctive to qualitative work. But lists of this ilk do not easily stand the test of practice, and if greater use is to be made of technical expertise within the various traditions of qualitative methods, then serious attention must also be paid to institutional contexts, which include research training programs, the procedures for tenure and promotion, and the networks that control the leading journals.

This process of reinforcement occurs in any setting, although the outcome is not deterministic. In different countries, unique institutional factors have helped to shape practice in different ways. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Economic and Social Research Council is the major funder of academic management research and has taken a policy decision to require research training to cover qualitative and quantitative methods in equal measure (Economic and Social Research Council, 2001; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2008). The situation is also made easier because there has never been a strong steer in favor of quantitative methods such as that given by the Ford/Carnegie report in the United States (Gordon & Howell, 1959), and it is also notable that European journals (starting with *Human Relations* in 1947) have always maintained a balance between qualitative and quantitative articles. Yet in light of increasing pressures to achieve and sustain high ratings in the U.K. and Australian universities, anecdotal evidence at least suggests that

getting the “quick publication” is taking priority, and because it takes longer to produce, qualitative research is taking a back seat.

Journal communities. Journals are social products in the sense that they are created by individuals who establish networks of supporters (both editorial board members and reviewers) who are largely representative of particular communities and who exercise their judgment in relation to submitted manuscripts in the interests of scholarship within their domains of interest. However, if there is a serious desire to tackle the “problem” of qualitative methods, journals will need to revisit their editorial policies, review the range of competencies on their editorial boards, and consider the training and development of reviewers.

Although it is essential for journals to maintain coherence and focus to develop knowledge in their particular domains, this also has a downside in that it makes them less willing to accept articles that fall outside the traditional domain. This is similar to the classic exploitation/exploration dilemma in strategic learning (March, 1990). Although editors seek to create diversity within their editorial boards, there is an inevitable tendency to draw on people who share similar outlooks and who have preferences for particular forms of theoretical development.

With regard to the recruitment and training of qualitative reviewers, journals need to recognize the diversity within the qualitative community. As Amis and Silk (2008) argue, they should ensure that the dominance of the foundationalist position is challenged and that alternative criteria are affirmed and legitimized. There needs to be wider acceptance and understanding of these different perspectives because there is often a suspicion that qualitative researchers are more critical of their own kind than others. Although there are plenty of general criteria to guide evaluating qualitative research in principle, as we have argued earlier, this is shaped differently in practice, and hence, training for reviewers might be conducted through their active engagement in decision making. Above all, we would encourage journals to continue “affirmative” action through both supportive editorials and through commissioning special issues edited by qualitative researchers.

Doctoral training and academic career structures. As is the case with any other practice skill, qualitative research is best learned through active engagement in the processes of generating and making sense of qualitative data. Furthermore, active guidance and mentoring supports the achievement of exemplary outcomes. Given the absence of an institutional infrastructure supporting such work, especially in the United States, there is reason to be concerned that many who wish to pursue qualitative research have to do so without sufficient support and guidance—thereby contributing to a lack of appreciation of the value of qualitative research and skill in conducting such research.

Qualitative researchers are in the minority in North America because doctoral training programs pay limited attention to developing relevant expertise, often providing no more than one or two sessions within a course. An important first step, therefore, would be to increase the volume of qualitative training while recognizing that this is constrained by the limited number of faculty currently qualified to provide this training. Moreover, our argument is that skills have to be acquired, developed, and honed through practice. Although the concepts and procedures offered in methods texts can help researchers to anticipate, make

sense of, and develop lines of action to address the practical issues of particular research projects, they can only really be understood in practice. Such texts are not able to guide the new researcher in the flexible application of technique, judgment, and choice necessary to produce work of high quality.

To take one example, as part of developing the practice skills associated with generating data through semistructured or ethnographic interviewing, the interview is construed as a type of social encounter (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). As interviewers, we therefore need the facility to develop “probes” and “follow-up questions” to develop rich detailed and clear descriptions of our topic of concern (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). However, knowing this in advance does not ensure that as interviewers we will recognize when a response lacks sufficient detail and clarity to warrant a probe, when a contradiction or an unanticipated dimension might indicate the possibility of a follow-up, how best to frame a probe or follow-up, what to do when an interviewee’s response to a carefully crafted main question appears completely off the mark or is simply “I don’t know what that means,” and so on. These skills can only be developed through practice, particularly by working with more experienced researchers; yet the shortage of mentors with qualitative experience means that they are very hard to develop.

Academic institutions have a responsibility to strengthen the qualitative elements in doctoral training, to encourage and support young researchers to take the more risky route, and to support career progress for these people. Unfortunately, as suggested earlier, individuals are often discouraged from doing qualitative research because it is time consuming and risky in terms of career outcomes. So institutional reward systems will need to find ways of valuing qualitative work, and this can be supported at a wider level by national institutions. For example, the National Science Foundation is seeking to encourage wider development and use of qualitative methods through measures such as sponsoring qualitative workshops and research groups, funding training in qualitative methods, supporting qualitative dissertation research, and providing grant funding over longer periods, which will make successful completion of qualitative projects much more feasible (Ragin et al., 2004).

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the methodological pluralism in qualitative research, and in our field more generally, complicates the work of determining quality. By looking closer at this complication through examining the work of determining quality, we have pointed to some ways forward for our academic community. In particular, if we accept the notion of criteria in use, there is a need to develop the skills both of qualitative researchers and of those who will potentially judge their work. Moreover, because the necessary skills are like a craft, which can only be learned through practice and under the guidance of experienced mentors, there is a need to cultivate the skills of researchers both at early and later career stages.

There is therefore a need for interventions into individual practices and the institutional structures, including journals and employing institutions, which frame the behavior and rewards of researchers and reviewers. We regard this as a systemic problem: It will not be resolved by isolated actions.

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