

# Qualitative management research

[Business](#), [Management](#)



Qualitative management research is an often uncertain and emergent undertaking which is just as complex as management it self. Accordingly, the inexperienced researcher needs some reference points to help them balance practical worth with academic rigor. It can be claimed that recent works have taken a qualitative and ethnographic approach, using extensive interviewing and observation, to the study of management.

These examples will all be more or less different, and some might say they are unique. What all of these examples and stories have in common is that they attempt to approach the complexity of a particular entrepreneurial setting as an ongoing process, as a process of becoming. Every managerial attempt is written on a daily basis, with many actors on multiple scenes simultaneously searching to move existing realities through creative actions into new worlds. Management is a creative process enacted through everyday practices: It is never done, and always going on, a journey more with surprises than with predictable patterns. As such, every managerial endeavor follows and writes its own story.

This leaves management as a young academic discipline with the huge task of deciding how to "organize" its knowledge of these "local complexities." The question is how to develop qualitative research activities in terms of paradigmatic conceptions, methodological practices, and ways of theorizing that match the complexity and uniqueness of entrepreneurial endeavors. In this paper I will discuss how such process studies can be conceived and what are the drawbacks of qualitative research.

Departing from a discussion of management as a process and embedding this concept within a paradigm of "becoming," we explore the methodological implications by addressing epistemological reflections, ways of theorizing, and methodological practices such as generating, analyzing, interpreting, and writing up data. Concerns of epistemology, method, and theorizing, we must stress, cannot become disconnected, and methodological considerations as such are difficult to make without taking into account the research contexts, in terms of both the sites the researcher visits and the paradigmatic position he or she takes.

The call for qualitative research in management is clear and strong<sup>1</sup>. However, before embarking on a qualitative research project, researchers must understand qualitative methods, including their advantages and disadvantages. Qualitative methods assist researchers who desire to understand complex social phenomena. They are appropriate when seeking knowledge about the fundamental characteristics of a phenomenon being studied before theorizing about it. This knowledge often surfaces through close contact with subjects of a study, allowing the researcher to understand their points of view about and experiences with the phenomenon.

However, the potential of qualitative methodologies in providing answers to questions about phenomena related to management and organization science has been hindered by the confusion about the nature of qualitative research. The label qualitative methods has no precise meaning in any of the social sciences. It is at best an umbrella term covering an array 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.

To operate in a qualitative mode is to trade in linguistic symbols and, by so doing, attempt to reduce the distance between indicated and indicator, between theory and data, between context and action. Researchers even disagree on the definition of " qualitative." For example, some researchers use terms such as naturalistic and descriptive, as well as field, product, and case study. Perhaps the best way to clear up some of the confusion about qualitative research is to examine some of its most accepted methodologies and characteristics. 2

Interviews - One of the main thrusts of the research was to investigate 'meanings'. The key qualitative tool used for this purpose was the interview, a data collection instrument which has been described as the essential source of information for the case study method . The approach to interviewing developed as the research progressed, although any changes were consistent with the overall research strategy. It was originally envisaged that the main interviews would be largely based on a number of set questions i. e. they would be structured. But the experience of the preliminary fieldwork indicated that this would be too inflexible.

Amongst the problems encountered were: asking respondents questions they had already answered (if involved in repeat interviews); asking questions which were not relevant to the experience or expertise of the individual; and pre-emptively restricting the range of answers if prompts were used. It was therefore decided to revise the approach to the case study

questioning, making interviews semi-structured, with specific preparation being made for each separate interview. These were based on an overall interview structure which covered the process, content and context of change. A key advantage of this flexible approach to interviewing was the ability to incorporate emergent issues. Consequently, although the majority of themes and issues had already been identified

through the literature review and the preliminary fieldwork, some became evident as work progressed. These emergent issues included the extent of contact with external consultants. A further outcome of the semi-structured approach was that follow-up interviews could be used to clarify queries from initial meetings, to cover topics which had not been previously discussed, to explore emergent issues in more detail, and to track the changing interpretations of individuals over time. Whyte (1982) has maintained that even unstructured interviews should be structured towards the research problem.

Consequently, the process of interviewing was as carefully organised as the content of interviews. Interviews were planned through the use of key informants who had several functions including: serving as gatekeepers to the organisation; developing an overview of the research problem; providing a number of alternative perspectives to the research problem; and helping to generate operational definitions of research terms.

As Tremblay<sup>3</sup> has argued: "When we use key informants, we are not randomly sampling from the universe of characteristics under study. Rather we are selectively sampling specialised knowledge of the characteristics".

The use of key informants was therefore carefully managed, with the initial point of contact in each organisation being human resources and facilities planning specialists.