

FROM THE EDITORS

THE COMING OF AGE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: EMBRACING THE DIVERSITY OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

We would like to add our editorial voices to those who have previously advocated for qualitative research in *AMJ*. From the editors who have supported such work¹ to the editorials they endorsed,² a strong vision and commitment to qualitative work is evident. Our new editorial team remains equally committed (see the February 2011 *From the Editors* [vol. 54: 9–14]). The fact that two associate editors are now dedicated exclusively to managing qualitative papers through the review process—one for micro submissions (Kevin) and the other for macro submissions (Tima)—is strong evidence of that commitment. That this, our team's second editorial, is by the two of us, Kevin and Tima, and focuses on qualitative research, is further evidence.

After years of sustained commitment to the qualitative research agenda, we now have the opportunity to ask: What has *AMJ* done particularly well so far, and where do we see potential for continued improvement in publishing high-quality qualitative research? To address these questions, we reviewed the qualitative articles that have been published in *AMJ* the past ten years. From this review, we identified some gaps and pondered opportunities for further development. In this editorial, we applaud the important strides made on the qualitative frontier, recognize that some strong norms are emerging in the research that is published, and encourage more diversity in the qualitative research appearing in *AMJ*.

We convey these thoughts through a first-person dialogue between us. We have chosen this style for several reasons. First, we want to signal that we are open to novelty by writing an editorial that departs from the traditional form. Second, dialogue embodies some of the character of qualitative research itself—exhibiting the authors' voice, illustrating context, and demonstrating transparency. This dialogue also reinforces efforts made in previous

editorials that show *AMJ* as a community of scholars collectively interested in advancing management research. Finally, this format allows us to share with you some of our conversation and experience as new associate editors making sense of and creating an identity for ourselves as visible advocates of qualitative research in the Academy of Management.

Our Roots

Kevin: You know, Tima, I'm enthusiastic about this role as an *AMJ* associate editor. I've been doing qualitative research since early in my doctoral program at Penn State. I was fortunate to have had some great mentors who were not only actively conducting qualitative research, but also willing to share their practices with young scholars and even provide guidance for our growth as qualitative researchers. Sure, I heard my fair share of advice on why I should wait to do qualitative research until after I had attained tenure and had the freedom "to do what I wanted," but I also received a lot of support for pursuing the type of research that best fit my desire to build theory and my skills of interacting directly with those living the phenomena I was interested in. As well, some of the most influential articles in my own areas of research (organizational change, identity and sensemaking) were qualitative and I wanted to emulate them.

Tima: My experience was quite different, Kevin. I completed my doctorate at the University of Oxford in the mid 1990s, at a point when students worked relatively independently. So, my approach to qualitative research was pretty much vicarious; I had no constraints, but not much guidance, either. I was driven entirely by an intellectual curiosity to uncover why firms would engage in activities for which there wasn't any financial incentive and ended up positioning my work in environmental responsibility. The only way I could figure out how to get to these answers, given the dominant economic paradigm within the strategy literature, was to actually talk to managers. And, I was lucky because there wasn't a stigma associated with qualitative research in the U.K. At the same time, I didn't fully appreciate the challenges I would later con-

¹ Most notably, they include Anne Tsui, Tom Lee, Sara Rynes, Duane Ireland, Peter Bamberger, and Mike Pratt.

² A complete list of previous editorials is provided on the *AMJ* website under "Author Resources" (<http://journals.aomonline.org/amj/author-resources>).

front in trying to publish qualitative work. Becoming an associate editor allows me to support a methodology that I believe is critical for deep insights in our field.

K: It's interesting how we were both imprinted with qualitative research early in our doctoral programs, so it is very much a part of our research identities. It's probably why you and I are such strong proponents of qualitative research. And, obviously *AMJ* strongly supports this methodology with this assignment of 2 of the 13 associate editors exclusively to qualitative manuscripts.

Taking Stock: Qualitative Research Published in *AMJ*

T: It seems to me that if we are to be stewards of qualitative research at *AMJ*, we should take stock of how far qualitative work has come. I recall preparing my first submission to the *Journal*, and puzzling how I was going to conform to the "Style Guide," which requested that Table 1 contain correlations. I know we've come a long way since then.

K: The question is how far?

T: Well, when I pulled all the articles from 2001 to 2010 to see how much qualitative research has appeared in *AMJ*, to my surprise I found that over 11 percent of articles were based exclusively on qualitative data.³ This is a lot higher than what I had understood it to be in the past, which I recall hearing was closer to 3 percent.

K: Well, given that 12 percent of the submissions in the first six months of our tenure as associate editors, from July 1 to December 31, 2010, were based solely on qualitative data, it seems that the qualitative articles published seem to proportionately represent the numbers submitted.

T: Even more remarkable is the positive reception and prominence of those published articles. Six of the last eight papers awarded *AMJ*'s "Best Article Award" were based exclusively on qualitative data.

K: It's curious that I still hear that *AMJ* does not value qualitative research, as the evidence doesn't seem to bear out that perception. I think we can confidently state that *AMJ* is a good target journal for qualitative research.

T: I wanted to dig further, Kevin, and see if there were any trends that were emerging in the qualitative articles that were published, so that we could offer potential contributors some pointers. I coded the articles from 2001 to 2010 for such things as types of data sources, data analysis, data displays, and how the theory was developed. Several interesting trends emerged:

- There is increasing consistency in the structure of published qualitative papers, with even some convergence in the sections provided (e.g., introduction, literature review, methods, findings, and discussion).
- Data analyses increasingly rely on coding data.
- Findings are illustrated in increasingly detailed tables, graphs, and diagrams.
- Finally, propositions are increasingly used to show a theoretical contribution.

K: Interesting. A specific "*AMJ* style" seems to be emerging for qualitative research, much as there is an *AMJ* style in quantitative research. I can see some merit in this, as it will be easier for new scholars, or at least scholars new to qualitative research, to be guided by these norms. This type of qualitative work has benefited from decades of refinement in the style of quantitative work. And, because we know how to assess the empirical and theoretical contribution of quantitative work, it is easier to spot the contribution of qualitative work that mimics the style of quantitative research.

T: True. But I worry that convergence to a specific style might signal that we are not open to the novelty and creativity for which qualitative research is often celebrated. It reminds me of something Sarah Tracy wrote: "Despite the gains of qualitative research in the late 20th century, a methodological conservatism has crept upon social science over the last ten years."⁴

K: That makes sense. The beauty of qualitative research is that it can accommodate different paradigms and different styles of research and research reporting. Although there are merits to having norms emerge for the style of qualitative research manuscripts, we do not want to stifle creativity. In fact, we should be encouraging creativity in qualitative work, the way that Peter Bamberger and Mike Pratt encouraged novel samples and research contexts.⁵

³ We are excluding from our analysis and discussion papers that apply mixed methods. Mixed methods are valued highly by *AMJ*, but the other associate editors review them, as their form and function typically follow a more quantitative structure.

⁴ Tracy (2010: 837–838).

⁵ August 2010 *From the Editors* (vol. 53: 665–671).

Opportunities for Qualitative Research in *AMJ*

T: So, do you see any opportunities for publishing qualitative research in *AMJ*?

K: Well, what I most appreciate about qualitative research is that the reader gets up close and personal with the ideas, the people, and the events that stimulated the researcher's curiosity. This intimacy with the phenomenon of interest means that the reader can see the world through the researcher's eyes, which often captures the informants' experiences. We experience the "Aha!" rather than just reading it. What qualitative research can do that quantitative research often cannot is to bring the reader closer to the phenomenon being studied. The most evocative and memorable pieces of research drew me into the text and engaged me so deeply that I was *there*.

T: It seems to me, then, that at the very least we should be encouraging the use of *nontraditional data sources*. Most qualitative research draws its data from some combination of archival sources, interviews, and observations. But we are open to insights drawn from more diverse sources, such as narratives, photographs, organizational artifacts, or even nonverbal interactions.

K: And we should encourage not just diversity in what is analyzed, but also in what *research questions* are asked. Qualitative researchers have the opportunity to raise new research questions, or even challenge the questions they or others have already asked. New questions will reveal deeper insights into management, organizations, and society, which are critical to understanding and potentially shaping our world.

T: I think we should also think about new and *varied data analyses*. For instance, I enjoy reading longitudinal studies because they can capture organizational change processes.⁶ Qualitative methods can get at temporal dynamics that quantitative research cannot. Plus, such analysis allows the researcher to also explore dynamics across different levels of analysis, which is challenging for quantitative analysis.

K: Some of the most powerful studies use *mixed methods* whereby they leverage insights from both qualitative and quantitative data. But it seems that

most of these studies use the qualitative data to service the quantitative study, either by validating constructs or simply providing explanation for the quantitative results. It would be interesting to see more innovative approaches to mixed methods, such as using the qualitative data to draw deeper insights from the quantitative data.

Critical Attributes of Good Qualitative Research

T: I worry that if we just say that we encourage diversity, potential contributors might interpret it as "anything goes." Such work must meet *AMJ*'s mission of publishing "theoretical and methodological contributions." I think it is important we tackle the question of what we mean by theoretical contribution and methodological rigor if we are to encourage a wider scope of qualitative submissions and set potential contributors up for success.

K: Let me tackle the theoretical contribution piece. Regardless of the type of data used, theoretical contributions generally are seen as involving findings that change, challenge, or fundamentally advance our understanding of a phenomenon. In other words, the findings cause us to think about a phenomenon in a way that past research would not normally suggest. The starting point for achieving this is that a paper must *engage scholars in an intellectual conversation*. This requires researchers to decide with whom they want to engage in a conversation, how best to begin or join that conversation, and ultimately how best to shape the discourse within that conversation. In this way, a theoretical contribution not only describes or explains a phenomenon, but also discerns or anticipates what scholars need to know about it and shapes their framing and dialogue around it. It's not just about "filling a gap" in the literature; it is also about changing the way scholars think and talk about the phenomenon.

T: Quantitative, and some qualitative, researchers highlight their contributions by developing hypotheses or propositions, but this doesn't have to be characteristic of all theoretical contributions. Sometimes, a significant contribution involves detailing a context or situation in a way that the assumptions underlying prior theory are challenged.

K: The key is for qualitative researchers, regardless of their methodological preferences, to explicitly engage in and significantly advance a scholarly conversation.

T: This makes good sense to me, Kevin. I've seen some papers with wonderful data, but they didn't

⁶ The upcoming special research forum, "Process Studies of Change in Organization and Management," edited by Ann Langley, Clive Smallman, Hari Tsoukas, and Andy Van de Ven, should offer a rich source of such insights.

connect to an existing scholarly conversation or they didn't say anything substantially new. The best papers succinctly communicate a core idea, and juxtapose that message against what we think we know in the field.

K: Do you want to tackle the second piece on methodological rigor? How can articles show rigor if they do not systematically code data for constructs and illuminate the relationships between those constructs? It's a question I've puzzled over lately, because we do not have many examples of articles published in *AMJ* that do not code data, so it is difficult to even anticipate the possibilities.

T: Plus, I don't think we should provide those examples to our audience, because it privileges those articles and authors and because those examples might be used as future templates.

K: Agreed. What we need to advocate for is flexibility and creativity, within the constraints of a few broad principles.

T: Well, given that there isn't a single "right" method, researchers must be *transparent* about how they engaged deeply with a phenomenon and show the evidence for their conclusions. And, to be clear, transparency comes not just from describing data sources and analysis thoroughly, but also from providing rich descriptions of the findings. Going back to what you said earlier about the strengths of qualitative work, we need to actually get a good sense of the phenomenon being studied through descriptions of the details. The greatest challenge of scholarly qualitative research is that there is no prescribed formula, or "boilerplate," as Mike Pratt called it.⁷ Because discovery can be serendipitous, methodological rigor is conveyed through the authenticity and candor of the text. It is important that researchers be able to describe how they discovered their insight, and how they were able to deepen it further through extended engagement with the focal phenomenon and associated data.

K: True. One needs only to read Clifford Geertz's classic description of Balinese cockfights to understand how deeply he engaged with that phenomenon and how he knew intuitively how to study it. Rather than synthesizing large amounts of qualitative data into codes, Geertz showed that it is sometimes important to shine the spotlight on a few critical incidents.

T: Another aspect of transparency is the importance of *researcher voice*. One of the key philosophical differences between most qualitative research and quantitative research is acknowledging the role the researcher played in the research outcomes. Strong quantitative data analysis strives for objectivity, but that stance implies that the researcher is detached from the data. It's not surprising, then, that most traditional ways of reporting quantitative research seem to remove the researcher from the text, for example, by using third person and focusing on numbers and charts. Many qualitative researchers assume that the phenomenon being researched and the researcher interact; one cannot be easily separated from the other. The researchers' role in the research and their voice must be visible in their manuscripts. So, I value the use of first-person narrative, both in describing the methods and the findings. It is important for researchers to be reflexive concerning their role in the research process.

K: It's not only about transparency or thick descriptions in the researcher's voice; the researcher must also be able to convey a *clear connection between data and theory*. Unlike numbers, qualitative data are not easily "reduced." This might be why we are seeing a trend toward coding, as it allows qualitative data to be shown efficiently and demonstrates the presence of constructs and their relationships. But such approaches aren't appropriate for all types of qualitative data. For example, ethnographers often gather mounds of field notes, but cannot capture everything because their context is so rich and their learning so vicarious. Moments of inspiration help to narrow their fields of vision, however. It might not make sense for them to code their earlier field notes, as they didn't even know what they were looking for. But they can draw patterns from their notes to juxtapose new theory with existing theory. Sometimes these patterns are illustrated through themes, and other times through stories. The important point is that there is no single right methodology for organizing and analyzing data, but rather a logic in the methods that ties together the research question, data collection, analysis, and theoretical contribution. Researchers must show a trail of evidence, conveyed not just in the methods section, but throughout the paper, such that each element of the paper is logically connected.

T: Ultimately, methodological rigor is conveyed by describing the who, what, where, when, and how in such a way that the reader sees clearly how the researcher moved from the raw data to the theoretical insight.

⁷ October 2009 *From the Editors* (vol. 52: 856–862).

K: That makes sense. From the reader's standpoint, the story being told is only as convincing as the data from which it emerges. If the researcher doesn't describe the methods in detail and provide rich descriptions of the data, the reader will feel alienated from the experience and lose faith in the researcher.

T: These general principles can explain why some qualitative manuscripts are rejected. Unlike our fellow associate editors who manage quantitative manuscripts and often reject manuscripts because of fatal flaws, it seems that we often reject qualitative manuscripts because of poor craftsmanship. The manuscripts just do not abide by the principles for theoretical contribution and methodological rigor.

K: I agree. Reviewers of qualitative work seem to have little patience for poorly written, dense, and difficult to navigate papers—which seem to be especially likely problems for those working with large sets of qualitative data that do not lend themselves easily to reduction techniques. I think that, more than anything else, a paper must be interesting and easy to navigate, and excite the reader. Qualitative reviewers are more open-minded and excited by interesting methods and novelty than most authors may realize, but reviewers seem to have little tolerance for poorly crafted papers.

Summing Up

T: In writing an editorial so early in our tenure as associate editors, we have the opportunity to send some clear signals to potential authors. In just a few words, what should they be?

K: First, I think I'd really want *AMJ*'s readers to know that we value qualitative research and would like *AMJ* to be seen as a journal of first choice.

Second, we welcome all manner of qualitative research submissions, whether they fit the more common form involving the coding of data and the development of propositions, or are more novel in their approach.

T: I agree. What we want to avoid is some sort of premature convergence to a specific style, when one of the defining features of qualitative work is its methodological plurality.

K: Yes. There is no single right way, and that is an important message for us to send. In fact, many approaches can uphold *AMJ*'s mission of theoretical contribution and methodological rigor.

T: And that mission can sometimes be best achieved when methodological frontiers are pushed, as long as the researcher engages a theoretical conversation and is transparent about how she/he was involved in the phenomenon being studied.

K: I'm looking forward to reading manuscripts whose authors have taken up our challenge to innovate and broaden the repertoire of qualitative styles and techniques.

T: Me too, Kevin—I'm sincerely excited about our remaining tenure in the position.

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