

Qualitative research in organizational studies: examples and reflections

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Introduction

Qualitative research is considered an appropriate method for addressing the questions of “how” (Pratt, 2009) and obtaining in-depth insights that either add to existing literature or expose new theoretical directions (Bansal et al., 2018). To shed more light on the ways in which qualitative research could be conducted, this paper will analyze two qualitative empirical studies, one of which was published in top-tier journal – The Academy of Management Journal (AMJ); and the other was published in Business Ethics Journal (BEJ), one of the journals in FT-50 journal list. The AMJ article employed analytic induction to examine the motivations and contextual factors that promote corporate ecological responsiveness (Bansal & Roth, 2000), whereas the BEJ article adopted semiotic analysis to identify how a controversial plant closure was framed by various actors and casted as moral failure which was then escalated from a local concern to a national attention (Wessel et al., 2022). The reasons for choosing these two articles include: (1) divergent genres, although both are qualitative inductive studies, they engaged different ways of analyzing data and building theories (variance-based case study versus process study); (2) large time gap, which makes it possible to observe whether qualitative methods have been changed over time; and (3) similar research theme, while the first article focused on what motivated organizations to go green, the second one concerned about the escalation of moral failure of a single case. This paper will first analyze the two articles, starting from conceptual frontend to data collection and data analysis and ending with theoretical insights and contributions. In the second part, a comparison between the two articles will be presented; followed by a general reflection on how to write a qualitative research paper in the conclusions.

Two examples of qualitative empirical research: an analysis and comparison

In the first article, regarding research relevance, Basal and Roth (2000) identified the gap that prior research on organizations and natural environment had not investigated in detail the conceptual distinctiveness of ecologically based motivations and the contexts which lead to particular motivations. Therefore, it was not obvious why in similar circumstances, some organizations embraced ecologically responsive initiatives while others did not. The authors argued for the necessity of understanding the motives for organizations to be ecologically responsive with two reasons. Firstly, it could assist organizational theorists to predict ecological behaviors; and secondly, it would allow policy makers, researchers and managers to determine control mechanisms and measures in order to promote ecologically sustainable organizations. In addition, the authors presented a preliminary model of corporate ecological responsiveness which was derived from previous literature and detected its limitations, including (1) inadequate data, where few case studies were not sufficient to determine if organizational motives indeed explained organizational ecological responsiveness; and (2) a lack of consideration of contexts that give rise to these motivations and their interactions. By framing the conceptual frontend and identifying research gap, Bansal and Roth (2000) achieved clarity in answering the call for this research. Next, they collected data from multiple sources, including 88 in-depth interviews (between one and two hours per each interview), participant observations (60 hours and 500 pages of single-spaced transcribed notes), and archival documents from a total of 53 companies in multiple industries (food retailers, auto manufacturers, oil companies) which faced a wide range of ecological issues and had visible impact on the environment, from the United Kingdom and Japan in the period of 1993 and 1995. Theoretical sampling, in which cases are selected to highlight theoretical issues and to refute or challenge the theory being tested, was applied; instead of statistical sampling in which a sample is designed to be representative of a population. The reason for involving Japanese firms in the study was to challenge the emerging theory in a different cultural context. Again, the authors justified their data collection with clarity of purposefulness. The data was later analyzed with two types of analyses: identifying different motivations by comparing actions with expressed motivations; and identifying the dimensions of the motivations to discriminate among them. The data from interview transcripts were coded and then recoded using the electronic software QSR NUD*IST which allowed easy handle of large amount of data. One reason for re-analysis was to examine the fit between the data and the emerging theory. In addition, the authors also used an

independent rater to code part of the data (from the food retailers) to inspect the validity of the differentiating dimensions. Contextual variables were developed by coding different internal and external conditions that influenced the intention of an organization to adopt a specific motivation. The data collection and data analysis were so detailed described that they made me think of this paper as a quantitative paper. The only difference is that the authors did not propose hypotheses to test, but instead building theory from the data they collected. The authors then presented the findings, following their analysis of the data. Overall, the motivations for ecological responsiveness were grouped into three basic motivations, namely competitiveness (potential for ecological responsiveness to improve long-term profitability), legitimation (the desire of an organization to improve the appropriateness of its actions within an established set of regulations, norms, values, beliefs), and ecological responsibility (a concern for social good). Meanwhile, the three contextual conditions related to the dominant motivations emerged from the analysis were issue salience, field cohesion, and individual concern which were linked to three levels of context, respectively: ecological context, organizational context, and individual context. From these findings, the authors provided an advanced model of corporate ecological responsiveness revealing the relationships between the motivations and their contexts. When a specific ecological issue is salient or has meaning for organizational constituents, it results in ecological initiatives motivated by competitiveness and legitimation. In a cohesive field, organizations are less likely to be motivated by pursuing higher level ecological responsibility and competitiveness, but the motivations mainly come from concerns of legitimacy. At individual level, the concern for the environment on the parts of organizational members or owners leads to the motivations of ecological responsibility and legitimation. In general, this research has both theoretical contributions and practical implications to research in organizations and the natural environment. Regarding theoretical contribution, it filled in the gap of previous research, distinguishing different motivations, contexts and the interactive relationships between them. As a result, the research posited various profile that organizations can apply in practicality to be more ecologically responsive. Overall, the research by Bansal and Roth (2000) overcame the challenges of reasoning with qualitative data (Mantere, 2017) and achieved internal coherence in which research questions and motivation, data collection, data analysis, findings and theory development and contributions all fit together (Howard-Grenville, 2021).

In the second article, Wessel et al. (2022) focused on one single case study of Nokia to understand the processes from which controversies around a plant closure in Bochum, Germany in 2008 escalated from local concerns to national attention as organizational moral failure. Although diverse aspects of plant closures had been examined in previous research, such as why companies made closure decision, how the closures were implemented and what the consequences of the closures for related stakeholders were, the processes that made these local protests escalate into national controversies remained unknown. The relevance for this research had, therefore, been justified. Furthermore, in framing theoretical background, the authors went through (1) the literature on ethics of plant closures, in which the focuses were on the impacts, moral justifications and stakeholder reactions, to (2) the literature on organizational moral failure and moral illegitimacy, with a stress on public discourse and discursive processes in constructing perceptions of moral illegitimacy and categorization of actions and events as organizational moral failure, which was then bridged to (3) the literature on the role of labeling in organizational moral failure in which socially constructed labels (for example: corrupt, unethical, etc.) used in public discourse could signify moral failure. In general, plant closure was argued to be an insightful case for the purpose of this research because it led to negative social consequences and could be seen as organizational moral failure. A development of a more refined understanding of the escalation process of controversies was crucial due to the negative consequences and impacts of such moral failure on the society. It is worth mentioning that in the case of Nokia, the organization did not violate any laws or regulations when shutting down the Bochum plant and even received favorable attitudes by some stakeholder groups. The reason for the closure was to maintain its competitiveness in the global cell phone market and to reduce production costs. The concerns only escalated when German politicians accused Nokia of abusing public subsidies (around 60 million euro in exchange for 2860 jobs in Bochum until 2006). Regarding data collection, the data collected consisted of 422 newspaper articles from five German newspapers, 21 Nokia press and stock exchange releases related to the closure, 24 Youtube videos and some blog posts in the period between January 2008 and December 2012. The authors chose newspaper articles as a main source because media could be seen as an arena for controversies when it comes to public perceptions. Such reason has verified the data choice. Later on, the data was analyzed following four steps: description of the development of the media controversy with a timeline, semiotic analysis (semiotic codes comprise signs that are perceived to be linked into binary oppositions by members

of a community), a systematic coding of the data, and the development of an inductive model which adopted grounded theory approach. Next, the findings were presented accordingly. The semiotic analysis showed how public discourse evolved relating to two moral framings of Nokia as egotistic and opportunistic. The media coverage shifted from neutral reporting of the closure to an intensifying debate around the morality underlying the social market economy. The competing accounts of Nokia's moral failure drew further interest and attracted new voices from German politicians. When the attention grew in the media coverage, it became linked to more abstract political and moral concerns of national interest. In the end, due to the magnitude of controversy all over media, the closure became a widely accepted symbol of organizational moral failure. This research had both theoretical and methodological contributions in that (1) it enriched the literature on moral failure and plant closures, drawing attention to the role of labeling in creating moral framings and the role of media as an amplifier of moral contestations; and (2) it showed semiotic codes as a methodological tool to link purposeful labeling to the subsequent developments in public discourse which helps explain meaning-making processes that are central to the rationalization and evaluation of controversial actions, practices, behaviors by firms as moral failures. Overall, the research by Wessel et al. (2022) also gained internal coherence with a fit among research question, data and targeted theoretical discourse (Mantere, 2017). When reading their paper, I had a feeling that I was not only reading a scientific paper, but also reading a story with a smooth flow in which the authors moved from one idea to the next one in a clear manner and followed a logical progression.

Basically, the two papers both engaged inductive reasoning with grounded theory approach to form new theoretical model. The difference involved the methods applied whereas variance-based case study was adopted in the research of Bansal and Roth (2000), Wessel et al. (2022) took a process study of a single case. The methods chosen fit their research objectives because multiple case studies are used to build an understanding of the relationships between well-defined constructs (in Bansal and Roth (2000), they are contexts, firm motivations and ecologically responsive initiatives) and often aim to unpack the factors that explain different outcomes (why firms respond differently to "green" responsibility), whereas process studies are commonly employed to explore the change, emergence, adaptation and transformation (in Wessel et al. (2022), it's the escalation of moral concerns from local to national level) (Bansal et al., 2018). Despite varied data types between the two studies, both seem to adopt discourse analysis of the

language used in the data, including texts, words in interviews, public discourse and archival data. Moreover, both studies are thick in the description of methods and the interpretation of data which make them more transparent in terms of data collection and data analysis. Last but not least, the structures of the two papers resemble to certain extent. Although the headings are slightly different, both include the following main parts: theoretical background, explaining the relevance of the research; methods with explanation on data collection and data analysis; findings; theory development; contributions; limitations and future directions. Hence, over time, qualitative research does not seem to change much in its structure and methods. Through the analysis of these two studies, I may have found the “boilerplate”, a template for writing up qualitative research, which was indicated to be missing (Pratt, 2009). However, it could be a coincidence and two is too small of a sample to generalize.

Conclusions

In summary, when conducting qualitative research, depending on the objectives of the research that different methods, such as variance-based case study, process study, historical study, engaged scholarship, discourse study, will be applied (Bansal et al., 2018). Then, just as quantitative research, qualitative research also encompasses many ways to collect and analyze data, including, but not limited to narrative analysis, ethnographic methods, grounded theory (Pratt et al., 2020). One should bear in mind that a balance and a fit among the description of methods, the interpretation of data and the development of theory will make the research internally coherent and comprehensive (Pratt, 2009; Mantere, 2017). Lastly, although there is no universal template for qualitative research, one should cover the research backbone consisting of theoretical background, methods (data collection and data analysis), findings, theory development, contributions, limitations and future directions. In other words, introduce a short, multipurpose front end, display the data, tell a story and end with a long, robust backend (Bansal & Corley, 2012).

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