

Getting Started

Assignment 2: Qualitative Research

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Hargadon, A. B., & Bechky, B. A. (2006).

When collections of creatives become creative collectives: A field study of problem solving at work.

Organization science, 17(4), 484-500.

Harrison, S. H., & Rouse, E. D. (2014).

Let's dance! Elastic coordination in creative group work: A qualitative study of modern dancers.

Academy of Management Journal, 57(5), 1256-1283.

I first read Hargadon and Bechky (2006) during my master studies. I was really impressed by the article at that time but somehow managed to lose it even though I never forgot its main message. I was intrigued by their idea of moments of collective creativity when the creative output cannot be attributed to any individual as everyone is building on each other in interaction. Therefore, I was more than thrilled when I finally reunited with the article after following Henri's suggestion to check Beth Bechky's work.

Whereas Hargadon and Bechky (2006) was an obvious and easy choice, the same cannot be said about Harrison and Rouse (2014). It was a bit of a struggle to find interesting qualitative articles from AMJ from my research field. I easily found a dozen interesting quantitative articles around my topic from AMJ and interesting qualitative articles from other FT-50 journals but qualitative articles from my field in AMJ were difficult to find. This makes me wonder if qualitative articles in general are rare in AMJ or is it just my topic. However, even though the choice of Harrison and Rouse (2014) was not fully deliberate, and the context of dance felt a bit distancing to me in the beginning, in the end, I was glad that I came across with the article. Harrison and Rouse turned out to be in many ways an inspirational article.

Given the somewhat random choices, the topics of the two selected articles were surprisingly close to each other and sort of addressed the same phenomenon from two

different perspectives. Both papers focused on creativity on group level and as a dynamic condition which emerges in moments instead of individual level and stable condition. Thus, the theoretical foundations for the two studies were very similar.

According to Hargadon and Bechky (2006), earlier research on creativity in organizations has primarily focused on individual level. They base their study on the presumption that the complexity of the contemporary working life demands collective creative efforts since the capabilities of an individual are limited. They build on the perspective that creativity is a recombination of existing ideas and by incorporating the expertise and experiences of multiple people, creativity can rise to new levels. Furthermore, they highlight the momentary nature of creativity rather than ongoing condition. Thus, in their paper, they focus on the *collective moments* when creative insights emerge.

Harrison and Rouse (2014) address that based on earlier research, providing autonomy is one effective tactic for fostering creativity and group work is another. However, they point out that when autonomy and group work are combined, they might cancel each other out and research evidence of the two together are mixed. The authors raise the key question of how creative groups coordinate for creative work which requires balancing between individual autonomy and constraints of the group work.

Hargadon and Bechky (2006) collected the data from six organizations in an extensive 18-month long fieldwork. The studied organizations represented different fields but almost all their practices were based on creating novel solutions to novel problems making a suitable setting to study collective creativity. The researchers applied ethnographic methods and gathered data from multiple sources in each case company to construct validity for the findings. The data sources were (1) interviews with key informants, (2) project postmortems, (3) observations of work, (4) tracking of particular projects (whether “live” or retrospectively), and (5) documents and technological artifacts of the organization. For analysis, the authors used an iterative process of cycling between the data, emerging theory, and relevant literature. They developed initial categories of action based on the interview transcripts and field notes, then returned to the transcripts and notes to see if they could find more evidence to support these hunches. Taking into consideration the

extent of the data, the findings of were presented in surprisingly compact form. There were only few direct quotations from the interview transcripts, no tables and only one simple figure. Despite my deep admiration to the article, I wonder if the findings were presented as thoroughly as possible.

Harrison and Rouse (2014) followed four dance groups during their 10-week preparation for a concert. To develop their research question and rough themes, they also conducted six pilot interviews prior to the actual data collection. As data collection methods, they used formal and informal interviews, and observations. They discussed their first order concepts, second order themes and emerging dimensions in detail with the support of several figures and direct quotes. In addition to the typical textual description of the iterative process between data collection, analysis, and theory, Harrison and Rouse (2014) also presented a highly informational figure of the process as well as their theoretical model. As comparison to Hargadon and Bechky (2006), they presented both the data collection process and analysis in more profoundly which really strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings.

As theoretical insights, both articles suggest a new model or a theory regarding creativity on group level. Hargadon and Bechky (2006) introduce a model of collective creativity which explains how creative problem solving is at times a temporary collective process instead of an individual act. They identify four interrelating activities that, together, appear to precipitate moments of collective creativity. The four activities are helps seeking, help giving, reflective reframing, and reinforcing. Their theory promotes the collaborative side of creativity in contrast to the predominant focus of creativity as an individual act. In my opinion, their findings are very pragmatic and beneficial as direct managerial implications to enhance collaborative creativity in business.

Harrison and Rouse (2015) build on theory on coordination and creativity in groups by suggesting a theory of *elastic coordination* which they define as “the series of interactions through which groups manage integration and de-integration to arrive at a working creative solution”. They determined three distinct interaction patterns which groups used to coordinate their work. The three patterns were surfacing boundaries, discovering discontinuities, and parsing solutions. The most interesting insight in their theory is the role

of constraints in creative work. Earlier research has regarded constraints as harmful for creativity whereas Harrison and Rouse (2014) point out that creative groups create boundaries themselves which help them to direct their creativity.

In addition, Harrison and Rouse (2015) build on the notion by Hargadon and Bechky (2006) that collective creativity is indeed ephemeral, and members of a creative group must have flexibility in working either together or individually. In a sense, Hargadon and Bechky (2006) argue that even though creativity is an individual act, it benefits of collaboration with others, whereas Harrison and Rouse (2015) suggest that for creativity to flourish in groups, individuals must be allowed to work individually and together which they call integration and de-integration.

However, even though the two articles had a lot in common, naturally there were also differences. The biggest difference was in the research settings. Hargadon and Bechky (2006) studied collaborative creativity in six established companies, whereas Harrison and Rouse (2015) studied four modern dance groups. It can be questioned whether the findings from a study in dance groups can be applied in a more typical organizational context. Harrison and Rouse (2015) argue that modern dance groups offered them “a relatively unencumbered view of group interactions” that lack the typical organizational features such as reward and promotion systems, departmental allegiances, or political games. They address any critique by arguing that their results are likely to be useful in similar type of reasonably flat project groups in which the creative process is relatively fast.

I believe that Harrison and Rouse’s (2015) somewhat unusual context worked in their favour. Study of modern dancers were most likely a risk that fortunately paid off. Their arguments were strong, but I can imagine that the context and the applicability of the results in other fields could have also turned out differently. Personally, I am not fully convinced without further theory testing that all creative groups necessarily share the dynamics of modern dance groups.

When it comes to learning how to write a qualitative paper, I paid special attention to the clarity in the theoretical framing. Both articles were theoretically very clearly framed. Given

the all-encompassing nature of qualitative research, I often find it challenging to make a compact framing. The theoretical framings of both articles in question seem simple, almost obvious, yet I believe the simplicity is deceiving. I can imagine the establishment of each theory has required a lot of work and moments of unclarity before the ultimate concept has been developed. Thus, it would be interesting to know, what other topics and possible theoretical ideas the researchers had during the process and were they completely dismissed or did they result in further developments or even other articles of the same data. Based on the descriptions of the data collections, Harrison and Rouse (2014) developed their idea of the theoretical framing quite early on in the data collection process, whereas the theme for Hargadon and Bechky (2006) emerged later during the analysis process.

Another aspect that I was impressed by were the visual presentations by Harrison and Rouse (2014). I think they brought clarity and increased trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis process as well as really helped to understand the cyclic nature of their theory. All in all, I think the illustrations lifted the quality of the paper to another level. As an architect, I am used to visualizing my ideas and I truly believe that research in general would benefit from more visual approach. I definitely want to exploit different visual presentations in my own research and use Harrison and Rouse (2014) as an exemplary paper in it.

By chance, the topics of the two articles chosen to this assignment happened to be very similar to each other. Yet, it was not the only surprise. Even though Hargadon and Bechky (2006) was a long-time favourite, Harrison and Rouse (2014) turned out to be equally interesting and even better at some levels. Nonetheless, I think they are both exemplary qualitative articles which, however, should not be any surprise giving the journals in which they have been published. I believe I will return to both of them many times during my dissertation process.