

Reflections on published qualitative research

The motivation behind the papers' selection

For this session's assignment I am focusing on the recent publication of Shepherd et al (2021) on the meaning Mumbai's ragpickers attribute to their work and the paper by Smith and Besharov (2019) on a case of sustaining organizational hybridity in a social venture. I find these two articles appealing to my research interest, since they shed light on themes within the scope of my study. I am now exploring how a compassion-venturing team leading a humanitarian aid project has developed into a *de novo* social venture. The emergence of the team and its transition to constitute a more solid structure involved hybrid organizing and dependency on an existing NGO with differing identity and logic. The core team of the compassionate venture and the leaders of the NGO are professional and non-professional volunteers - many combine their social mission with other unrelated work and need to find balance in the process. My paper's selection helps me explore organizational hybridity and work meaning attribution in more detail, as well as get an in-depth focus on the writing of authors who are experts on the underlying topics of the papers, like social entrepreneurship and adversity.

This session's assignment aptly guides learning on qualitative research development by inviting to look beyond the content and into the structure of the publications, the detail of the methods section, the steps of the data analysis and the presentation of the contributions and findings. So, I purposefully chose articles from two different journals – AMJ and ASQ - to get familiarized with the differences in publication style, expected sections and structure and information on access and spread of the publications. I also chose recently published papers that we already discussed with Ewald. I wanted to look at not long past developments in the field and see what other relevant work I could discover cited in the articles.

Brief introduction of the papers

In their research contextualized in Mumbai, India, observing the work of ragpickers who dispose of rubbish while also belonging to the lowest caste and living in slums, Shepherd et al. (2021) shed light on the fact that ragpickers often create both positive and negative meanings regarding their own work – which may be difficult to manage, since such meanings require a particular level of coherence to serve as a foundation for action. This issue is heightened when filthy labor is intractable—when it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid performing it. The authors identified that the ragpickers acquired "functional ambivalence"—the simultaneous awareness of competing orientations toward their work and lifestyles that supported both acceptance and a feeling of agency and enabled them to go on in their lives—by keeping and mixing these divergent meanings. Smith and Besharov's (2019) work focus on the case of a hybrid organization – a successful social enterprise in Cambodia titled Digital Divide Data. According to the authors organizations are increasingly grappling with hybridity, which they define as the mix of identities, forms, logics, and other essential aspects that would not otherwise be compatible. The authors draw attention to the lack of knowledge on how hybrid organizations maintain dual at times conflicting elements (logics, identities, etc.) throughout time. The authors present a model to sustain hybridity via the understanding of structured flexibility: "the interaction of stable organizational features and adaptive enactment processes" (p.1).

Reflecting on the two papers' themes I ask myself: how Shepherd et al's (2021) work apply to compassion-venturing teams or volunteers? How do such collectives or individuals find purpose and how do they convince themselves to do what they do? How is their identity formed regarding devotion to their social work and how is it balanced with other roles or activities? Do they also experience, like the ragpickers, if not a physical, but at least a psychological no-way-out from volunteering and compassion

for others? And what can Smith and Besharov's (2019) contribution explain to me about social ventures and their development?

The paper's overall structure

Shepherd et al.'s (2021) paper is composed of an Abstract, an Introduction, a Theoretical background section, a Methods section elaborating further on the Research Context and Sample and describing the Data Collection procedure, continues with the Data Analysis and moves to the Findings section; before proceeding to the Discussion section, the authors dedicate a section to elaborate on their model of Multi-focal Meaning Making (the titles are kept in capital letters to respect how they appear in the publications). Finally, the authors conclude with discussing their contributions, a direction for future research and the limitations of their work. Smith and Besharov's (2019) work presents the following structure: from the Abstract, the authors move to an untitled introduction and then to the Theoretical framing – starting directly with the macro topic of organizational hybridity and not zooming in into any sub-themes. The authors follow the section on Organizational hybridity directly with the Methods section, where they elaborate on the Data collection highlighting and detailing in separate sub-sections their data sources: Interviews, Observations and Archival Documents. Smith and Besharov (2019) then proceed with describing their Data Analysis. The authors present their detailed analysis through a time frame based on eras. In each of the eras, the authors describe in detail conceptual categories that are representative of each time divided into the aggregate dimensions they propose based on their findings (for reference's sake these are: Enactment process - surfacing strategic tensions, Reinterpreting Identity meaning, Experimenting with practices and Bumping up; as well as - Enabling features: Paradoxical frames and Guardrails). Afterwards, the authors elaborate on their data analysis and propose a Model of structured flexibility which I mentioned in the previous section. Finally, Smith and Besharov (2019) highlight their theoretical contributions and implications, as well as the limitations and directions from future research.

Both papers are based on a traditional IMRaD (Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion) skeleton structure: include an introduction and a theoretical framework, elaborate on their methods and data, present findings and insights from their analysis and bring forth a discussion on their contributions and avenues for future research. Also, both articles include a model that birthes from the findings of the authors. Models are not necessarily a must in such publications, but I have observed them to be a common practice – unsurprisingly, since they are helpful in improving explanations, may serve as a great tool and be applicable for other cases/practices, or simplify the representation of complex or abstract concepts.

Theoretical framing of the papers

Shepherd et al (2021) begin their theoretical framing by introducing the concept of Dirty Work as the main theme of inquiry, but then zoom into sub-themes on Dirty Work: Intersectionality in Dirty Work and Interactable Dirty Work (the titles are kept capitalized to respect how they were written in the original paper). Smith and Besharov (2019) frame their work around the concept of organizational hybridity. They start with a brief introduction of what organizational hybridity implies (combine logics, forms and identities that would usually not go together) and how sustaining hybridity in organizations over time brings forth opportunities, but also challenges. The authors introduce relevant streams of research that investigate short-term responses to challenges in hybridity: 1) a stream emphasizing organization-level strategies, structures and practices to resolve conflicts in hybrid organizations, 2) a stream exploring group and individual relations of hybridity. Then, the authors draw our attention to the knowledge gap - while short-term responses to hybridity challenges are studied, the response to challenges and the sustainability of hybridity in the long-term is overlooked. And finally, the authors elaborate why this knowledge gap merits further exploration - hybridity challenges persist in the long term because a hybrid

organization implies changing dynamics and ongoing tensions and not being able to address those challenges might lead to the organization's failure, hence effectively sustaining hybridity in the long-term is crucial for the venture's success.

All in all, the authors: 1) define the main topic (and sub-topics when applicable), 2) elaborate on why this topic (sub-topics) merits our attention, 3) what research streams have contributed knowledge on this topic (sub-topics) and 4) what has research overlooked regarding them (identifying the knowledge gap) and finally 6) why what has been overlooked is important to be studied.

Data collection, data analysis and presentation of findings

Both papers include detailed descriptions regarding data collection and analysis. Aside from being a requisite in many journals, I believe that describing in detail the data collection and data analysis process adds transparency to the research practice - to the accountability and responsibility of the researchers with how they work with their data. A detailed description can help other scholars follow the researchers' analysis work more in depth – follow in their steps, to be more precise. The data analysis process section can also point out to the more appropriate reviewers that are familiar with the analysis technique described. All in all - transparency is the bedrock of ethics in approaching investigative work.

In Shepherd et al.'s (2021) paper the authors interviewed 73 individuals, including 46 ragpickers and garbage removers living and working in slums. Other interviews were with NGO's and customers or ragpickers. To gain the trust of ragpickers the authors collaborated closely with the NGO's and had a representative of an NGO present almost at every interview. It seems obvious that interviews would be a top data source choice for such work – since a straightforward way to understand the motivations, beliefs or reflections of the ragpickers is to talk to them. As an extreme and isolated 'population' type adhered to specific norms, the ragpickers or 'dirt' workers are not easily accessible and, for the authors, establishing a collaboration with an Indian local representative to carry out the interviews seems fully appropriate. The authors also supplemented and triangulated interview data with field notes based on observations. Secondary data included web material available from Indian media on ragpickers'. Moreover, the authors complimented their findings with printed materials from NGOs and government documentation which helped them learn more about ragpickers. The authors employed an inductive social constructivist approach to analyze their data and particularly the interviews – an approach I learnt more about thanks to the reading. The authors also moved back and forth between data which is common in qualitative work and underwent several rounds of coding: from first order to second order codes. The codes were then integrated by the authors into higher-order categories and subsequently into aggregate dimensions. Basically, Shepherd et al (2021) went from a more abstract understanding of the data to creating concrete meanings from the interview data and other sources obtained. It was great to learn that the authors brainstormed, went back to the data and reflected even back to the literature. Through such brainstorming the authors understood, for instance, that time played a role in the interviews, and they presented their findings according to a temporal frame. Finally, the authors focused on looking into theoretical dimensions to come up with the concept of "functional ambivalence" that I mentioned in a previous section. A discovery for me was the insider/outsider approach the authors used. I was already familiar with exhaustive checks from outsiders or "second opinions" for research work, but not in such a combination – two insiders and the researchers treated as outsiders with constant dynamic checks and interactions. The coding and development of the model was rechecked between insiders and outsiders, contributing, in my opinion, to a higher robustness of the findings. The findings in Shepherd et al.'s (2021) publication were presented as four separate blocks of text corresponding with the themes of the finding's outcomes: 1) multiple intersecting sources of taint. 2) overarching negative meaning of the ragpickers work and lives, 3) facets of their situation and adopting specific temporal frames 4) finding on that the ragpickers held these negative and positive meanings simultaneously, interwoven in their

descriptions of their work and lives. To illustrate the findings, excerpts from interviews shedding light on the themes were brought forth. Tables with more detailed excerpts from interviews were also elaborated and added in the tables section for more exhaustive illustration of the data. Then the findings presentation transitioned into the presentation of the model mentioned in a previous section. The model was also visually illustrated. I believe that illustrations serve well for further simplification, comprehension and wider applicability of the presented model.

Smith and Besharov's (2019) data included 34 semi-structured interviews with the founder/CEO, managers, board members, operators, and an external advisor, as well as observations during trips to Cambodia while attending to board meetings and other company reunions. The authors also received exclusive access to 3000 archival documents of the company, as one of the authors was a friend of the founder of the company that was included in the case study. A new learning was for me the employment of the "courtroom interviewing style" mentioned by the authors – with emphasis on specific events and their unfolding over time. The data collection was temporally divided into 2 stages: first interviews happened between 2000 and 2004 and the rest 2005 and 2010. The data analysis approach used focused on "following forward" and "tracing backwards" (following Langley) by looking at interviews and observations unfolding events into the future and the archival documents supporting looking into the past. The authors moved from the data to theoretical interpretations – going between data collection, analysis and existing literature to formulate insights – in following 3 main steps: 1) a case study that integrated the various sources of data – interviews and description of events. In the process the authors had to change their focus - because the orientations of leaders became more important than the study of hybrid identities. 2) Return to the raw data to understand unfolding processes – split into temporal bracketing: three distinct eras by open-coding data for each era and converging with common themes supported by glancing at literature. 3) Finally, the authors tried the understanding of the connections between concepts and infused literature to create a theoretical model. In Smith and Besharov's (2019) work findings are not labeled as 'Findings' as per Shepherd et al.'s (2021) paper, but are directly explained in a subsequent section. As well as in the previous paper, Smith and Besharov (2019) present excerpts from their interviews and observations to illustrate their analysis and showcase the associated categories. As previously noted, the findings are explained based on eras – each of the era is elaborated by the authors in detail and characteristics of those described. The authors also employ illustrations and tables to present their data and their model.

The paper's theoretical insight and contributions

Shepherd et al. (2021) contribute to the literature on dirty work and intersectionality, particularly by showcasing how individuals performing difficult precarious work can make meaning of it to continue on with their lives. The authors shed light on how workers can experience and combine both positive and negative meanings through "functional ambivalence" - embracing opposing meanings to keep going. The authors show that negative and positive meanings can co-exist and even be constructive and empowering. Shepherd et al. (2021) provide us with a multi-focal meaning making – a global focus on both positive and negative meaning allocation a setting that can be extended to understand other working and organizational settings where such conditions exist. Smith and Besharov (2019) on the other hand contribute to literature on hybridity, but also to paradox and dialectic theories, due to the case being one of dual tensions. Smith and Besharov's (2019) work provides more knowledge on the interaction of competing demands. The authors also add knowledge on system dynamics, cultural-historical activity theory, configurational analysis, etc. The model of structured flexibility introduced by the authors showcases the maintenance of organizational hybridity in the long term through the relationship of stability and adaptation which prior research overlooks. By providing a novel view on hybridity within organizations, the authors also advance understanding of stability and change, as well as on organizational identity and routines.

Differences and similarities observed between the two papers and learnings

I would like to focus on what unites the two publications, but a few differences can be highlighted: for instance, slightly varying structure (explained in a previous section) and theoretical background presentation: a broader one introduced in Shepherd et al's (2021) paper, while a much condensed one in Smith and Besharov's (2019) work. In any case, both theoretical/literature sections are quite short and to the point, while in other publications they might take on several pages. Also, the data analysis procedures between the publications also differ (which were detailed in the previous section). The two publications follow a very thorough analysis process which includes 'moving' back and forth from data to interpretation. The exhaustiveness also includes re-coding and re-analyzing data. In both papers the authors mention changes in interpretation through the exploration process. The papers are published in top journals, including a theoretical model, illustrations and data excerpts to showcase their findings. The authors point out in detail the process followed for data analysis. Robustness and trustworthiness are enhanced by checks of other colleagues and external evaluators.

An essential aspect of writing qualitative work is to understand that the analysis may lead to change the initial course or decisions regarding what the study is a case of. Much qualitative work is based on primary data in the form of semi-structured interviews, field notes and observations supported with secondary data such as archival documents or press clippings, for instance. Also, not only codification, but also re-codification and external evaluation of the codification is a practice. Qualitative work may take years to accomplish. Smith and Besharov's work is a clear example: they adopted a qualitative longitudinal study of 10 years to finally conclude it with their analysis and theorizing. Also, there is certainly a difference in how the work is expected to be presented in the different outlets: some are more appropriate for a certain theme/topic than others. Writing qualitative work needs a holistic approach and the willingness to iterate. I learnt that extensive literature reviews are not necessary to frame a paper theoretically – that for instance, one short theoretical section (Smith & Besharov, 2019) is sufficient to introduce the topic, the knowledge gap and the novelty of the study and that illustration can be helpful and developing models can come in handy in concluding and contributing to qualitative work.

Other reflections on doctoral studies and writing a dissertation

Despite an understanding of qualitative methods, I have been lacking an extensive and comprehensive guide on approaches and best practices – for instance just recently in a seminar I was introduced to Qualitative Comparative Analysis conducted with a configurational approach which I was unfamiliar with prior. I thought about how useful it would be to have an endorsed 'proof-read' descriptive guide on the different approaches and their characteristics. Of course, I understand it is all very individual and it depends on the researchers, the data or the case study as a whole – but some preliminary generalized materials could come in handy. Also, I wonder about the reviewers that receive submissions – do they have biases towards a certain approach, or does it all depend on a convincing justification of its use? Are there specific outlets/reviewers that favor one over the other? Recently I attended a webinar by Tima Bansal and Catherine Welch on qualitative studies reviewer's work and they brought forth the discrepancies in opinions or methods regarding using Gioia or a different approach and the bias of certain reviewers to consider a rejection because they do not favor the approach. I am curious as to how this is common. My concern is also with time: how can we, as doctoral researchers, realistically publish our work in top outlets in under four years – which, why not, is an expected achievement - if the data collection and analysis process is so time-consuming? (and of course, why wouldn't it be). When I read qualitative research I many times wonder, unless explicitly stated, how long did it take the authors to develop the article? How long since they started working on the paper until they finally submitted and published? I appreciate reading about authors receiving peer feedback about their work. And I am very grateful that there is a course like Getting Started to also provide bi-directional feedback and have a space

for such reflections, but at the same time I am saddened that in other courses/workshops that I attend, receiving feedback, especially for one's writing, is extremely rare – so when I do not receive feedback on my short submissions, I do not always understand how and where exactly I can improve. For instance, recently I attended an academic writing workshop. It is great that such a time and space has been thought of – I joined the workshop once but turns out it is oriented towards spending time to write only – nobody provides feedback on your deliverables. It sounds ironic that in a dedicated event to improve writing, time spent on feedback seems too precious. I would love to know about other courses and workshops where constructive feedback on writing could be obtained. All in all, I would appreciate having benchmarks on what is expected at each stage and to understand how I am doing and how I can improve.

References:

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