

FROM THE EDITORS

ACHIEVING FIT AND AVOIDING MISFIT IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Questions of fit have been central to the enterprise of conducting qualitative research since it first gained currency in our field. In this editorial, we briefly explore tensions around fit before offering a critically important way of conceiving of—and achieving—fit for authors seeking to publish their qualitative work in *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ). We argue that, ultimately, the kind of fit we should care most about is that of internal coherence within a research project, and, relatedly, a paper. By “internal coherence,” we mean that the research question and motivation, data collection, data analysis, findings, and theory development and contribution all fit with one another, and with the broader assumptions underpinning the research approach.

Fit as internal coherence is important to any research approach and associated papers, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods are used. It is, however, especially germane to inductive, qualitative research because such research often begins with data and works toward theory, arriving at novel and significant empirical and theoretical contributions through a highly recursive process. Along the way, as authors deepen their inquiry, gain a different focus within the data, or even adjust the theoretical frame, the paper may lose coherence between these elements. Even experienced authors are familiar with the challenges of realigning a qualitative paper—sometimes multiple times—as it develops out of a research project, which may itself have evolved. In other words, seeking and achieving fit as internal coherence demands ongoing engagement; as former AMJ associate editors wrote:

Whereas quantitative scholars often make decisions at the start of a project to ensure that the data collection and analysis fit with the research question, qualitative, inductive approaches often require rethinking these questions throughout the project. (Bansal, Smith, & Vaara, 2018: 1193)

We thank Tima Bansal, Kevin Corley, Katy DeCelles, Denis Grégoire, Andrew Knight, Jan Lodge, Matthew Semadeni, Gurneeta Singh, Wendy Smith, Laszlo Tihanyi, and Elizabeth Umphress for their very helpful feedback on earlier versions of this editorial.

We find, as editors, that a common reason for rejection of qualitative manuscripts in particular is lack of internal coherence. Sometimes, this arises from the research project itself—and can only be fixed through a different set of choices around the project’s assumptions, goals, or design. At other times, misfit arises within the paper as it is written. In order to help authors preempt misfit from arising in their work, we raise a series of questions that authors can ask about how effectively their work is achieving fit as internal coherence. Our aim is to help authors develop papers that fit together, *and* that fit the inclusive norms for what constitutes good qualitative research in the field today.

PRIOR AND ONGOING TENSIONS AROUND FIT

We first briefly explore other ways that fit has arisen as a concern for qualitative research.¹ Early on, scholars conducting qualitative research faced pressures to fit their practices and writing to the expectations of reviewers and readers who were predominantly trained and experienced in quantitative methods (Eisenhardt, 2021). Qualitative research is now widely accepted and strongly represented in AMJ—almost 20% of the manuscripts that go out to review are based on qualitative data and analysis, and a roughly equal percentage appears in its pages. Indeed, today, we see wide variety in how qualitative research is conducted, presented, and contributes to vibrant conversations in

¹ We are not the first to consider how research designs, and the papers that flow from them, attain fit. Foundational arguments about fit for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research approaches were developed by Edmondson and McManus (2007), who asserted that qualitative research designs are appropriate when prior theory is nascent, so open-ended research questions can help develop theory. Beyond this, qualitative research is appropriate when there is a need for local grounding and contextualization of phenomena, to explain human or organizational processes (rather than focus mainly on outcomes), and/or when peoples’ interpretations are of interest (Lee & Lee, 1999). Each demands getting close to the matter at hand through rich data.

organizational scholarship (Bansal et al., 2018; Gehman, Glaser, Eisenhardt, Gioia, Langley, & Corley, 2018).

Yet, with wider acceptance come some new tensions around fit. One is that authors may struggle to think about how to conduct or present their work so that it “fits in” with perceived methodological standards. Papers drawing on qualitative data can appear to use templates or stylized approaches (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016). Methods sections have grown longer and tend to resemble each other in form. Even ethnographies, which might be presumed to afford variety in their presentation, are written using a predominant template of the “detective story” (Zilber & Zanoni, 2020). Recent work cautions against authors unreflectively adopting templates that may not align with their data or research questions, and celebrates variety in analytical approaches and styles of presentation (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Gehman et al., 2018; Grodal, Anteby, & Holm, 2021).

A second and related tension might arise from the now-vibrant conversation about research transparency. A recent editorial engages this (see DeCelles, Howard-Grenville, & Tihanyi, 2021), including how authors, reviewers, and editors of qualitative papers may think about transparency in relation to their methods and reporting. The reasons for—and, hence, practices around—transparency differ from those for quantitative research (DeCelles et al., 2021; Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020). Nonetheless, authors face choices and sometimes tensions (Grodal et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski, Langley, & Nigam, 2021) in how they fit their qualitative research to readers’ expectations and evolving norms around transparency.

We do not intend to repeat what is being said in these important conversations around the fit of qualitative research with expectations in our field. Rather, we seek to recognize how they shape the context in which authors—especially those new to publishing qualitative research—are working. If anything, the recent emphasis on encouraging variety and authenticity within qualitative research, which we fully support, nonetheless might amplify felt tensions. Presented with many pathways, authors might now conclude that fit with readers’ expectations is in the eye of the beholder—a no less challenging position to be in than that of misfit with predominant norms.

Against this backdrop, we explore how fit as internal coherence can be achieved, given its importance to successfully publishing qualitative research in

AMJ. Internal coherence is not only important in and of itself; achieving it also signals a confident and authentic engagement of the authors with their own process, and enables transparency, so it can serve to alleviate the tensions just described.

ACHIEVING FIT AS INTERNAL COHERENCE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

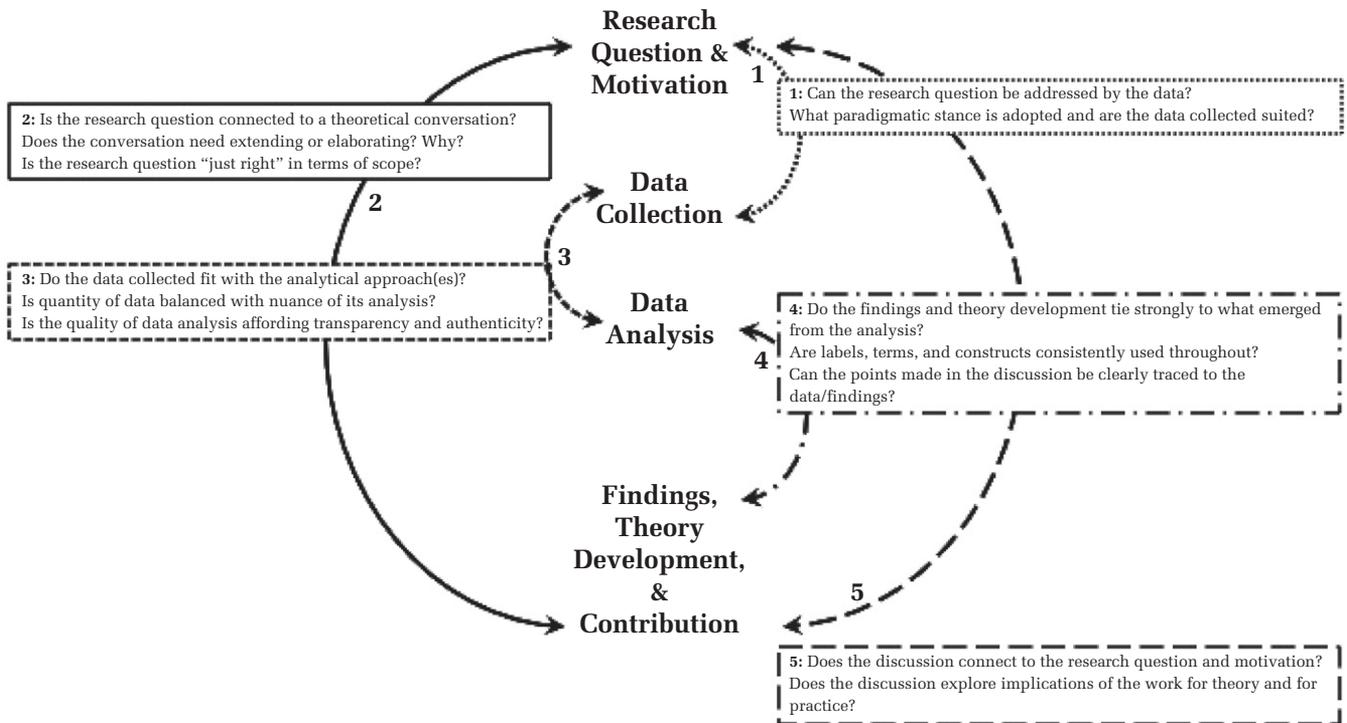
We reflect next on how the qualitative manuscripts we see achieve fit as internal coherence, and draw attention to some typical sources of misfit for authors to avoid. We choose the word “coherence” carefully. When we assert that a paper needs to be internally coherent, we mean that it needs to *work* and *make sense* as a whole, and we understand coherence to be dynamic, involving ongoing modifications and adjustments.

The model in Figure 1 captures relationships between a paper’s research question and motivation, data collection, data analysis, findings, and theory development and contribution, to guide questions authors can ask as they strive for internal coherence among these. As a necessarily simplified model, the figure captures only aspects of what we may think of as a more holistic coherence, for it is hard to untangle choices about one element from another. Nonetheless, we hope the model acts as a guide to our observations on the importance of connections and fit between these central elements of a paper. We present a series of questions authors can ask as they work toward establishing and articulating their paper’s internal coherence. Some questions are more oriented to the research process, and others to the writing of the paper. Of course, these are interconnected, as often writing or revising a paper drives one back to the data or research design, which may be expanded or altered. In addition, and although each question (and arrow in the figure) considers the relationship between two particular elements, authors ultimately obtain internal coherence by considering all of these relationships simultaneously.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND MOTIVATION

Effectively motivating the need for qualitative research involves articulating how a study will contribute to the literature and framing a clear and compelling research question. The motivation and research question should be carefully considered as the research is being conceived and conducted,

FIGURE 1
A Model of Key Areas of Fit to Produce Internal Coherence in Qualitative Research Papers



although their details may continue to evolve during the process of writing a paper.² We begin with a key question for internal coherence that arises early in the research process and persists: Can the research question be addressed by the data (arrow 1 on Figure 1)? We then consider a question that arises mostly during writing a paper: Is the research question conveyed in a way that fits the intended theoretical contribution of the paper (arrow 2 on Figure 1)?

1: Can the Research Question Be Addressed by the Data?

Internal coherence between a research question and the data available is central to a good qualitative research design—and to a well-written paper. Achieving such coherence begins with ensuring the authors know why they have collected certain forms of data, and what these data afford in terms of theory building or elaboration. This involves an explicit

acknowledgment of one’s paradigmatic stance. Because the terrain of qualitative methods is rich and varied, different paradigmatic stances exist within it—be they, for example, constructivist, interpretivist, or post-qualitative research (Carlson, Wells, Mark, & Sandoval, 2021; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Each of these have implications in terms of what data are collected, how they are collected, how they are analyzed, and how they can be used in relation to theory. In other words, types of data collected and forms of data analysis are connected to ontological and epistemological stances, which must be acknowledged by the researcher and incorporated into considerations of fit.

Echoing others, we urge qualitative researchers to be reflective on the choices they have made in designing and conducting their research, and explicit about how these choices show up in their data collection and analysis, as well as how these relate to the research question(s) pursued. Rather than repeat extensive recent guidance on these matters (Anteby, 2013; Gehman et al., 2018; Grodal et al., 2021), we hone in here on what we see in submitted manuscripts that might signal a misfit between posed research questions and the data.

² For simplicity, we refer to the research question and its associated motivation simply as “research question” in the rest of the editorial.

One common area of misfit relates to the use of data that are not suited to addressing the question at hand. For example, one might effectively motivate a study that seeks to understand how discourse around an organizational practice evolves over time; to do this, one needs access to data that capture discourse, collected over a period of time. While it might seem obvious stated in those terms, it is surprising how many times a stated research question does not fit with the data available. Considerations for how to avoid this stem back to choices made about data collection. For example, many AMJ qualitative submissions include interviews, often as a primary, or at least supplementary, data source. While there are clear guidelines to analyzing interview data, this does not mean that interview data are completely straightforward to work with, nor that they suit all research questions. Instead, there are various ways to conceptualize interviews and interview data (Alvesson, 2003; Langley & Meziani, 2020), necessitating clarity in one's stance regarding interviews and the space of possibilities they allow (see Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

Let us give some examples. One type of misfit is using retrospective interviews as a direct channel into what people thought and did many years before. The challenge here is that people's memories of beliefs, motivations, and behaviors are often rationalizations of the past. We are not referring to "recall bias" (e.g., Golden, 1992; Miller, Cardinal, & Glick, 1997), but to the fact that interview accounts are constructions, rather than reports, of the past (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The longer the gap between the events and the interview, the more creative these constructions can be. At the very least, authors have to account for these construction processes or otherwise justify their take on interviews and how they allow probing the past. If the research question relates, for example, to how organizational constructions of the past affect organizing in the present, using retrospective accounts fits well (e.g., Sonenshein, 2010). In other cases, authors interested in pursuing research questions about the past can more productively use archived interviews—like oral histories or interviews conducted by others at the point in time under investigation (e.g., Nelson, 2016; Nigam & Dokko, 2019).

Another common misfit is to pursue a research question focused on closely capturing interactions or practices, but relying only on interview data. If one is interested in day-to-day interactions, or people's taken-for-granted behaviors, it is better to observe them. While interviews typically probe

interviewees' reflections and conscious cognition,³ observations reveal what people do in the flow of action. Many authors are supplementing or replacing direct in-person observation with video recording to capture actions and interactions over long periods of time (de Rond, Holeman, & Howard-Grenville, 2019) or through structured engagements (e.g., meetings or simulation exercises; Luciano, Fenters, Park, Bartels, & Tannenbaum, 2021). Such data lend themselves to research questions focused on interactions because, with video in particular, there is a permanent record that can be viewed multiple times throughout the analytical process (Christianson, 2018). As more work life is conducted online, other ways of observing interaction—through social media or recorded meetings, for example—will only become more important as data for some research questions.

Of course, other research questions may suggest other data sources or data gathering approaches entirely. For instance, scholars might evaluate documents in historical archives or assess other forms of data that Meyer (1991) refers to as "outcroppings." Some ethnographies rely on observation and field notes, and need not be supplemented by formal interviews (e.g., Bourgoin, Bencherki, & Faraj, 2020). The point is that no one type of data is categorically better than another. Rather, it is the fit between the research question and the types of data (and the methods of analysis, which we address subsequently) that matter. Researchers need to educate themselves on the array of research approaches available, the data they allow for, and their possibilities and limitations. Being aware of various options will help authors make the most fitting choice, take into account its pros and cons, and explain these as they later write their paper.

2: Does the Research Question Connect with a Theoretical Conversation and Cue Up a Theoretical Contribution?

A well-motivated paper skillfully connects to a theoretical conversation. Although this question of internal coherence arises earlier in the research project, it becomes critically important in writing a paper. Beyond motivating the need for or interest in the research, a paper's introductory section should also motivate *why* scholars need an enhanced understanding within a given theoretical

³ Interview methods can be adjusted to allow them to be more useful in capturing the flow of action (e.g., Nicolini, 2009; Rouleau, 2010).

conversation(s)—in other words, what do we know, *not* know, and *need to* know in order to make our theory more complete? Indeed, some papers offer admirable summaries of existing work, but they do not leave the reader with a clear sense of what unanswered question the paper hopes to address or which theoretical conversation it hopes to elaborate or extend. Absent this understanding, it is in turn difficult to judge the appropriateness of the data and methods, and the potential contribution of the findings.

A common misfit is when authors use their rich data or interesting phenomenon as the sole or primary motivation for the paper, connecting only to an empirical puzzle. To be sure, understudied phenomenon can be hugely important to sparking important research questions that build or elaborate theory—but the connection to theory must be made. For instance, a paper might engage the literature on employee entrepreneurship and may rightly note that the majority of such studies are based on employees in certain industries and certain places. Then, the authors might argue that we still do not understand how employee entrepreneurship might function in a different industry or place—for example, among auto parts suppliers in former Soviet republics. The challenge with this approach is that the authors have not established why the underlying mechanisms might be different among auto parts suppliers versus, say, electronics manufacturers or insurance brokerages, or among former Soviet republics versus, say, other countries that may be similar or different in terms of resources, business activity, or other relevant factors. In other words, what's missing in such a setup is engagement with the underlying theory and mechanisms developed by prior work. Often, this setup is accompanied by a lack of clarity on which theoretical conversation the paper hopes to join. To be clear, such empirically motivated studies can be very interesting and important, and, in fact, the Academy of Management sponsors *Academy of Management Discoveries* as one outlet for such work. But theory lies at the heart of AMJ and authors therefore must engage theory in their research questions and motivating opening pages.

Connecting well with a theoretical conversation involves more nuance than it might at first appear to. This is because, often with qualitative research, there are many possible findings to explain, and many theories could be engaged and extended through these explanations. Moreover, given the logic of inductive research, the theoretical focus may change throughout the research process. Therefore, asking if one's

question is theoretically motivated is neither a straightforward nor a one-off question. Still, authors need to think carefully about how their research addresses a theoretical conversation, possibly “try out” alternatives, and seek input and feedback from other scholars about this. Joining a conversation means also meaningfully engaging prior work. This requires not merely passing citations and setting up a “straw man” argument in relation to existing theory, but, rather, deep engagement with the theory and boundary conditions of related research. We advise authors to also contemplate their primary audience. Whom—or with which prior work—specifically do they hope to engage in a conversation?

A second and related consideration is whether the research question is conducive to making a strong contribution to the selected theoretical conversation(s). Here, a research question must be appropriate in terms of its scope. On the one hand, submissions sometimes suffer from research questions that are too narrow and specific. These might arise out of a tight focus on the specific empirical setting, or out of a desire to craft a niche question at the intersection of multiple literatures, each of which limit the potential appeal of the paper and its theoretical contribution. On the other hand, we also see research questions that are too broad. In some cases, this can be evidence that the authors have not yet identified what is most interesting and novel within their data, and they need to develop a sharper focus for the theorizing. For instance, a paper may purport to contribute to how organizations confront competing institutional logics. Yet the conversation about competing logics is already very rich and varied and a question at this level may no longer be interesting and important. Thus, a more fruitful approach might tighten the inquiry by examining how different leadership styles shape how an organization approaches conflicting logics, how approaches vary with the organization's age, or some other focusing or limiting lens on the broader theoretical question. Other times, a research question may be too broad because it attempts to arrive at a “grand theory” or develop a new construct or relationship that is, frankly, beyond the scope of the data. A single case study can teach us many things about processes and relationships that may be transferable to other settings, but it cannot, on its own, build a new theory on how something so broad and varied as “trust,” for example, works in organizational settings.

Like Goldilocks trying the beds and the porridge until she found what was “just right,” so too should authors try to scope and orient their research

questions in potentially different ways and work through what the implications are for the theoretical conversation and contribution; colleagues can help with this process through feedback. Ultimately, however, the research question must not be too “over-engineered” so as to anticipate exactly what is found—qualitative papers are best motivated by open questions, inviting surprise, even once we have arrived at some form of answer.⁴ As well, authors must retain what is fundamentally of interest to *them* in articulating their research question, for this is how they will breathe life into the rest of the paper and their process of working on it.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

To attain internal coherence in a qualitative paper, beyond assuring that the data are well matched to the research question (as discussed), one must also question if the data collected are a fit for the analysis—and vice versa (arrow 3 on Figure 1).

3: Do the Data Collected Fit with the Data Analysis?

Issues of fit around analysis relate to both the quantity and quality of the data. We discuss quantity first, as, over the years, the amounts of data collected for qualitative studies are growing bigger and bigger. But, more is not always better.

To begin, can one really master vast amounts of data? Suppose one needs to analyze 100 interviews, or thousands of pages of documents, or months' worth of observations. Even with a team, can one delve deeply into each interview, text, or observation to understand the meanings and experiences of people, groups, or organizations? Often, with huge amounts of data, one needs to reduce its richness and particularities to be able to process it all. Thus, the focus may move too quickly from idiosyncratic, contextualized insights into higher-level patterns. Identifying patterns is good, and we all strive to identify them and theorize them. Still, if we gloss too quickly over the particularities, we may offer less interesting, less profound insights. We often see papers whose claimed contribution is a list of mechanisms, strategies, or practices. But these invite further inquiry—what is the value of this list? How do

its elements fit together and inform each other? If there is a model capturing such elements, does it largely present boxes with no elaboration on the arrows? Rather than trying to reduce all of their data into explanations that can, at times, feel scattered or overwhelming, we encourage authors to focus at least initially on some of the most interesting, surprising, or informative microcosms within the data; these may hold outside insight into processes or mechanisms that can then be contextualized and more deeply explored. After all, qualitative data often allow for fine, situated, local details that can be useful for making the needed conceptual leap (Crawford, Chiles, & Elias, 2021; Klag & Langley, 2013) to analytical understandings. Too much data, in other words, may ultimately not be constructive.

Further, authors often detail huge amounts of varied data, like formal and informal interviews, observations, and a wealth of textual data, generated from within and outside the setting. Yet, when describing the analysis and later presenting the findings, authors may rely heavily on one type of data (often, interviews) to the neglect of other types. This creates misfit that troubles readers who are seeking to see more holistically how the data contributed to the analysis and ultimately the analytical account. To better handle expectations, authors should be very precise about the kinds of data they actually used for the particular project and how each type of data helped develop their insights.

There is, of course, the opposite problem of having too little data to support the analysis. We often are asked in paper development workshops, “What is the minimum number of interviews needed?” This is a bit like asking the question, “How long a piece of string do I need?” The answer of course, is it depends on what you are trying to achieve with the string. And, to some degree, whether string, as opposed to an elastic band or dental floss, is even the right material for the job. So too with data. As noted already, the data must suit the purpose, which includes the research question and theoretical intent. Readers also expect enough data to signal that the analytical work is robust and the findings are trustworthy. There is not a “one size fits all” answer, therefore, to the question of how much data (interviews or otherwise) are enough. Many authors claim to have stopped data collection when they reached theoretical saturation, but what does this actually mean in the given situation? Reflecting on one's emergent understandings, questions, and further pathways to pursue throughout the data collection process is essential to capturing—for one's own author team

⁴ Later, we consider the conundrum of conveying the qualitative research process once one has arrived at a clear theoretical conversation and contribution, which inevitably reads somewhat differently from the actual research process itself, which is guided by surprise and discovery.

and ultimately for others—the ways in which authors reached a confident grasp on the phenomenon. At the paper-writing stage, conveying this within the methods section is also important, as is recognizing that this too is a dynamic process; many times, additional data or additional types of data are needed to address questions that come up during the review process.

Beyond quantity, the quality of data and its analysis are crucial to internal coherence in a qualitative paper. The question of data quality relates closely to its fit with the research question, as explained above. Indeed, questions about appropriateness of the data for the research question, and the analytical approach, are tightly interrelated and arise throughout a project.⁵ Thus, when considering their analytical approach, scholars might ask how well the data lend themselves to the approach being used. For example, often, researchers might have collected data across several sites, groups, or other dimensions that allow for a variance analysis, yet they don't take advantage of the variance in their analytical approach. Conversely, authors might wish to develop a process model, but lack data that capture actions or interactions over time. Other times, we see a mismatch between the level of analysis at which authors aim to contribute and the data—for example, individual-level data that purport to capture organizational-level phenomenon.

Beyond these concerns, we next explore what we often see in terms of quality of the analysis—or, more specifically, the description of the analytical process in the paper itself—in relation to the data collected. The question of fit here is really around transparency and authenticity—“telling it like it is”—in conveying the analytical moves made and the reasons for them. Again, there has been much written on this recently (DeCelles et al., 2021; Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021), but we focus on what we see as editors to point to some tips for avoiding misfit.

Many times, the data analysis section in papers we receive reads something like this:

We analyzed our data in four steps. First, we engaged in open coding in which we assigned codes to the

data. Second, we used a process of classifying and reclassifying codes that led us to a smaller set of codes. Third, we organized these codes into higher-level categories (see Figure X). Finally, these higher-level categories form the basis of a model presented in Figure Y.

There are several issues with this approach. First, it appears based more on conventions and less on what the authors actually did. And, it does not actually tell us much at all about how authors reached a (theoretical) understanding of *their* data. At the most basic level, it lacks much needed specificity, if it does not provide examples of specific codes that were developed and categories that were derived from these. Specificity helps the reader understand the authors' thought process, by showing how examples from the data were interpreted, so we encourage authors to provide such detail. Furthermore, such a generic description does not provide much insight into what is typically a quite messy process, filled with twists and turns as well as unexpected surprises. Instead, it makes the qualitative analysis process look quite straightforward, which may call into question how transparent the analysis is. While we have certainly used the basic tenets of this approach in our own research that involves coding, we have never found coding to progress in such a linear fashion. Rather, coding processes would be better characterized by a sense of surprise, sometimes puzzlement, unproductive explorations, and reassessment. There may be “aha” moments that punctuate the process and send the analysis in a different direction, sometimes invoking a reconsideration of what one thought the research question was and demanding the engagement of alternate or additional theoretical conversations or constructs. Articulating these insights and how the authors responded to them, even if still within the general stages articulated above, provides a more realistic picture of how data analysis often unfolds, and can strengthen authors' authority and build readers' trust.

Finally, the description above ends too soon. It stops short of getting to the real action of the analysis, which is where authors seek explanations for the processes or connections within and between their coded data (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Granted, arriving at such explanations is generally a long, convoluted process that cannot be fully articulated within the length of the method section.⁶

⁵ As should be clear by now, fit is not a one-way street. All methods have blind spots, and methods also produce certain types of theory (Zilber, 2020). In other words, there is a two-way relationship—or more dynamic interplay—between theory and method at the heart of choices about research design, which then persists through the paper-writing process.

⁶ We encourage authors to use supplemental files or appendices, if needed, to contain more detailed descriptions of specific methodological moves.

However, some insight into the key decisions is helpful (Grodal et al., 2021; Klag & Langley, 2013). For example, when and how did the authors begin to incorporate existing literature? Did particular codes or themes resonate with existing constructs and how did this drive the inquiry and analysis forward? Some authors (e.g., Harrison & Rouse, 2014) have depicted their moves between data collection, data analysis, and literature in diagrammatic form, which can give the reader a clearer sense of how these iterative processes unfolded. In other cases, an early hunch during data collection or insight from early analysis might have provided a centerpiece that the authors follow during subsequent analysis and eventually build their model around (e.g., Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013). If this is the case, it is important for authors to state this insight, and how they pursued and explored it. In sum, simply stating that codes became theory is insufficient explanation for a reader to understand the process.

Finally, coding is not an appropriate—nor the only possible—analytical approach for all qualitative data (see, e.g., Gehman et al., 2018). When authors try to force fit their analysis into what they believe is convention, they sometimes miss out on the richness and excitement that can come from other approaches or letting the data drive the choices made in analysis. For example, there is a growing emphasis on narratives and narrative analysis (e.g., Riessman, 2008). When we are engaging with stories and want to understand how individuals tell stories and the relationships between the varying elements within stories, common line-by-line coding approaches may not suffice.

In sum, ensuring the quality of the data analysis fits with the data, and ensuring authenticity and transparency, each involve authors taking an active approach to building, recording, and conveying *their* methods. From a variety of approaches, authors can select, and even develop, the particular analytical moves that best suit their data and research question (Pratt, Sonenshein, & Feldman, 2020). Being clear about what these choices are, and why they are made, throughout the research process (Grodal et al., 2021) will support authors in establishing the fit between their analysis and the data themselves. We encourage researchers to make notes and memos as they proceed with their analysis, and keep records of key decisions made; we, like our informants, do not have perfect memories and it is important to trace the process of discovery as it unfolds in order to ultimately convey it accurately.

FINDINGS, THEORY DEVELOPMENT, AND CONTRIBUTION

Finally, there are two main areas of coherence to explore in relation to a qualitative paper's findings, theory development, and contribution: first, do the findings and theory development tie strongly to what emerged from the analysis (arrow 4 on Figure 1); second, do the theory development and overall contribution connect to the research question and motivation—and ultimately contribute to an enhanced understanding of something important (arrow 5 on Figure 1)?

4: Fit of Findings and Theory Development with Data Analysis

Qualitative papers often develop theory in the telling of the findings; that is, they integrate the articulation of theorized constructs and relationships within the findings section and illustrate these through data extracts. This is somewhat different from what might have been more typical in the past, when findings were conveyed more descriptively and then a theoretical account developed. Either can work, but, today, if a findings section is not in part structured by analytical insights, readers may be confused, as they have been signaled through the methods section to expect some analytical structure. In other words, how the data analysis is conveyed already foreshadows the theory development, so the findings section serves as a crucial connector of these elements. Again, we might invoke Goldilocks. The findings section must get a “just right” balance between showing enough data and richness that the reader understands and trusts its insights, and telling a more analytically structured account that begins to scaffold the theory being developed (see Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007, on showing and telling). There are many ways to do this engagingly and effectively (see, e.g., Berends & Deken, 2021, on composing qualitative process research).

Misfit can occur not only when the balance is off between showing data and telling from them, but also when more straightforward things like labels and constructs are inconsistently applied throughout the manuscript. For example, if codes conveyed in the data analysis section don't appear again in the findings, or a model, it is confusing to the reader. Or, if a model or summary of the findings introduces new labels or language, such that the reader has to work hard to connect these to the data, it is again confusing. Authors can ask if a new reader would be able to take the discussion section (or model, if there

is one) and its claims and “map” how these arose and were derived from the analysis and findings. If this process is not easy, no matter how interesting and compelling the arguments are, the reader will not buy them. So, it is important to create a clear chain not just of language and terminology, but also of logic and supporting evidence in these portions of the paper.

Finally, many times, we read in reviewer reports that the claims made in the discussion section are interesting and important, but don't resonate with the findings that have been shown. This is unfortunate, as it suggests that there are exciting ideas coming forward, but they are insufficiently grounded in the empirical material to support a strong contribution. Being so engaged in their data and analysis for so long can lead qualitative researchers to see and know so much, but they may forget that, within one paper, it is hard for the new reader to grasp the implications and nuances. So, the claims in the discussion section might be potentially valid, but crucial support for them is missing. Here is where a fresh set of eyes on a paper can be especially important. Equally, authors need to balance how much to abstract from their data—it is essential to do so to some degree, but thinking carefully about and articulating boundary conditions of the theorizing is important. Good qualitative papers ground their theoretical claims firmly in their data and analysis, but also suggest other settings where the theory would apply, why it would be expected to do so, what the limits to transferability are, and some further research that could explore this space.

5: Fit of Theory Development with Research Question and Motivation

It is already clear that there is a lot of careful tuning needed to achieve internal coherence in a qualitative paper. In qualitative research in particular, both the research process evolves as it unfolds and papers

evolve in their writing. Thus, sometimes a qualitative submission reads very differently in its back end from its front end, and “the seams begin to show” in between portions of the manuscript.

A common issue is a discussion section not returning—or not returning sufficiently—to the original research question and motivation for the paper. Perhaps in a rush to show broader implications, sometimes, authors don't take the time to return to the motivating question and the state of the theoretical conversation and explicitly show how they have addressed or expanded these through their empirical work. Thus, a paper might promise one thing and deliver another. It is easy to see why this happens, but it is avoidable. First, authors should revisit the research question and check that the answer is clearly articulated somewhere (ideally, early) in the discussion section. They also should check if the critiques or limitations of existing theory that motivated the study have been taken up. Finally, we encourage authors to “open up the funnel” again in crafting some broader implications for how readers might think about the theory or phenomenon. After all, if the research question is important enough, there will be many other questions and possibilities it raises.

Finally, while authors whose work appears in AMJ write for an academic audience, their work must fit with the broader intent of our craft—not just to inform management and organization theory, but also to help others understand and perhaps think differently about organizations, organizing, and its implications. So, it is important to step back and consider what a paper's theory development offers in terms of practical implications, which might be related to an original empirical puzzle or a personal motivation for studying a given setting. After all, AMJ seeks to publish work that is important—not just interesting—in relation to understanding organizations, people within them, and their societal impact (Tihanyi, 2020).

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Qualitative research has come a long way from the 1980s, when its appearance in top management journals was rare, and it might have needed to fit expectations of readers familiar with quantitative methods. We now have qualitative papers appearing regularly, winning awards for their quality and impact, and demonstrating that there are many ways to craft and convey a contribution using qualitative data. At the same time, the number of choices and the open-ended nature of qualitative research can make it difficult to write a paper that is internally coherent—and neither too formulaic nor too loosely crafted. Getting the balance right takes time and is an ongoing process, even through revision. But a paper that fits together will convey authority, authenticity, and trustworthiness. Ultimately, behind questions of fit in qualitative research, then, are not so much declarations of what standards and norms we should

apply and uphold, but of what we as qualitative researchers are doing and how self-aware we are of the often implicit choices that have been made throughout the research and writing process. We hope this editorial essay provides some direction for how authors can think about their research projects and papers, provokes them to ask questions to test their papers for fit understood as internal coherence, and ultimately enables them to develop stronger and more impactful papers.

Jennifer Howard-Grenville

University of Cambridge

Andrew Nelson

University of Oregon

Heather Vough

George Mason University

Tammar B. Zilber

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

REFERENCES

- Alvesson, M. 2003. Beyond neopositivists, romantics, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 28: 13–33.
- Anteby, M. 2013. Relaxing the taboo on telling our own stories: Upholding professional distance and personal involvement. *Organization Science*, 24: 1277–1290.
- Bansal, P., Smith, W. K., & Vaara, E. 2018. New ways of seeing through qualitative research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61: 1189–1195.
- Berends, H., & Deken, F. 2021. Composing qualitative process research. *Strategic Organization*, 19: 134–146.
- Bourgoin, A., Bencherki, N., & Faraj, S. 2020. And who are you? A performative perspective on authority in organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 63: 1134–1165.
- Carlson, D. K., Wells, T. C., Mark, L., & Sandoval, J. 2021. Introduction: Working the tensions of the post-qualitative movement in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27: 151–157.
- Christianson, M. K. 2018. Mapping the terrain: The use of video-based research in top-tier organizational journals. *Organizational Research Methods*, 21: 261–287.
- Crawford, B., Chiles, T. D., & Elias, S. R. S. T. A. 2021. Long interviews in organizational research: Unleashing the power of “show-and-tell.” *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 30: 331–346.
- DeCelles, K. A., Howard-Grenville, J., & Tihanyi, L. 2021. From the editors: Improving the transparency of empirical research published in AMJ. *Academy of Management Journal*, 64: 1009–1015.
- de Rond, M., Holeman, I., & Howard-Grenville, J. 2019. Sensemaking from the body: An enactive ethnography of rowing the Amazon. *Academy of Management Journal*, 62: 1961–1988.
- Edmondson, A. C., & McManus, S. E. 2007. Methodological fit in management field research. *Academy of Management Review*, 32: 1155–1179.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. 2021. What is the Eisenhardt method, really? *Strategic Organization*, 19: 147–160.
- Eisenhardt, K. M., Graebner, M. E., & Sonenshein, S. 2016. Grand challenges and inductive methods: Rigor without rigor mortis. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59: 1113–1123.
- Gehman, J., Glaser, V. L., Eisenhardt, K. M., Gioia, D., Langley, A., & Corley, K. G. 2018. Finding theory–method fit: A comparison of three qualitative approaches to theory building. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 27: 284–300.
- Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. 2013. Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16: 15–31.
- Golden, B. R. 1992. The past is the past—or is it? The use of retrospective accounts as indicators of past strategy. *Academy of Management Journal*, 35: 848–860.
- Golden-Biddle, K., & Locke, K. 2007. *Composing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Grodal, S., Anteby, M., & Holm, A. L. 2021. Achieving rigor in qualitative analysis: The role of active categorization in theory building. *Academy of Management Review*, 46: 591–612.

- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. 1994. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*: 105–117. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- 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: 1256–1283.
- Howard-Grenville, J., Metzger, M. L., & Meyer, A. D. 2013. Rekindling the flame: Processes of identity resurrection. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56: 113–136.
- Jarzabkowski, P., Langley, A., & Nigam, A. 2021. Navigating the tensions of quality in qualitative research. *Strategic Organization*, 19: 70–80.
- Klag, M., & Langley, A. 2013. Approaching the conceptual leap in qualitative research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 15: 149–166.
- Lamont, M., & Swidler, A. 2014. Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. *Qualitative Sociology*, 37: 153–171.
- Langley, A., & Meziani, N. 2020. Making interviews meaningful. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 56: 370–391.
- Lee, T. W., & Lee, T. 1999. *Using qualitative methods in organizational research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. 1998. *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Luciano, M. M., Fenters, V., Park, S., Bartels, A. L., & Tannenbaum, S. I. 2021. The double-edged sword of leadership task transitions in emergency response multiteam systems. *Academy of Management Journal*, 64: 1236–1264.
- Meyer, A. D. 1991. Visual data in organizational research. *Organization Science*, 2: 218–236.
- Miller, C. C., Cardinal, L. B., & Glick, W. H. 1997. Retrospective report in organizational research: A re-examination of recent evidence. *Academy of Management Journal*, 40: 189–204.
- Nelson, A. J. 2016. How to share “a really good secret”: Managing sharing/secretcy tensions around scientific knowledge disclosure. *Organization Science*, 27: 265–285.
- Nicolini, D. 2009. Articulating practice through the interview to the double. *Management Learning*, 40: 195–212.
- Nigam, A., & Dokko, G. 2019. Career resourcing and the process of professional emergence. *Academy of Management Journal*, 62: 1052–1084.
- Pratt, M. G., Kaplan, S., & Whittington, R. 2020. Editorial essay: The tumult over transparency: Decoupling transparency from replication in establishing trustworthy qualitative research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 65: 1–19.
- Pratt, M. G., Sonenshein, S., & Feldman, M. S. 2020. Moving beyond templates: A bricolage approach to conducting trustworthy qualitative research. *Organizational Research Methods*. Published online ahead of print. doi: 10.1177/1094428120927466
- Riessman, C. K. 2008. *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Rouleau, L. 2010. Studying strategizing through narratives of practice. In D. Golshorki, L. Rouleau, D. Seidl, & E. Vaara (Eds.), *Cambridge handbook of strategy as practice*: 258–270. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Sonenshein, S. 2010. We're changing—or are we? Untangling the role of progressive, regressive, and stability narratives during strategic change implementation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53: 477–512.
- Tihanyi, L. 2020. From “that's interesting” to “that's important.” *Academy of Management Journal*, 63: 329–331.
- Zilber, T.B. 2020. The methodology/theory interface: Ethnography and the microfoundations of institutions. *Organization Theory*, 1: 1–27. Published online ahead of print. doi: 10.1177/2631787720919439
- Zilber, T. B., & Zanoni, P. 2020. Templates of ethnographic writing in organization studies: beyond the hegemony of the detective story. *Organizational Research Methods*. Published online ahead of print. doi: 10.1177/1094428120944468

