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FROM THE EDITORS: PUBLISHING IN "AMJ"—PART 7: WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Author(s): Pratima (Tima) Bansal and Kevin Corley

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## FROM THE EDITORS

### PUBLISHING IN *AMJ*—PART 7: WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

*This editorial concludes a seven-part series, "Publishing in AMJ," in which the editors give suggestions and advice for improving the quality of submissions to the Journal. The series offers "bumper-to-bumper" coverage, with installments ranging from topic choice to crafting a Discussion section. -J.A.C.*

I'm comfortable with my knowledge of qualitative work—and my ability to give some insight on a specific piece—but for whatever reason, this quantitative-to-qualitative comparison is hard for me to make. And I don't understand the reasons that is hard! -Panelist

Over the past six issues, our editorial team has presented a series on how to write effective *AMJ* submissions. Much of what this series has covered is relevant to both quantitative and qualitative papers. For example, the five criteria that Colquitt and George (June 2011 "From the Editors" [vol. 54: 432–435]) identify for choosing topics—significance, novelty, curiosity, scope, and actionability—apply equally well to qualitative work. However, there are also key differences. For example, qualitative work does not typically suffer from the measurement, operationalization and model specification problems identified by Bono and McNamara (August 2011 "From the Editors" [vol. 54: 657–660]). As our opening quote illustrates, these differences are not always easy to articulate or explain. In this final FTE for the "Publishing in *AMJ*" series, we provide our perspective on the key differences.

To do this, we focus our thoughts around this provocative question: If a colleague who has only ever published quantitative papers before asked you to identify the main differences between qualitative and quantitative papers (besides the type of data presented), how would you respond? We put this question to a panel of some of *AMJ*'s top qualitative authors and reviewers. We believe we hit a chord with this question, as we received 24 replies (from more than half of the people we contacted), a return that far exceeded our expectations. There was a range of responses from our colleagues; some felt the differences were stark, whereas others felt the differences were superficial.

Rather than merely reporting back what they said, we synthesized their views (and sprinkled in some of the more revealing quotes) while bringing to bear our own experiences from the more than 180 decisions

we have cast in our tenure as associate editors responsible for qualitative manuscripts. Instead of providing a point-by-point comparison with what has been written previously in the series (a result that would be too long and too tedious), we offer a more holistic view of the unique attributes of a qualitative paper for *AMJ*. In this way, an author who reads this editorial will receive helpful guidance on the writing process without having to read the other six pieces but could also find direct comparisons if reading the current FTE in conjunction with the previous six pieces. We illustrate our points from the many qualitative *AMJ* Best Article Award Winners. We hope this editorial will prove insightful not only for those researchers who have attempted to publish qualitative research in *AMJ* in the past, but also for those who may wish to do so for the first time in the future.

#### BUILD THEORY INDUCTIVELY

Papers published in *AMJ* typically change, challenge, or fundamentally advance theory through insights on focal phenomena. Most qualitative papers advance theory by building it inductively, although qualitative data can be used for theory testing, or deduction, as well. This difference in purpose drives the most significant differences between qualitative and quantitative *AMJ* papers, which we discuss below.

#### A Short, Multipurpose Front End

Qualitative researchers often have to build a case for their research question and motivate their work more strongly than quantitative researchers. . . . Thus in the front end of the manuscript, the writer has to work harder to establish the theoretical gap and make a compelling case for why this research question is important.

All *AMJ* articles need an engaging front end that motivates the research (see Grant and Pollock, October 2011 "From the Editors" [vol. 54: 873–879]).

The introduction and literature review provide key opportunities to grab and direct the reader's attention toward an understanding of theory that will carry throughout the paper. The front end of a quantitative article typically includes an introduction, literature review, and the development of new theory by way of hypotheses. The literature review, therefore, sets the background for the hypotheses. Because qualitative papers fulfill a different purpose, their front end is shorter, yet it serves more functions.

The front end of a qualitative manuscript must not only hook the reader, expose a significant gap in a current theoretical conversation that warrants the development or extension of theory, and situate research questions in that conversation, but also provide a framework for the textual data that follow and a springboard for the new emergent theory. If the literature review reveals too much, then readers feel that theory did not emerge from the data; if the literature review reveals too little, the project will seem too broad in scope to be manageable. Thus, much is riding on these first sections of a qualitative paper.

Plowman, Baker, Beck, Kulkarni, Solansky, and Travis's (2007) article on radical change, for example, grabbed readers' attention by describing changes at "Mission Church" and built the theoretical platform from extant theory on radical organizational change and from complexity theory. Even the framing of their research question was able to simultaneously describe their project, create intrigue, and expose the theoretical gap: "In this research, we attempt to understand how and why an initial small change, whose ultimate consequences were unintended, escalated and led to radical organizational change" (Plowman et al., 2007: 516).

### A Long, Robust Back End

Quantitative work often builds theory in the front end by developing hypotheses that are then tested. Since new theory is discussed in the front end, the back end of a quantitative paper focuses primarily on the implications of the empirical results. Qualitative works, on the other hand, reserve the biggest punch for the back end. A strong Discussion section should not only summarize the findings and ultimately delineate the theoretical and practical implications that are also demanded of quantitative papers (see Geletkanycz and Tepper, April 2012 "From the Editors" [vol. 55: 256–260]), but also integrate data and theory in a way that explicitly conveys the connections between the analyzed data, the emergent theory, and the literatures at which the contribution is aimed. This often results

in a complex and dynamic discussion, especially given the high interdependence of the anchoring theory, data analysis, and theoretical contribution.

Plowman et al. succinctly summarized their findings in a single sentence in the back end of their article: "Mission Church's experience of decline and renewal supports the notion that change can be viewed as continuous/evolutionary . . . but also provides empirical evidence that continuous change, whose pace is much slower than that of episodic change, can become radical" (2007: 537; embedded citations removed for clarity). To efficiently manage the theoretical extension, Plowman et al. listed their propositions in a table, juxtaposed against the theory of change and complexity theory, which allowed them more room to discuss the implications. This emphasized the uniqueness and importance of their work.

### Comprehensive, Personal, and Transparent Methods

There is not as clear an agreement among qualitative researchers as to what constitutes acceptable methodology and analysis. . . . The signature of qualitative research is its solid grounding in the phenomenon; however each researcher's journey in uncovering the phenomenon is unique and nonlinear.

Qualitative researchers have considerable latitude in their methods, including the way in which they conduct interviews or ethnographies and the techniques they use to analyze data. Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research cannot simply reference well-known data sets and statistical tests. It is critical, then, that qualitative researchers offer detailed accounts of their data sources and analysis. Communicating the journey (from initiating their project to submitting their manuscript) gives meaning to the accounts of the data and emergent theory as well as signaling the quality of the research exercise, the credibility of the researcher, and, ultimately, the trustworthiness of the data and the emergent theorizing. As such, the researcher often features prominently, in first person and reflexively, in the description of the methods.

Describing that journey is a hallmark of many of the award-winning qualitative articles published in *AMJ*. Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) study of homelessness at the New York and New Jersey Port Authority is often hailed as an exemplar of qualitative research. Their description of their methods is detailed and personal and clearly reflects their nonlinear journey:

Our initial research objective was to explore differences in how groups in the organization interpreted

and responded to the issue. The objective was consistent with research on organizational culture and the creation of meaning in organizations. . . . However, the data generated by informants indicated a surprisingly consistent pattern of issue interpretations . . . [that] emphasizes the dominant logic, collective beliefs, and consensual elements in how the homeless issue was interpreted over time. (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991: 552; embedded citations removed for clarity)

### Creative Data Displays

Qualitative and quantitative scholars are similar. We all try to edit the messiness out of our research presentation. Yet, on the margin, qualitative research comes a bit closer to representing the messiness. And, that is the strength of what we do.

Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data cannot be easily synthesized or reduced into tables, so qualitative researchers must think creatively about showing their data. Some researchers account the data chronologically, others seek patterns across observations and prefer data displays based on first- and second-order codes. Most importantly, data must be shown, not merely described, so the reader can connect the raw data with the analyzed data, and the analyzed data with the emergent theorizing. The data must transport the reader into the context to provide a personal experience of the focal phenomenon and support for the emergent theory. The challenge is to show enough richness and depth of the data while respecting *AMJ*'s page limits. The data deluge forces qualitative researchers to confront the limitless possibilities and show discipline by discarding irrelevant data.

Gersick (1989), for example, investigated transitions in work groups asked to complete a creative task over an hour. She video-recorded teams' efforts and a wall clock that showed the elapsed time. Her article illustrates the transitions with an asterisk in a figure that showed every team's efforts over the hour. The pattern of asterisks in the diagram vividly illustrates the transitions and pacing that contributed to successful outcomes.

### TELL THE STORY

I think all academic writing has to tell a compelling story, and this is doubly true of qualitative research.

Over half of our colleagues used the word "story" in their responses to us and emphatically expressed the belief that a compelling story is critical to good qualitative work (see also Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2006). There is no question that quantitative researchers also try to build stories in their manu-

scripts, but story is the very essence of qualitative research. Quantitative articles generally follow a well-defined structure: introduction, literature review, hypotheses, methods, results, and discussion. Accounts of the data are spliced between accounts of theory; data and theory appear almost episodic. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, attempt to create narratives through these accounts. The theory narrative comprises current and emergent theory; the data narrative describes the collection, the analysis (the methods), and the actual data (the results or findings).

### Two Narratives Jointly Contributing to an Overarching Story

Whereas quantitative researchers typically look at a handful of "trees" and try to draw the implications for the forest, in qualitative research, we are trying to see the forest through the trees.

Through the two data and theory narratives, qualitative articles tell a compelling story. They create tension through a provocative question, build plot through a data narrative, and provide an interesting and even provocative explanation and conclusion through a theory narrative. Moreover, the data and theory narratives are tightly interwoven—so interwoven that it is sometimes difficult to isolate either narrative (unlike in quantitative works, in which the data and theory are clearly marked). The data are needed to give the theory context, and the theory is needed to give the data meaning. Qualitative articles, thus, use current theory as the backdrop for interpreting the data, the data to provide the context and describe the phenomenon in-depth, and the emergent theory to expose the phenomenon in new light.

For example, Elsbach and Kramer (2003) created their story by asking how experts assessed the creative potential of others. They grounded their theory narrative in social judgment theory, which, they argued, has focused on laypeople, not professionals, and been developed in the lab, not in the field. They wove the data narrative through the theory narrative by providing a rich account of screenwriters pitching ideas to Hollywood studio executives and producers, sprinkling this account with quotes and rich descriptions of incidents. They concluded their theory narrative by showing that assessors judge targets' creative potential not only on the basis of the targets' attributes, but also on the basis of their relationship with the targets. The two narratives interlocked to tell a compelling story. Like a good novel, good qualitative work seduces readers and motivates them to continue reading.



## A Unique and Inspiring Story

When I read qualitative research, I want to be wowed. I want to have the experience of a “shazzam!”—a spark of inspired recognition or deep insight that comes from an author providing me with an idea or a way of seeing that I had not previously entertained.

A good story is engaging and pushes frontiers. Qualitative research does so through both its data and theory narratives. The data narrative situates data in a unique context, narrates skillfully, and reveals something new and powerful about management and organizations. The theory narrative connects to a prior conversation and reveals something new that changes the way in which readers see other phenomena. The theory narrative must offer a significant contribution, involving both revelatory and scientifically useful insight (Corley & Gioia, 2010), but the revelatory dimension is particularly important in qualitative research.

Each of the articles that earned an *AMJ* Best Article Award offers something truly unique. For example, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) offered insights into homelessness in New York—insights drawn from data that revealed the important interaction of image and identity. Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) showed the processes by which institutional entrepreneurs mobilize change in heavily institutionalized environments—insights to theory that were revealed by a deep dive into the evolution of the multidisciplinary practices of the Big Five accounting firms.

### EMBRACE THE PROCESS, NOT THE PLAN

Quantitative research is about careful preparation and faithful execution of the plan laid out in the beginning; qualitative research is about exploring ideas.

The tools, techniques, and processes of qualitative researchers vary considerably, not just at the beginning, but throughout the research endeavor, including the writing process. At the beginning of the process, qualitative researchers often do not know where they will land. Quantitative researchers often follow detailed plans because data collection is so focused on testing a priori theorizing. Qualitative researchers often do not even know the theory they will anchor their insights on prior to collecting the data. Where they land may be very different from where they started. This iterative process poses immense challenges to qualitative researchers.

### Concurrent Writing and Research

I think the main difference is that the ideas and findings get reconceptualized with each writing.

Tight interweaving of the theory and data stories in a work of qualitative research breaks down the boundary between “researching” and “writing,” so that the two occur simultaneously. For instance, qualitative researchers find that their data analysis is closely tied to the writing process. Often the emergent theory narrative is revealed when the back end of a paper is written, which forces changes to how theory is narrated at the front end and how data are narrated. Once the data are rewritten, additional theoretical insights may emerge. Theoretical discovery, therefore, often occurs when writing. Such an iterative process defies the detailed planning that is often characteristic of a good quantitative study.

### Submission: Just Another Beginning

Much of the discovery occurs as one writes in that as one writes, one identifies remaining gaps, inconsistencies and questions requiring further exploration. So in that sense . . . writing in qualitative research is a highly iterative process.

As many of our panelists explained, this highly iterative process is often sustained through the review process for a submitted paper. Reviewers often become cocreators (but should not become anonymous coauthors) because the true scope of an inductive study’s theoretical implications cannot be fully understood until reviewers have provided feedback on the socially constructed meaning of the data. In this way, qualitative researchers can be thought of as like sculptors: they use an array of tools to work and rework their materials to form their composition. Critics and reviewers expose new ways of seeing the composition, which sometimes forces a significant reworking. As our panel noted, often a qualitative researcher cannot finalize the front end of a paper until the back end has been finalized; both will continue to be revised during the review process all the way until the final draft is accepted.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

In reflecting on our journey in preparing for and writing this editorial, we saw as many similarities as we saw differences between good quantitative papers and good qualitative papers at *AMJ*. Writing a strong scholarly article is a challenging yet rewarding undertaking, regardless of the type of data one reports. In that sense, our aim here was not to make qualitative papers seem more difficult to write, or to push quantitative and qualitative research apart. In fact, qualitative manuscripts have benefited from the strong traditions of quantitative research, and they have

much to offer for the composition of quantitative manuscripts.

Our ultimate goal was to help researchers publish their qualitative data in *AMJ* and understand some of the unique attributes of writing qualitative papers that typically are learned from experience. Because the hallmark of qualitative work is its ability to expose theoretical boundaries and push theoretical insights, we all will benefit from better qualitative research gracing the pages of our most-read journals. Hopefully the insights and knowledge provided in this editorial will encourage more scholars to publish strong qualitative research in *AMJ*.

**Pratima (Tima) Bansal**  
University of Western Ontario

**Kevin Corley**  
Arizona State University

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