The role and status of qualitative methods in management research: an empirical account

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present a piece of empirical work that investigates the current role and status of qualitative research within the management field.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is based on 45 in-depth qualitative interviews with members of a range of different stakeholder groups, including: journal editors; qualitative researchers; Doctoral Programme Leaders; practitioners; and those who fund qualitative management research.

Findings – The findings suggest that there is considerable variety in definitions of qualitative research; that there are still a number of issues surrounding the status and credibility of qualitative research within the field; and there is a need for greater access to researcher training in this area.

Practical implications – The paper is of practical interest to qualitative researchers in that it details some of the issues surrounding publishing qualitative work.

Originality/value – The paper presents original empirical work in this field.

Keywords Management research, Qualitative methods, Training

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Qualitative methods have a long history and tradition within business and management research, and have a well-established pedigree. For example, early ethnographies of managerial work have led to considerable insights into managerial experience and practice (e.g. Dalton, 1959; Mintzberg, 1973; Watson, 1977; Jackall, 1988; Watson, 1994). Qualitative methods have permeated all aspects of the management research field, ranging from the “softer” areas such as organizational analysis (Cassell and Symon, 2004), to the traditionally more quantitative areas of finance and accounting (see Lee and Humphrey, this edition). A wide variety of authors have highlighted the considerable contribution that qualitative research can make to the

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field, suggesting that research utilising qualitative techniques can provide rich insights into the issues that interest both management practitioners and researchers (Boje, 2001; Crompton and Jones, 1988, Prasad and Prasad, 2002; Reason and Rowan, 1981; Van Maanen, 1979).

Despite these plaudits from a variety of writers, it seems that research reporting qualitative data is still not as prevalent within the field as that which emanates from traditional positivist approaches, where the emphasis is upon the quantification of data. The most prestigious journals within the field continue to be viewed as hostile to qualitative research, despite the protestations of their editors (Cassell et al., 2005). This raises the interesting question of how qualitative research is perceived more generally within the management research community, and its role and status within that community. Clearly qualitative methods have much to offer the management researcher in enabling access to the subjective experiences of organizational life, but more recent discussions and debates about the future of management research have focused more on its purpose, rather than the methods and techniques by which it is conducted (e.g. Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; Starkey and Madan, 2001). The aim of this paper is to investigate the current role and status of qualitative research in the management field. In the paper we seek to address the key issues surrounding qualitative research in the field by drawing on a research project that was designed to assess current perceptions of qualitative research within the business and management area. Firstly we discuss some of the issues surrounding the visibility of qualitative research in the field, in order to set the context for the study outlined. We then outline the methodology of the study and present the findings of the research. Finally we draw out some of the implications of our findings for researchers in the management area, with a focus on highlighting the potential ways in which change can be brought about in this domain.

**Positioning qualitative research**

Despite the alleged benefits of qualitative research, it is clear that within some areas reading many of the “prestigious” journals in the management discipline gives the impression that most research is guided by a positivist approach and is dominated by quantitative techniques of analysis. Larsson and Lowendahl (1996) conducted a meta-analytic review of the espoused and actual applications of qualitative methods in management research. The journals that formed the basis of their review were *Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly, Organization Science* and *Strategic Management Journal*. When assessing the articles published between 1984 and 1994 they concluded that just 12 studies during that period could be classed as qualitative. Bearing in mind the length of the period, and the number of journals covered, it would seem that qualitative methods have not been particularly prevalent in the management field. It could be, however, that things have progressed somewhat since 1994, though more recent research has suggested that this may not be the case (Buehring et al., 2003).

Symon and Cassell (1999) argue that this lack of visibility for qualitative methods arises from difficulties in opposing current dominant practice. They identify a number of barriers to the publication of qualitative research, including:

- Getting research past epistemological gatekeepers (journal editors and reviewers, conference committees).
• Conforming to journal editorial criteria and constraints of other presentations, which have probably been set up with quantitative studies in mind.

• The pressure to justify research methods according to (sometimes) inappropriate (positivist) criteria.

• The lack of exposure to alternatives in management publications and on management courses.

Taking each of these in turn, we can see they may interact to impact upon the visibility of qualitative management research. Journal editors and reviewers have a key impact on what kind of research is selected for inclusion within their journals. A number of editors have recently suggested that although they would like to see an increased amount of qualitative research in their journals, there are difficulties with qualitative submissions (e.g. Lee, 2001; Gephart and Rynes, 2004). For example Gephart points out that few qualitative pieces succeed in being accepted for the Academy of Management Journal, and identifies what he defines as a number of “challenges and opportunities” (2004, p. 459), regarding qualitative work that need to be addressed. These include reviewing the literature thoroughly; stating the explicit goals of the research; and adequately specifying the methodological processes that lead to the creation of a particular piece of work. This links into the second issue of conforming to journal editorial formats. Some have argued that in order to make a persuasive case more words are needed to do justice to qualitative reporting. Yet increasingly journals are short of space and limited word counts are enforced by editors regardless of the methodological approach of the piece.

The third issue concerns the criteria through which we assess the quality of management research. Several writers have argued that one of the key barriers to the use and publication of qualitative research in the management sciences is the application of inappropriate assessment criteria (e.g. Symon et al., 2000). This is a key issue because whereas there is considerable consensus amongst management researchers about quality criteria for empirical research within a positivist framework, there is far more debate about what makes “good” research within alternative epistemological approaches (Symon and Cassell, 2004). Even writers who promote qualitative research (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) may evaluate it in terms of positivist concepts of objectivity, validity and reliability (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Therefore if reviewers are evaluating qualitative research using criteria from a different epistemological perspective, it is clearly less likely to pass through the increasing demands of high status journals. Despite the creation of alternative sets of criteria by qualitative researchers (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 2003; Morse, 1994), there is little evidence of these criteria being used in practice (Cassell et al., 2005). Yet the call for a set of universal criteria for assessing qualitative research continues to be made (e.g. Sandberg, 2005).

The fourth issue relates to the extent to which management researchers are exposed to qualitative techniques through their research training programmes. It could be that there is a lack of knowledge and expertise that surrounds the use of qualitative methods in the management arena. There is some evidence to suggest that this is the case. For example PhD training courses within the field can over-emphasize the quantitative at the expense of the qualitative (Boje, 2001); and management practitioners may not have received any training in qualitative methodologies (Skinner
et al., 2000). Therefore researchers may simply not be aware of what is good practice in this field, and how to access the skills required to enable them to produce high quality publishable work.

These factors in combination can serve to undermine the potential contribution of qualitative research. The lack of visibility may be an indication that there are issues regarding the credibility and status of qualitative research in this area. This could therefore discourage researchers from conducting qualitative research and create a vicious circle of events where researchers are reluctant to direct their attentions towards an undervalued area of research activity.

In summary it would appear that there are some mixed messages about the role and impact of qualitative research within the management field. One the one hand it is clearly evident that qualitative research has a contribution to make that warrants a higher visibility, whereas on the other hand writers are still doubtful about the potential contribution that qualitative research can make. The study reported here aimed to address this issue directly by examining the current role and status of qualitative research within the area.

Aims and methodology
The overall aim of the study was to conduct a systematic investigation into current perceptions of qualitative methods in management research, including perceived barriers to their use. A total of 45 in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals from different stakeholder groups. We identified four major groups of interested parties (the “panels”) and recruited individuals to each of these. In practice panel membership was sometimes overlapping (i.e. individuals could be said to be members of several panels, although recruited with one particular panel in mind). Therefore, for the most part, we did not analyse the data from each panel separately. Rather the notion of “panel membership” was a useful heuristic device for us in the collection and reporting of the data.

Composition of the panels
Membership of the four panels is outlined below:

(1) **Panel A: Academic disseminators.** This panel included editors of key management journals from the USA, the UK and Europe; chairs of relevant professional associations; and those responsible for funding management research. The aim was to explore the views of those who have to regularly assess the quality of qualitative research, and who may be considered “epistemological gatekeepers” (Symon and Cassell, 1999), in the sense of controlling access to the desirable inputs and outputs of research.

(2) **Panel B: Practitioners.** This panel included those from the public and private sector who conduct or commission qualitative research, or are consumers of management research outputs (e.g. management consultants; senior members of relevant government organizations; and those from organizations which specialize in survey and other research work).

(3) **Panel C: Doctoral.** This panel consisted of those who currently manage university PhD and research methodology Master’s programmes in business and management schools. Such individuals are closely involved in the training
and assessment of junior management researchers and may most benefit from the outputs of this project. An even spread of pre- and post-1992 institutions was included in this panel.

(4) **Panel D: Qualitative researchers.** This panel included those who have published within the area of qualitative methods in management research, or who use qualitative methods regularly as part of their substantive research. This group can be considered experts in the subject matter of the research and also have a direct interest in criteria for the assessment of qualitative research.

**Data collection**

Although focused on qualitative management research, the interviews were quite wide ranging and, over a period of one or two hours, thoroughly explored the topics at hand. Individuals were initially contacted by e-mail or telephone. We outlined the nature of the project and the contribution we felt the individual could make to this. We explained that all interviews would be taped but that the material gathered would be considered confidential within the research team. Interviewees are only identified in the text that follows by their panel membership. Most of the individuals we approached were happy to contribute to the project, many suggesting that this was an important area, which needed some investigation. The majority of interviews were conducted at the interviewee’s work place, however the practicalities of the situation sometimes necessitated telephone interviews (i.e. when the panel member lived in a different country). Additionally a small number of interviews were conducted at the 2003 US Academy of Management Conference in Seattle. Interviewees were asked a range of questions about the subject area including their views about the role and purpose of qualitative research; what good qualitative research looked like; and potential barriers that existed to the dissemination of qualitative management research.

**Data analysis**

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. The overall analytical approach adopted largely followed the conventions of template analysis, where the researcher produces a list of codes (template) representing themes identified in the textual data (King, 2004). The qualitative data analysis package NVivo was used for the initial stages of coding. One member of the research team, trained in the use of NVivo, was primarily responsible for this initial coding of the interview material. Using template analysis (King, 2004), the transcripts were coded into broad themes based on the research objectives and interview questions to create an initial template. This template was further discussed and modified within the research group. Each broad theme was then subjected to a more detailed analysis by two members of the research team, which led to the formation of more specific categories within each theme.

When conducting the analysis it was apparent that not all the data fitted neatly into one precise category or another, therefore in both interpreting and writing up the findings there was the need to often cut across the different categories. Additionally our analysis does not seek to make grand claims concerning the state-of-the art in this area. Rather we have been concerned with identifying issues in the areas of interest rather than drawing conclusions about the strength or generalizability of such views.
Our aim was to use the research findings to stimulate discussion and debate about the role and status of qualitative research in the management field.

Findings
The interviews provided a rich source of data concerning current perceptions of management research. In this paper we summarize the outcomes of the analysis of five sections of the data that link in with our research objectives: definitions of qualitative research; perceived status and credibility; difficulties in disseminating qualitative research; assessment criteria; and training. Where appropriate, illustrative quotes from the interviewees are given.

Defining the role of qualitative research
One of the interesting findings that emerged, that provides an important context in which to consider other findings, was that the term “qualitative management research” was open to multiple interpretations. Therefore it would seem that “qualitative research” in itself is a problematic term. Analysis of the interviewees’ accounts of qualitative research suggested an array of definitions. There were many different views. Often, but by no means always, these definitions were intimately bound up with their conceptions of the role of qualitative research. These definitions range from those indicating that qualitative research has a central concern with the subjectivity of research practice, to those, which suggest qualitative research barely constitutes research at all. For example, there was one view that qualitative research could be most appropriately seen as taking an interpretivist stance, therefore it was about “trying to understand meaning”, or “accessing and understanding how meaning is constructed through social interaction”. Thus qualitative research entails taking “an interpretivist perspective where one is particularly interested in being able to . . . investigate the perspectives that subjects have and to interpret their view of the world”. Others were more dismissive with the suggestion, for example, that qualitative research could only ever be legitimate as a precursor to a more sophisticated quantitative piece of analysis:

What I would say is qualitative; in so far as it means anything, can only ever be a preliminary piece of work . . . to me any research that is worth doing must be replicable or at least produce predictions (Panel A: Academic disseminators).

Another view was that qualitative research was just another bag of tools available for the management researcher, or a set of specific data collection techniques such as case studies, interviews or focus groups. Such a range of definitions indicates the diversity of work in this area, and makes problematic any generalized prescriptions for the field more generally.

Status and credibility of qualitative research
One of the main issues that emerged from the analysis related to the perceived current status of qualitative research within the business and management field. A general perception identified by the interviewees, though not necessarily shared by them, was that the quantification of data and associated statistical analysis conveys credibility. In a management environment, with an organizational emphasis on the “bottom line”, numbers may be especially convincing:
I suppose a lot of people in business (I don’t want to put them down), but they may not have a very strong research background and, if they look at a piece of quantitative research, they might focus on the figures rather than the design. So they may be taking on board something that hasn’t been terribly well designed and might say: “Oh yeah, this is really good and we should adopt this because we can get X percent improvement” (Panel B: Practitioners).

Without measurement, data cannot be transformed into research but remains a “story”:

... but until he [postgraduate student] starts to do a comparative study between us and other organizations and actually gets some measures in place, then all it is, is an interesting story. That’s my view (Panel B: Practitioners).

While it could be recognized that qualitative research may draw its credibility from sources other than quantification (e.g. richness of the language), those other sources themselves may not be regarded as credible:

... my own philosophical inclination is I have somewhat more confidence in them [statistical studies using large data sets] than I would in studies which depended upon, you know, the richness of the language or the understanding of one’s interviewee where, you know, how well does he or she understand the question, the lack of facility with the language, a lack of intelligence perhaps and all of those things seem to me to run the risk of in a way of dirtying the data and making it, from my point of view, less reliable (Panel A: Academic disseminators).

The phrase “dirtying the data” implies that the qualitative research process in some way contaminates the research product. The scientific status that may be associated with quantification also conveys credibility:

Well, I think the problem is that to be seen to be credible you’ve got to be bulging, overflowing with stats otherwise it’s like, “Oh, you’re not a scientist!” It’s not scientific (Panel D: Qualitative researchers).

Within the interviews then, claims were made that quantification, statistical analysis, rigour, systematization, were indicators of credibility. In this conceptualization, qualitative research is by definition, not credible because it does not adopt many of these processes and measures. However, credibility was also presented as a judgement made by assessors – and it is argued that such assessors may not have the skills or knowledge to make a proper judgement of the credibility of qualitative research.

Given these perceptions, it was claimed that qualitative researchers had to be more careful about the way they present themselves and their data.

I guess it’s an issue of credibility in terms of whether the person feels that you have got your act together and you know what you’re looking for ... you know, I entirely accept that if I have to provide an account of what I’m doing, then something reasonably coherent has to be presented (Panel D: Qualitative researchers).

In this case credibility is in addition to impression management. Credibility is therefore also presented as an achieved status – not intrinsic to the research process but accomplished by presenting the research report in particular ways. Judgements of credibility, are also seen, to be influenced, by particular (political) contexts and what constitutes credible research may change from period to period, being something of a cultural artefact.
This therefore has implications for qualitative researchers in that they have to actively learn appropriate skills of impression management with regard to how they present their qualitative research. Whereas quantitative pieces of work are often presented in a standardized format there is more variety in the presentational style of qualitative work, but the key issue seems to be that it is presented in such a way that it appears credible. This in itself is complex, given the factors that influence judgements of credibility as outlined above.

**Barriers to disseminating qualitative management research**

In the introduction we suggested that the formats of journal outputs might be restrictive for qualitative authors. Within the interviews, the length of journal articles and how to present these within the confines of journal space was identified as problematic for publishing qualitative work. Barriers were identified such as: how to “condense it down to 25 sides” without reducing the “richness”; how to present the “labour process” of doing the research itself “when editors really want that to be cut down to the bone”; and that there is a trade off between quality and quantity where “I would not be averse to taking a paper that was twice the length if it really was exemplary”. This “trade off” was illustrated in terms of the number of slots a journal might have as opposed to the quality or importance of a longer piece:

I've talked to the editor of [a top American] journal . . . and he says the biggest problem with the qualitative work is the length. But he has published some very long ones because they have to spend more time describing what they do and he said that just because . . . you're given a fixed number of pages, it essentially means you have to take [fewer] articles altogether. It increases your rejection rate . . . And the question is: Is this as important as two other papers? If it's taking as much space as two papers, then he has to ask is this as important as two papers because it's essentially kicking somebody else out (Panel A: Academic disseminators).

Such constraints on writing qualitative papers for journal articles, meant that the opportunities to write in a less restrictive environment were appreciated much more:

I really, really enjoyed the chapter that I wrote for the international qualitative management book, because there was a story to be told and it wasn't a story I could tell very readily in the sort of squashed up methods bit at the beginning of a chapter where I'm really principally talking about findings (Panel D: Qualitative researchers).

Clearly there are problematic issues related to publishing qualitative work, which may impact upon its visibility. Other issues related to the nature of the academic labour process, and the increased pressure on individuals to publish in what are considered as the “elite” journals. For example:

A very, very serious issue facing us in this country [UK] with interpretive or, if you like, qualitative research . . . is with the pressure to meet global criteria . . . the American criteria of what is good research, is what counts . . . well even case study stuff now they tell me it just gets sent back if it isn't big survey. So a whole lot of the American journals are operating in that way and people are being pressured (Panel D: Qualitative researchers).

All of these issue highlight that publishing qualitative work is a challenging process that can create frustrations for the qualitative researcher. However despite these problems, it is evident that examples of good qualitative research do sometimes get published in the top journals, and a number of well-established European journals such
as the *Journal of Management Studies* and *Organization Studies* regularly publish qualitative work. The interviewees did not seem to be suggesting that publishing qualitative work is impossible, but rather highlighting some of the difficulties that researchers might encounter when they pursue that route.

**Defining “quality” research and research assessment criteria in use**

Previously we suggested that qualitative research might be evaluated against inappropriate criteria, by which we meant those traditionally associated with positivist approaches. The interview questions focused particularly on how interviewees recognized quality in qualitative research, and how “gatekeepers” perceived their own and others’ judgements through the peer review process. From the data it was apparent that interviewees were using a variety of criteria to define quality in the field, and that these criteria were influenced by a range of paradigmatic assumptions. One thing that was seen as important was that research was seen to be making a contribution although the nature of “contribution” may be evaluated in different ways, according to the underlying epistemological assumptions of the evaluator. Examples of what constitutes a contribution are that a piece of research provides “new insights”, told something that was “not just common sense” or “added to management knowledge”.

Some of the interviewees expressed concern that the focus on assessing qualitative research against criteria derived from a positivist perspective had led to an obsession with procedural correctness that was inappropriate for qualitative research. For example:

> It’s kind of dressing up qualitative research in quantitative clothes, isn’t it? That you’re making a big deal out of the procedures and steps that you go through in the research process … in the same way as you would if you were reporting … “I did this T test and I found R-squared” … It’s that search for rigour, isn’t it? The appearance of rigour. But having said that I think it’s a good thing. It’s got to be a good thing to be more systematic and at least force people to think more about why they’re doing things the way they are even if it’s a bit finicky at times (Panel B: Practitioners).

A further interesting finding was that, while some broad areas of agreement about quality criteria could be identified, the interviewees were not consistently applying a specific and invariable set of criteria to assess qualitative research (in contrast, to the criteria of validity and reliability in use in quantitative research). Rather, the assessment of quality was seen as intuitive decision-making, “you know it when you see it”. The implication of this is that defining the criteria used to assess quality in this context is difficult, and may be informed by a range of different factors, including the methodological preferences of the assessor.

**Training in qualitative research**

Another issue highlighted in the introduction related to access to training in qualitative research techniques. Interviewees identified a number of issues with the type and standard of training in qualitative management research currently available. The provision of qualitative research training was seen as important yet “patchy” or not widespread. For some this was a concern:

> I’m really concerned about the quality of training that occurs in a lot of universities because I don’t think it’s good enough. I don’t think that the people necessarily training them have the breadth of understanding in methods to really, really impart the importance of it … and if
you get that building block wrong, you’re already on catch up or correction, and it is correction sometimes … but, I think it is throughout particularly the early years of researchers’ lives, post-doc. Too many get thrown in without any proper training or supervision. They’re working as researchers supporting people on projects, but aren’t getting the training and supervision that would help them develop as researchers (Panel A: Academic disseminators).

The point here is that there are training issues throughout the academic career and that not enough attention is currently paid to them, particularly at the early stage.

Comparisons were made by interviewees regarding the amount of training available for qualitative and quantitative techniques. These comparisons were particularly made with regard to doctoral programmes. From a North American perspective one interviewee suggested that:

So, for example, every doctorate in management will include several courses in quantitative methods. Everywhere! That has to be. Whereas … you will get a qualitative course only if there happens to be somebody in your particular institution who’s really a champion of qualitative methods and wants to make sure that their students have a balance (Panel A: Academic disseminators).

Within UK doctoral programmes, the views of interviewees varied, ranging from “a bit more on qualitative methods”, and “a fairly identifiable balance between the two approaches” to “biased to the quantitative”. The rationale behind the weighting given to the various approaches in doctoral training programmes was located within the methodological preferences of supervisors, an existing “interest [with]in the school” or the extent to which “there’s provision outside the school” or “we’ve got people interested in it”, with one interviewee suggesting that their School had a “reputation” for a particular approach.

It would seem therefore that there are a number of issues that need to be addressed with regard to the provision of training in qualitative methods more generally, particularly with regard to the type of training available, and how it can be accessed.

Conclusions
The data presented provides an informative interpretation of the current role and status of qualitative research in the business and management field. There is considerable variety in definitions of qualitative research. The way in which individuals define qualitative research is important in that it influences their perceptions about who does it; what it should look like; and, ultimately, how it is judged. From this research, it is clear that there are a variety of definitions in use, and that there is no general consensus about the nature of qualitative management research. This variety of definitions in use is could be considered a credit to the rich diversity of research that can be included under the banner “qualitative management research”. Rather than being a restrictive, or indeed exclusionary term, there is room for a variety of perspectives and interpretations, which could encourage innovation in the area. Our conclusion here is that there is no one correct definition, but when assessing qualitative research, we need to take varieties of definitions into account.

Clearly there are still a number of issues surrounding the status and credibility of qualitative research within the field. From some of the interviewees’ accounts, although they may not agree with this conceptualization themselves, there is clearly a perception
that credibility is associated with quantification and scientific status. Therefore those engaging with qualitative research methods may not even be starting from a level playing field when their research is considered alongside that of researchers using more traditional positivist perspectives. It is evident that some of the difficulties around credibility in relation to qualitative research may dissuade researchers from conducting qualitative research. Additionally there are other barriers such as the problems identified with disseminating qualitative research, particularly with regard to journal formats.

At the start of this paper we suggested that reviewers might be using inappropriate criteria from a positivist perspective to evaluate qualitative work. However the findings suggest rather that evaluators use a variety of criteria to assess the quality of qualitative work. That researchers do not refer to explicit sets of quality criteria for qualitative research within the field is interesting given the existence of numerous published works which provide advice in this direction (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Morse, 1994; Seale, 1999; Lee et al., 1999). It may be that as a reviewer becomes very experienced, they develop their own list of criteria, which are used as a heuristic device in a more systematic sense. It would seem then that the key issue is that when evaluating a piece of research it is important to be explicit about the criteria in use, and the underlying assumptions in choosing those criteria. Even though researchers and writers may presume that they are talking about the same thing, clearly they may be singing from different hymn sheets.

It is apparent that there is scope for some development in the area of training in qualitative research. In considering training needs, of particular interest is the underlying assumptions about the career of the management researcher and the life stages they go through with regard to training. The notion of the PhD as an apprenticeship was present in the interviewees’ accounts, however there was less certainty about what research methodology training was available, or indeed pursued, once the PhD had been achieved. Interviewees suggested however that there is a need for both academic and practitioner researchers to engage in continuous professional development in this area. In particular there are concerns about the lack of appropriately trained reviewers and concern about where the future trainers of students in this area will come from. It is interesting to speculate about the impact that any training within this area may have. Given the political context, and the status and credibility issue previously outlined, although training may go some way to enhance the quality of qualitative research, these type of interventions on their own, may not be able to go far enough.

So what are the implications of our findings for qualitative researchers in this area? If we are arguing, for example, that qualitative research still has little status in the field of management research, and that there is still little of it published in the top management journals, does this mean that we are indirectly discouraging qualitative researchers from submitting their work to the top journals? Could it be that we are then guilty of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy about the lack of qualitative research in this context? Clearly this is not our intention. It is also evident that some qualitative work does get published in the top US-based journals such as *Academy of Management Review*, and that some researchers have successfully established careers along this route. As we suggested earlier, qualitative research is also published regularly in such esteemed European journals as *Journal of Management Studies* and *Organization*.
Studies, therefore our intention is not to present a picture that damn qualitative researchers to less “prestigious” or “alternative” outlets, though some researchers may choose to go down this route. We also recognize that terms such as “top journals” and “prestigious” are in themselves value laden, and that, as our data indicates, there are many different interpretations of what is high quality work. Our intention is, rather, that our findings will help stimulate debate about the current role and status of qualitative management research. Additionally we would propose a change agenda to address some of these issues.

First, our findings suggest that there is a need for greater awareness amongst management researchers more generally of the rich diversity of techniques that are available under the banner of “qualitative” research and the various roles that such research can have. Despite the rise in texts designed to inform researchers about techniques available (e.g. Cassell and Symon, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Flick et al., 2004; Seale et al., 2004, Silverman, 2004), and the variety of approaches in which qualitative methods can be used (e.g. postmodernism, critical theory, constructivism), it would seem that there is still a view in some quarters that qualitative research is only suitable as a prelude to a more quantitative design. Profiling qualitative research in a themed issue such as this is one way forward. Second, given that our findings highlight that credibility can be viewed amongst other things as a subjective judgement, there are potentially ways in which we can influence the judgements that people make. We may be able to influence the perceived credibility of qualitative research, not just by training qualitative researchers in particular methods or processes, but also by highlighting appropriate methods of assessment, and the problematic nature of assessing qualitative research through universal pre-determined criteria associated with the positivist paradigm. Third, our findings suggest a need for more comprehensive training generally within the field of qualitative management research. As our interviewees suggested, current provision within the field may be somewhat patchy. Access to training and continuous professional development is important if researchers are to have confidence in using qualitative techniques. Fourthly, and perhaps more challenging, is addressing the dominant perception in the field that high quality research is associated with quantification. At the heart of this issue is the underlying presumption that the natural and the social sciences may be united by one methodological approach located in the hypothetico-deductive model. Qualitative methodologies with their commitment to induction and verstehen are inevitably undermined in such an approach. The consideration and recognition of different philosophical positions and their different commitments, highlights the contexts in which qualitative methods can have much to contribute to the business and management field, and the appropriate assessment criteria through which high quality research can be evaluated.

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Further reading


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