Editorial: Thoughts for improving qualitative research in management studies
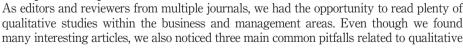
We start this editorial by exposing our understanding of qualitative research: "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43). Qualitative research involves the studied use of a collection of multiple empirical materials and sources (case studies, personal experience, introspection, life story, individual and group interviews, artifacts, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts, to cite a few) that describe routine, moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena regarding the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

That is precisely at the core of qualitative research, in which we can find the great advantage of conducting qualitative studies (Gephart, 2004). The researcher is rewarded for the direct engagement with day-to-day management and organisational realities and opportunities this kind of research provides to make substantial contributions to the field. Qualitative research often advances the field by providing "unique, memorable, socially important and theoretically meaningful contributions to scholarly discourse and organisational life" (Gephart, 2004, p. 461).

The text "Reclaiming Qualitative Methods for Organizational Research: A Preface", published in 1979 and written by John Van Maanen, is one of the primary references for the debate on qualitative research. Throughout the text, Van Maanen explains that the description of the results of qualitative research should be seen as a map, not as a territory because this construction is a reflective product of the cartographer.

At the same time, we can compare qualitative research in the management field with craft production. Our research is based on field research with real people, problems and organisations. This feature means that unexpected, complex problems and obstacles interfere with the research project at various stages and researchers learn and make decisions along the way (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

Main pitfalls in qualitative studies

As editors and reviewers from multiple journals, we had the opportunity to read plenty of qualitative studies within the business and management areas. Even though we found many interesting articles, we also noticed three main common pitfalls related to qualitative

studies. These gaps make studies look fragile from a theoretical point of view, lacking a scientific approach.

The first pitfall is the lack of alignment between the research question and the appropriate method, either because of the mistaken formulation of the question concerning what was carried out or the limitation in achieving what is expected from the method. This misalignment may be associated with the lack of scientific maturity of the researcher. An example is the attempt to use the case study method simply because the data collection was carried out in an organisation when the research question would require other approaches. It is not rare that a case study's selection and analysis criteria have not even been followed in cases like these.

The second pitfall may not be a characteristic only of qualitative research but is, in fact, recurrent in studies of this nature. It is the lack of detailed information about the methodological choices. This includes clear and well-defined criteria for selecting units of analysis, criteria on how research participants were approached, in addition to sufficient descriptions regarding the method for data analysis. For example, some studies point out that content analysis was performed without giving more details on whether this is the most appropriate method for the research question or which steps were followed.

Finally, the third pitfall refers to the superficiality of the data analysis itself, which in many cases is presented without the necessary depth to deduce, from the data, the novelty or advances in existing models and theories. In some cases, the analyses and interpretations are not supported by the presented data. An example is using the case study method through an approach more similar to an organisational consulting report. This perception arises from a research goal aimed at understanding a specific organisation's context. It results in little in-depth analysis, where only the positive points and improvements that the organisation adopted are highlighted – and no theory gap is addressed.

Recommendations

Van Maanen (1979) describes qualitative research as *an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world.* With so many possibilities, there is a high probability that disagreements will arise about the criteria for evaluating qualitative research (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, giving recommendations for the development and reporting of qualitative research becomes a complex and audacious challenge.

Some researchers, such as Pratt (2009), Tracy (2010), Köhler (2016) and Aguinis and Solarino (2019), have proposed scripts, questions and observations that can help other researchers in this arduous task, especially concerning consistency with the research goals, transparency and methodological rigour. Not claiming to exhaust the subject in this editorial, we will now present some recommendations on conducting high-quality qualitative research.

Köhler (2016) guides the researcher to always wonder about the pertinence of a particular part of the text or a specific methodological decision to achieve the research goal – this is the fundamental link between all decisions and, consequently, between all parts of the text. This issue is particularly critical in qualitative studies because an incoherent decision can lead to an incoherent or at least misaligned study. So, maintaining coherence with the research question, methodological choices, arguments and ideas presented and connected in the text itself would be one first recommendation.

Another common point among the various texts dealing with the development and reporting of qualitative research is transparency. Some questions should be answered by

researchers that help them build a more robust qualitative study (Tracy, 2010; Köhler, 2016; Aguinis & Solarino, 2019):

- Is the researcher an insider or an outsider? What are the researchers' biases?
- What is the context? What was the process of accessing information and informants? What is the level of immersion of the researchers?
- Were there any unexpected errors, challenges and problems? How were they addressed?
- How was the sampling process? And the recruitment process? How relevant is this sample to the research question? What are the limitations of this choice?
- How were ethical issues addressed? Was there a protocol? Have you submitted the study to a Research Ethics Committee? Did the participants sign a term on the ethical issues involved? Did they know that their participation was voluntary? How was the data processed and stored?
- What was the saturation point?
- What was the initial encoding? And the final?

These same authors highlight high methodological rigour as critical. Rigour involves describing and explaining the decisions and the methodological path. In the case of conducting interviews, Tracy (2010) exemplifies that the demonstrations of rigour include the explanation of the number and duration of the interviews, the types of questions asked, the transcription report (level of transcription detail, practices to ensure accuracy and the total number of pages transcribed). Rigour must also be present in the analyses, such as explaining the process of transforming and organising raw data, including their classification, choice and presentation (Tracy, 2010). Sometimes transparency is more related to the text than the lack of information. Being clear about both would therefore be another recommendation.

The development of the analysis is a focal point of the articles, although it is sometimes neglected. Pratt (2009) and Köhler (2016) suggest a balance between describing the data and performing the analyses, and the reader must understand the logical line between one step and another. Researchers must have in mind how to answer the question: How from my data did I arrive at these findings? We add to that: will the readers get that too?

In this sense, Souza Neto *et al.* (2019) summarise the four quality criteria for qualitative research, agreed upon by several scholars in the field: confirmability, credibility, dependability/consistency, transferability. While these criteria can be met from different strategies throughout the research, the authors list the use of qualitative data analysis software, known by the acronym QDAS, as an effective alternative. Besides, the use of QDAS positively affects strategies related to researcher coherence, detailed description of the investigation, validation of respondents and by researchers and triangulation.

So, to sum up: be clear and didactic about the analysis, be sure about meeting the quality criteria of your research, and, if possible, use QDAS.

Final remarks

To conclude this editorial, we offer some points of reflection, remembering that "the field of qualitative research is on the move and moving in several different directions at the same time" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 29).

Firstly, we believe that it is necessary to break out of the common, traditional, standardised silos of qualitative research, in which the regular choices are case studies, interviews and content analysis. This is not a criticism of these methods and techniques *per se*. Instead, our provocation is to expand the gaze and escape this shared sense of qualitative studies.

Secondly, qualitative research offers a wide range of possibilities related to strategies, sources, data collection techniques, and data analysis. We suggest qualitative researchers make more use of creativity, either by adopting unconventional methods, support tools or a combination of these. Cassell and Bishop (2019) call to our attention that the field of qualitative research is surrounded by traditional formulaic approaches and recommendations, whereas it is possible to add new and creative methodological strategies. The main argument is that given the increasing trend towards standardisation in qualitative management research, it is essential to promote and encourage alternatives within the qualitative researcher's analytic toolkit.

Finally, do not be fooled into adopting qualitative research because, at first glance, it may seem more inviting when compared to other approaches. Gephart's (2004) honest alert is still valid in pointing out that qualitative researchers will likely be less productive than quantitative researchers in terms of the number of manuscripts produced. High-quality, robust and rigorous qualitative research is challenging, time-consuming, and demands expertise.

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