
Improving the Odds of Publishing Inductive Qualitative Research in Premier Academic Journals

The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science
48(2) 282–287
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DOI: 10.1177/0021886312438864
<http://jabs.sagepub.com>


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The objective of this commentary is to explore the challenges scholars face in developing qualitative work to the standards required for publication in top international journals. Over the past decade, qualitative research has achieved increased acceptance in the academic community (Bansal & Corley, 2011) because research on impact has found that although published qualitative studies represent a relatively small proportion in premier journals, they account for a “disproportionate” portion of works considered by the general community of scholars as the most interesting (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006).

First, I discuss the common confusion between qualitative and quantitative research, and the related expectations for each genre. Second, I discuss some of the more common mistakes made by inductive qualitative (IQ) researchers that lead to rejection by premier journals. Third, I present some of the deeper causes that may produce these mistakes. Fourth, I propose some advice that can help improve the odds of publishing IQ studies. Finally, I lay out other benefits of doing qualitative research, even if publishing it in premier journals fails.

Basic Understanding: Inductive Qualitative Research

Qualitative research simply means research that uses qualitative data as the dominant source of information to make certain theoretical claims. Although one can use qualitative data to test hypotheses, the majority of qualitative works published in premier management journals use qualitative data as the source of inductive theorizing (theory building) rather than deductive theory testing. Hence, qualitative research is most often implicitly associated with the inductive method. Obviously, the inductive and deductive methods often complement each other in the continuous and

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iterative cycle of knowledge creation. IQ research seems best suited (in comparison with other research methods such as experiments, use of archival quantitative data, quantitative surveys) when one or more of the following conditions are present:

- The phenomena are little known, the literature is still very thin, and thus it is difficult to formulate precise hypotheses for testing purposes (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).
- The researcher is investigating new mechanisms that underlie the relationships among various constructs and related boundary conditions that cannot be easily deduced from the existing literature.
- Collecting quantitative data to study some specific phenomena can be very difficult, for example, studying how social interactions among various groups with different interests and needs evolve over time, the evolving subjective perceptions of these groups (thinking and emotions), and how these influence behavior and collective outcomes.
- The researcher is investigating process-related matters (e.g., how certain phenomena evolve over time; how various groups of actors think, feel, and act; and how their behavior affects collective performance) rather than “how much does it matter?” (Langley, 1999).

Common Mistakes of Inductive Qualitative Researchers

Based on my long experience both as an author and as a reviewer, there are two common mistakes made by IQ researchers that lead to journals rejecting their works. First, the theoretical contribution is perceived as insufficient by the journal. There has been considerable debate about what constitutes a theoretical contribution by other scholars including Weick (1995), Sutton and Staw (1995), and Van Maanen (1995), and authors can benefit from keeping up-to-date on this ongoing debate, as what is viewed as a sufficient theoretical contribution represents one of the most dominant criteria for acceptance for publication in journals and can vary among different sets of editors and reviewers' subjective tastes and preferences.

What constitutes a “theoretical contribution” has been elaborated in a recent article (see Corley & Gioia, 2011). Usually, this means that the paper contains a qualitative description of the empirical phenomenon but does not present a “theory” or “model” that reviewers perceive as sufficiently “new” and “important” to the literature. Some authors mistakenly believe that describing what is taking place in one company or several companies with a rich description, then adding to this description some review of the related literatures would meet the premier journal expectations. Oftentimes, they fail to articulate what the literature about a given phenomenon has not studied, what we do not know conceptually (a “gap” in the literature), and why it is important to address this gap (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). What is new and important must

thus be clear to the reviewers in the first pages of the introduction. The rest of the paper is to demonstrate the authors' initial claims of *novelty* and *importance* to the literature.

The second common mistake is poor connection between the proposed theoretical contribution and the data. Simply put, reviewers are not convinced by the plausibility of the inductive conceptual claims that authors infer from their data (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). One of the reasons for this disconnect is that in their quest to increase claims of the novelty and importance of the proposed theoretical contribution, authors might feel pressured to make inferential claims that their data cannot support convincingly when reviewers examine the bases of these inferences. Showing a clear explanation of how data were collected and analyzed and how concepts and relations were inferred from the data represents a key factor in convincing reviewers of the rigor of your data collection and analysis methods.

Why Do These Mistakes Happen?

I now discuss some of the deeper reasons that might have produced these two mistakes, again based on my experience as an author and a reviewer. By far the most serious cause for failure is authors' insufficient knowledge of the relevant literatures when they collect and analyze data. Akin to seafarers attracted by the sirens' songs, doing qualitative research can be seductively fatal. Authors can become so fascinated by the empirical phenomenon itself (imagine you are interviewing senior executives and exciting innovators in Facebook) that they lose sight of what *conceptual insights* they expect to derive from their research. Again, what theoretical gap(s) do they seek to address (i.e., the theoretical phenomenon that the academic community does not know and would consider it important to know)? In those cases when authors can publish multiple IQ studies based on a sample of $N = 1$ organization (e.g., Burgelman, 1983, 1994; Huy, 2002, 2011), reviewers likely perceive that their theoretical contribution is not idiosyncratic to a single organization but is potentially generalizable across many. The theoretical discussion that follows the presentation of the findings is thus critical to convince reviewers of the plausibility and wider impact of the theory that is inferred from a very small sample. This is accomplished by providing thick description to ensure "transferability"—the idea that others have sufficient information to apply the ideas to their own settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A potential second cause is authors' confusion about the goal of IQ research, which should propose new theory rather than using existing theories (even just frameworks) to explain new data. We do the latter all the time when we teach "new" cases in class. Researchers may sometimes resort to using existing frameworks to explain new data (thus essentially writing teaching notes for a case).

The third cause may be "data asphyxiation," meaning that authors might feel so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the qualitative data that they cannot derive deep and new meanings and relationships out of their data. Instead, they pin their hope on

some magical qualitative analysis software to produce novel and important insights. Software might be useful to store and categorize data and thus assist in the analysis process, but systematic analysis cannot substitute for creative synthesis. A rare skill of a successful IQ scholar is *creative conceptualizing*, and I am not aware of any mechanical process that systematically produces creative insights, that is, reveals new and important conceptual relationships in data where most other observers fail. These creative conceptualizing skills are epitomized in the works of famous inductive researchers such as Darwin, Freud, Kübler-Ross, or Piaget.

How to Increase the Odds of Publishing

By now, a careful reader might have already inferred what she or he could do to improve the odds of publishing IQ papers. I propose seven tips that should help in this regard:

1. Achieve absolute mastery of the relevant literatures that could inform your study prior to or early on in the data collection process. If not, the odds of reinventing the wheel are high.
2. Remain constantly updated on the evolution of the literature throughout data collection, analysis, writing of the paper, and its submission to a journal.
3. Strategically choose research questions that other research methods can only tackle with great difficulty. Examples include detailed and longitudinal processes involving human beings dealing dynamically with unexpected events, subtle social-psychological interactions involving diverse groups in natural settings over time, how- and why-type questions.
4. Choose research questions in fields that are still much underdeveloped, that is, the literature (more specifically and narrowly, articles published in premier journals) related to the research question is very thin to nonexistent. Development of compelling hypotheses for testing is thus very difficult, and this further justifies IQ research.
5. If possible, seek coauthorship with people who have a track record of publishing IQ papers in premier journals in the recent past. The norms of publishing research in many disciplines are increasing; coauthorship with skilled qualitative researchers can significantly increase the novelty, speed, and quality of the work.
6. Seek coauthors who can bring complementary resources, which can include some of the following: data, knowledge of different literatures, publishing experience, networks, and so on.
7. For those for whom tenure is important, inquire of the various academic institutions—preferably before you join them and assuming that you have a choice—whether the tenure evaluation places more emphasis on impact than on quantity and whether the school accepts qualitative research as valid.

By now you might perceive IQ research as having an unacceptably low “return-to-risk” ratio. Thus, it seems useful to reiterate some of its potential advantages.

Qualitative research can allow you to produce a combination of the following intellectual outputs:

- *Theory articles*: Even if you fail to publish IQ research because of lack of sufficient supporting data, the novel insights from the limited data can still spark your imagination to write theory papers that suggest new areas for research and new hypotheses to test (e.g., Sutton, 1997) that the academic community also values.
- *Managerial articles*: You can also publish a managerial version in practitioner-related journals such as *Harvard Business Review*, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, or *Stanford California Management Review* (e.g., Huy & Mintzberg, 2003).
- *Books*: If the above fails, you can still publish your qualitative research as a book. Hugely successful books such as *In Search of Excellence*, *Good to Great*, and *Built to Last* relied mainly on qualitative cases to “infer” conclusions that many practitioners found useful.
- *Cases for teaching*: In addition to all the intellectual outputs above, you can also produce one or several cases to teach. This will allow you to reach a different audience, such as students and more practitioner-oriented readers.
- *Emotional benefits*: For some people, it is actually “fun” to go out to talk to people and learn about the “real” and evolving world rather than making unrealistic assumptions sitting in one’s academic ivory tower and playing with computers all day long.
- *Teaching and consulting benefits*: When you teach students or do consulting work, you can claim with authenticity that you have been “out there.” Your examples will come to life, boosting your credibility as a seasoned management professor, instead of students and managers stereotyping you as an ivory-tower, managerially irrelevant academic.

To summarize, doing qualitative research can bring a number of significant benefits, but it also carries the risks that I have described above. I hope I have given you a relatively balanced view of this genre of research, and I hope that some of you will adopt this method (while using other research methods, as I also do) for the right type of research questions and with realistic expectations as to what IQ research can and cannot do.

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