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Emerald

Qualitative Research
in Organizations
and Management

The handicap of lists, QROM and the future

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Manuscripts

Review

The handicap of lists, *QROM* and the future

Purpose: This short article considers the contribution that this journal has made to the development of qualitative research over the ten years of *QROM*'s lifetime and its potential to contribute further in the future.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach: Reflections are made from the author's standpoint as a longstanding associate editor of *QROM* and a UK academic in the field of accounting.

Findings: Concern is expressed about the way in which the use of a particular journal list in UK institutions – namely the ABS list – has skewed development away from qualitative research during the hitherto lifetime of *QROM* but how, despite that handicap, *QROM* has made a notable contribution.

Originality/ Value: A reflection informed by both the disciplinary and geographical context as well as ten years' service as an Associate Editor of this journal.

The handicap of lists, *QROM* and the future**Introduction**

I am delighted to have received this invitation to comment on the development of qualitative research over the last ten years, the contribution made by *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management (QROM)* in that period and a prospective agenda for the future. I will address each of these areas in turn from the perspective of someone who has been an associate editor of *QROM* since its inception and who is working in the UK in the discipline of accounting. Reflections like this can only ever be partial, so my initial comments will discuss a handicap to *QROM* before I proceed to draw out two of the important contributions that I believe *QROM* to have made and then I suggest ways in which those contributions may advance further along with expression of another emergent agenda item for qualitative researchers. I will end with an aspiration for the future.

Qualitative research development since 2006

Looking back to 2006, qualitative research had made inroads in a number of management disciplines. A useful yardstick was provided by members of the business and management (B&M) panel of the 2001 research assessment exercise (RAE) that indicated that a number of disciplines – including: Accounting; Information Systems; Marketing; Organizational theory; Strategic Management; and Technology, innovation and operations management – exhibited evidence of qualitative research and alternative epistemological positions to positivism (Bessant *et al*, 2003). For example, my own discipline of accounting had developed a highly respected “alternative academic super-structure” of conferences and journals which were of at least of equal standing to those containing more conventional, quantitative research (Guthrie and Parker, 2004, p 10) and which embraced qualitative research, the underlying intellectual frameworks and the challenging questions that such work facilitated. Guthrie and Parker’s view reflected the comments of the 2001 RAE B&M panel who found that “The UK produces accounting research that is clearly world class, but ... being world class in accounting research is not identical to having impact on US research” (Bessant *et al*, 2003, p 56). In the accounting discipline, the alternative academic super-structure continues to allow qualitative research to make an important contribution as represented by others’ reviews of the field (for examples, Humphrey, 2014; Parker, 2012).

In the UK context there was, however, a development that has hindered qualitative research across the full range of management disciplines; that was the gradual emergence of the Association of Business School’s guide to journal quality – hereafter the “ABS List” - from 2004 (Nedeva, Boden & Nugroho, 2012). Official assessments of quality, such as the RAE, rely on panel members’

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3 painstaking reading and comparison of articles; by contrast, the ABS List encourages reading quality
4 from a ranking given to the journals in which that work is published. The methodology used to
5 compile the ABS List has always been quite opaque, but there is some evidence that aggregate
6 citations of a journal influence its rank. This creates two kinds of bias against new journals that
7 publish qualitative research. Firstly, new journals have less history, so citations will be lower.
8 Secondly, qualitative journals publish work from a broad range of epistemological stances, which
9 leads to those articles being cited less frequently than ones that promote a narrow focus by
10 upholding a positivist pursuit of single truths. American journals that lean towards positivism
11 dominate the highest rankings in the ABS List, even though research quality audit panels state world
12 class research does not equate with publishing in American journals. Unfortunately, the ABS List has
13 been used in a number of UK Management and Business Schools as a proxy for the quality of articles
14 when considering new appointments and promotions. This practice has discouraged UK academics
15 from publishing in newer qualitative journals such as *QROM*.

Contribution made by *QROM*

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27 The contribution made by *QROM* would warrant a systematic review of its entire contents
28 that space constraints prevent and a summary of its coverage has been provided recently elsewhere
29 (Lee & Cassell, 2013, p 128). Instead, I will draw out two particular contributions that I believe
30 *QROM* to have facilitated in quite outstanding ways. Firstly, insider accounts that entail researchers
31 using their intimate knowledge of their own cultural context to elaborate on academic life: Insider
32 accounts were generally confined to edited collections such as those by Bryman (1988) and
33 Humphrey and Lee (2004). *QROM* established a special section for insider accounts and although
34 very few articles have been published in the Insider Accounts section, its presence has encouraged a
35 wealth of substantive articles that have reflected critically on the practice of being an academic –
36 whether it be through autoethnographies or insider-informed accounts of research (Johnson, 2014;
37 Sanders-McDonagh, 2014), teaching (Humphreys, 2006) or more general academic practice (Haynes,
38 2011) – or in providing accounts of how research projects developed (Llewellyn & Northcott, 2007).
39 Such work escapes from prescriptions of how academic work should be conducted, to illuminations
40 of the real quandaries, challenges and triumphs of being an academic and – in my view – can provide
41 a whole lot more assistance in inducting new academics, or reassuring them that their experiences
42 are not isolated incidents caused through some fault of their own, than any amount of textbooks or
43 “pedagogic” contributions on how to use a particular method or technique that are found in some
44 methods journals.
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3 Secondly, *QROM* has played a key role in discussions of how new technologies may be
4 employed to help develop research methods and enhance understanding of organizations.
5 Examples of this include Davison, McLean and Warren's (2012) exemplary collection of different
6 articles in a special themed issue on the use of a range of visual methods, Pritchard and Whiting's
7 (2012) articulation of a variety of sources of data available from the internet in e-research and
8 Corrigan and Beaubien's (2013) application of Goffman's dramaturgical framework to internet based
9 research. If anyone needs convincing how innovative *QROM* has been in this respect, they should
10 review the content of the research methods journals that journal "quality" lists rank highly and see
11 the extent to which these issues have been covered in those journals up to now and when such
12 coverage occurs. If there has been a benefit to *QROM* of many UK academics shying away from
13 publishing in newer journals because of journal rankings, it is that the authors that write for it come
14 from across the world. The discussion of innovative ideas and articles written by authors from
15 different continents are surely signs of a high quality journal. If only those responsible for compiling
16 lists spent a little more time reading the journals that they rank!
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29 **Future agenda**

30 In considering an agenda for the future, I would suggest that *QROM* continues doing what it
31 has always done so well. In relation to insider accounts, I have often attended conference sessions
32 on research methods where papers are delivered by people who have just completed a PhD. It is
33 clear that the authors have tried to apply a method religiously and become frustrated when the
34 situation demands that they adapt their method to specific circumstances. So, they claim to have
35 come up with a new method rather than a different application. We could all learn from them if
36 they wrote reflexive accounts of limits to methods that weave in discussions of ethics, access,
37 demands for theoretical development, etc., that face us all in the course of empirical studies. The
38 "insider accounts" section of *QROM* appears an ideal publication outlet for such work.
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45 In relation to the use of new technologies, there is considerable scope for further
46 development and – in some cases – fusion with existing methods. For examples, areas not yet
47 considered sufficiently include how: (i) Skype facilities make interviewing possible across great
48 distances; (ii) digital conferencing tools such as *Vidyo* could facilitate group interviews from
49 dispersed sites, as well as allowing greater collaboration between researchers who may be based at
50 different sites in multi-site ethnographies; and (iii) organizations' use of digital tracker tools generate
51 meanings for those organizations. There will no doubt be other technological developments that
52 *QROM's* readers and contributors will wish to consider in future.
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3 A future agenda could also include glocalistic – as a fusion of local and global – issues in
4 research. Glocalistic research may be distinguished from cross-cultural research in two ways. Firstly,
5 unlike cross-cultural research, it does not necessarily involve a comparison between empirical
6 evidence collected in different countries, but instead involves a researcher moving between two
7 countries to use ideas and methods developed in one country to research in another and is likely to
8 involve translation from one language to another to operationalise the ideas developed in one
9 country in the second country and then translate the data back into the other language. Secondly,
10 glocalistic research infers relationships of domination and subordination. English-speaking countries
11 have attracted many research students and academics who are confronted by numerous issues
12 around interpretation of language and the appropriateness of particular theories and views of
13 ontology and epistemology when conducting research in their country of origin. If research is not to
14 become a means of intellectual imperialism, it is essential that intellectual instruments of the
15 glocalisation process are reflected on and understood. The plurality of *QROM* makes it an ideal
16 journal for that.
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27 **Concluding comment**

28 I have reflected on how, despite the handicap of lists, *QROM* has made notable
29 contributions in its ten years of publication. My hope is that by the time of the 20th anniversary
30 edition of *QROM*, I have celebrated the demise of lists such as that associated with the ABS so that
31 more of my colleagues in the UK work to a maxim of producing the best possible work and
32 submitting it to the most appropriate journal.
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