Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: Ten years on

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Introduction

Just ten years ago we proudly introduced a new journal Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: an International Journal to the world with the statement that "We are delighted to be involved in the production of such a journal, and believe it is a much needed and useful addition to the organization and management field" (Cassell and Symon, 2006: 1). We grandly stated that "In providing this outlet for high quality qualitative research, we wish to encourage an increased recognition of the significance and value of qualitative research in the organization and management field and continue its development both methodologically and epistemologically" (Cassell and Symon, 2006: 10). We also emphasised the need for such a publication given the invisibility of qualitative research within the field more generally and highlighted our intention to establish a journal that would both showcase excellent qualitative research and provide a forum where qualitative researchers from all over the world could discuss their work and share their experiences.

Ten years later we are equally proud of what the journal has achieved, though also somewhat reflective as we retire from our editorial roles and hand the journal over to the incoming editorial team. In this short article we reflect upon what we believe the journal has achieved so far, and highlight some of the challenges that lie ahead for qualitative researchers in our field. We also introduce the invited commentaries that follow in this special issue, where those who have been involved in QROM over the years offer their views about the key issues

and challenges facing qualitative researchers and comment upon the future of qualitative management and organisational research. It is not our intention here to provide a review of what has been published in the journal over the years, although some of our contributors do provide useful overviews. Rather, we want to take the opportunity before we stand down to celebrate what the journal has achieved so far and consider its prospects for the future.

Reflections on the editorial process

Setting up a new journal is fraught with tensions and challenges and QROM has been no different. The ongoing challenge of securing excellent qualitative articles that meet the journal's aims and objectives has proved a demanding one. The struggle of finding good reviewers who will review qualitative papers using appropriate criteria is one we anticipated, but we have found a welcoming community of academic scholars out there wanting to help. Throughout these editorial challenges during the last ten years we have been supported by a superb team of Associate Editors who have not only assisted us in dealing with papers submitted, but also importantly helped us shape the flavour of the journal. Their input has been invaluable and we thank them sincerely for their contributions. We are also grateful for the important contribution of our Editorial Advisory Board in reviewing papers in an open-minded fashion and for the ongoing, daily support from the team at Emerald Publishing Group.

Editing a journal comes with some responsibility and we have tried to take this seriously. Our aim is that those submitting to QROM receive constructive feedback on their papers regardless of whether they go into the review process or otherwise. As Katrina Pritchard says in her contribution that follows, when submitting to QROM the assumption is that the author will get a fair hearing. Our intention has been to build an international community of

qualitative scholars in an academic environment that can sometimes be both unfamiliar and unfriendly. Hence we want to support qualitative researchers rather than undermine their efforts. As Ann Cunliffe and Karen Locke suggest in this issue, QROM is a journal that offers rich opportunities for qualitative researchers to learn their craft, something we hope will continue.

The journal is also international, and has become increasingly international during the last ten years as its reach has expanded. In the last year alone we received submissions from over twenty different countries. A key player in the development of this international qualitative research community has been the biennial QROM conference hosted by Ann Cunliffe and Karen Locke at the University of New Mexico. As well as promoting the journal and bringing the community together, this conference has served to produce some of the most insightful special issues that the journal has published. Carefully edited by Ann and Karen – together with Steve Linstead - these themed issues have highlighted the diversity of qualitative research and the contemporary challenges that are taxing qualitative researchers. We are indebted to them for their support for the journal during the last ten years and indeed the final two papers in this issue come from the most recent QROM conference which took place in 2014.

Methodological diversity and novelty

A particular commitment of ours has been that the content of QROM both demonstrates and promotes the diversity of qualitative research. One of the issues that emerges from the contributions that follow is the recognition of the variety of methodological and philosophical approaches that come under the umbrella term of qualitative research. As editors we have

sought to both cherish and encourage that diversity. QROM has championed new and emerging approaches in the organization and management field, as well as critiquing well-rehearsed approaches, for example the special issues on visual methods (Davison, McLean and Warren, 2012) and case studies (Lee, Collier and Cullen, 2007). The journal has also contributed to discussions of important and neglected topics, for example the special issues on knowing, learning and acting in healthcare (Bosio, Graffigna and Scaratti, 2012) and dirty work (Grandy, Mavin and Simpson, 2014). Silvia Gheradi argues that one of the things that has distinguished QROM from other journals is the attention given to the application of qualitative methods to unusual topics, and there are many more to explore as Natasha Slutskaya highlights in her account. Our intention has been to highlight the potential that the wide variety of qualitative methods has to enable the investigation of different contemporary organisational phenomena. In highlighting the diversity of qualitative research we seek to encourage other researchers to use the techniques and become excited by the opportunities they offer. It has also enabled us to raise awareness of new methods as Davison, McLean and Warren suggest in their contribution to this issue.

Moreover our aim has been that QROM become a journal where diversity can be both expressed and celebrated. Paula Hyde uses the term 'polyvocal' in her contribution that follows, and we would contend that QROM is a journal where qualitative researchers from a variety of post-positivist perspectives can feel included and showcase their work.

Standardisation in the qualitative landscape

Inevitably we have seen some changes in the qualitative research landscape during the last ten years and one that has been particularly apparent to us – and is also discussed in a number of the commentaries that follow – is the increased pressure on qualitative researchers to

standardise their work and conform to a given set of quality criteria. The increased disciplining of qualitative researchers has not gone un-noticed in the more general methodological literature indeed Lather (2013: 635) describes how the field has become "centred, disciplined, regulated and normalized". Our concern has been to promote discussion of these trends, plus to seek to support those who resist them through the pages of QROM. These trends are manifested in a number of ways. Phil Johnson in the account that follows discusses the inappropriate lauding of neo-positivist criteriological assumptions of some commentators n articles published elsewhere (e.g. Bluhm, Harman, Lee and Mitchell, 2011) whilst Joanne Duberley highlights the dangers of a one best way approach to qualitative research methodology. Bill Lee discusses the implications of the methodological regulation that inevitably emerges as a result of artefacts like the UK Association of Business Schools (ABS) Journal Quality Guide and Yiannis Gabriel discusses his concerns about the emergence of the standard qualitative doctoral thesis.

In contributing to the debate about such pressures, our aim for the journal has been to expect and encourage high quality work but to be eclectic about precisely how that is made manifest. We would hope that the publication opportunities presented by QROM can off-set some of the negative impact of the standardisation of qualitative research that is happening elsewhere and concerns both us, our editorial team, and our contributors. However, as a journal we are also subject to the same disciplining processes as our authors. Indeed the fact that QROM is a 1 * journal on the ABS list likely deters some UK researchers from submitting to it. Hence this probably does undermine QROM's potential as a mechanism for legitimating qualitative research. So although we leave our editorial roles excited for the future of qualitative management and organizational research, we are somewhat tired by the ongoing challenges of dealing with journal quality lists, rankings, and resultant pressures to enhance citation counts.

As Editors we have also experienced tensions with our own criteriological assumptions. One potentially contentious issue of our editorship is that we have unequivocally sought to privilege both qualitative data and qualitative forms of data analysis. Some of the hardest decisions we have taken are about papers using qualitative forms of data collection where the data has been analysed and presented through some form of descriptive statistics, for example a frequency analysis. We have deliberated many times about such papers and have desk rejected most of them, though in some cases have gone back to the authors and asked if they are prepared to analyse their findings more discursively. This has led to some reflection on our part as clearly we have been excluding papers based on mixed methods – see Giampietro Gobo's contribution that follows. Our view has been that such papers may not benefit from or need the specialist support we have to offer. Throughout, our concern has been to promote the view that qualitative methods can stand on their own as a legitimate research design. The journal is unique in this respect, hence this is an editorial policy we have been keen to maintain. However, we recognise that this reflects our own epistemological assumptions about qualitative research; that our editorial decisions have excluded mixed methods designs; and that an alternative editorial team may have seen such papers in a different light.

Reflexivity

In our first editorial for the journal 10 years ago we suggested that "We are particularly welcoming of papers in which authors have engaged in a critical appraisal of their own research practices and recognise their own underlying assumptions and how this has shaped their work" (Cassell and Symon, 2006: 6). This statement has been embraced by our contributors and an enduring theme in the journal throughout the last ten years has been the encouragement of a reflexive stance towards qualitative research. This has been achieved in a

number of ways through the pages of QROM. Firstly, through the publication of a range of insider accounts where researchers talk about their experiences of conducting qualitative research. It is important that these accounts are not sanitised but rather present the process 'warts and all'. As Joanne Duberley says, there is an increasing recognition of the messiness of qualitative research and it is important that novice researchers are aware that complexity and ambiguity are the context within which they work. Hence insider accounts such as those in the special issue entitled 'Untold stories of the fields and beyond' (edited by Donnelly, Gabriel and Özkazanç-Pan, 2013) have been important in setting the agenda of the journal. As Grandy, Mavin and Simpson suggest in their contribution to this issue, QROM is a forum where there is space to discuss such things as the awkwardness of the research experience.

Secondly, the journal has carried a number of explicit discussions of reflexivity and how it can be interpreted (for example Haynes, 2011; Hibbert et al, 2006). Hence QROM has developed as a place where qualitative researchers can expose their reflexive concerns plus engage in debates with others in their community about the meaning and practice of reflexivity. Such discussion is important, because as Yiannis Gabriel cautions us in his account that follows, we should not be taking a mechanistic approach to reflexivity where qualitative researchers use it as some kind of checklist, but rather we need to take a more critical approach, seeking to expose some of the assumptions that underpin our own qualitative research practice.

Towards the future

Ten years on there is more evidence of published qualitative research within our field and the community of qualitative management and organizational researchers is growing (Üsdiken, 2014). Albert Mills in his account that follows suggests that qualitative research has gained

more adherents and legitimacy over the past decade whilst Michael Myers suggests that in relation to his own field of information systems research, the acceptance of qualitative research is increasing and qualitative researchers no longer need to apologise for their approach.

Although we clearly welcome this progress, we are comforted and inspired by the knowledge that the contributors to this special issue believe that there is still a need for a journal like QROM. In her contribution, Silvia Gheradi invites readers to look back over the first ten years of QROM, suggesting that we read things differently ten years later. We would encourage you to do the same. There is much in the content of QROM that can be re-discovered and resonates differently on a second reading.

In our first editorial we noted that QROM would come to nothing without the commitment of other qualitative researchers. As we suggested: "The main protagonists in this endeavour, however, are the researchers and practitioners who pursue qualitative research. Our goals depend on you as authors of high quality research and we, therefore, encourage your support through your submissions" (Cassell and Symon, 2006: 10). So our final thank you is to all of those who have supported the journal through their contributions during the last ten years. It has been an honour to read and deliberate on your work. We wish the new editorial team and everyone else involved in the journal all the best for its ongoing development and future success.

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