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Legitimizing Diverse Uses for Qualitative Research: A Rhetorical Analysis of Two Management Journals

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This paper examines how management researchers rhetorically construct the theoretical purpose and contribution of qualitative studies. By means of a rhetorical analysis of qualitative studies published in the *Academy of Management Journal* and *Journal of Management Studies*, we identify three sets of rhetorical practices, or repertoires, in the period 1999–2011. These repertoires differ with regard to how they position and legitimize the use of qualitative research. The first repertoire, which we label 'modernist', bases the legitimacy of qualitative research on its exploratory and theory-building strengths. The second 'revisionist' repertoire accepts key assumptions of modernism, but allows for an expanded role for qualitative research. In contrast, the third 'subversive' repertoire is non-positivist and rejects the traditional theory-building/-testing dichotomy. Using the insights from our 'rhetoric of science' approach, we argue for the use of alternative repertoires that decouple qualitative research from the rhetoric of exploration.

Introduction

Top-tier management journals require submissions to 'test, extend, or build strong theoretical frameworks' (*Academy of Management Journal*) and 'make a strong theoretical contribution' (*Journal of Management Studies*). The mission statements of both these journals are explicit that qualitative and not just quantitative approaches have a role to play in theory development.[1] But what sort of role? For what theoretical purpose(s) can qualitative research legitimately be used? In this paper, we accordingly analyse how authors represent and justify their use of qualitative research to develop theory. In doing so, we challenge the dominant modernist tradition that relegates qualitative research to discovery, exploration, induction and theory-building, and quantitative research to confirmation and theory-testing. Our argument is that adherence to these dualistic

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[1]We use 'theory development' as a general term to encompass theory-building, theory elaboration, theory-testing, theory construction and any other term to denote the theorizing process.

assumptions limits the potential for qualitative research to provide novel insights and contribute to theoretical debates. Instead, the aim in this paper is to contribute to a future for qualitative research that is more accepting of diverse views on the nature of knowledge production and the role that qualitative research can play within it.

By seeking to understand how qualitative researchers position their theoretical purpose and persuade readers that their chosen method advances it, we are interested in theorizing as 'a rhetorical enterprise' (Gross 1990, p. 6). Our view of theory is that it is the result of active 'construction' (to use the term proposed by Weick 1989) – a discursive and persuasive accomplishment – rather than the mirroring of reality (as suggested by positivists such as Eisenhardt 1989).[2] The choices that authors make in positioning and justifying their constructions are influenced by often implicit assumptions of those involved in the publishing process – assumptions held not just by authors themselves, but also by reviewers and editors. Legitimizing the theoretical purpose of a study and its contribution to knowledge is not an objective exercise, but is bound by epistemological considerations, as well as by the dominant methodological conventions and expectations of a scholarly community.

There is a dearth of prior literature on the rhetorical practices of qualitative researchers.[3] The only such study in management research is Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997). Our analysis is similar to theirs in that it is informed by the rhetoric of science (e.g. McCloskey 1998; Simons 1990). However, while they confine their analysis to introductions, we focus on a different feature of qualitative texts. Our concern is how authors rhetorically construct the theoretical purpose of their studies – not their actual theoretical contribution to their disciplinary field. Specifically, we analyse the stylistic, argumentative and presentational practices that qualitative researchers follow in legitimizing the theoretical purpose of a qualitative study. Doing so allows us to examine the dominant assumptions regarding the legitimate role of qualitative research in theory development.

The first step in developing our argument is to examine the broader methodological context in which qualitative researchers operate. Specifically, we trace a gradual shift over time in how influential methodological texts have conceived the role that qualitative research should play in theory development. Our reading of this history traces the origins of 'qualitative research equals theory generation' to the so-called modernist tradition in qualitative research methodology that held sway in post-war sociology departments until the late 1960s – and in business schools arguably for much longer. This tradition includes the development of grounded theory and the codification of the case study – the two dominant qualitative approaches in management research generally, and certainly in the journals and time period (1999–2011) analysed in this paper. We then show how recent methodological literature on grounded theory and the case study has reassessed modernist assumptions that relegate qualitative research to an exploratory role, and has proposed a new theoretical vocabulary for grounded theory and the case study.

We then turn to an analysis of qualitative research practice, and ask to what extent this move away from modernist assumptions and language can also be found in management publications. Our discussion is based on an in-depth rhetorical analysis of the *Academy of Management Journal* (*AMJ*) and *Journal of Management Studies* (*JMS*) from 1999 to 2011. We identify three sets of rhetorical practices, or repertoires, among qualitative studies in these journals: modernist, revisionist and subversive. By making the rhetorical strategies of each repertoire explicit, and juxtaposing alternatives, we hope to encourage greater diversity in the use of qualitative research for theory development.

Analytical approach

Our examination of qualitative research practice in this paper is itself qualitative. Specifically, we undertook a rhetorical analysis of qualitative-based empirical papers published in *AMJ* and *JMS* from the period 1999–2011. The empirical research article represents a distinct genre bound by common linguistic rules and conventions. We have chosen it because of its central influence on the modern academy (for a discussion, see e.g. Swales (1990)). The journal selection was driven by a desire to

[2]In this paper, we use 'positivism' as a general term (as do, for example, Johnson and Duberley 2000) to denote approaches that assume an objectivist epistemology and realist ontology. In this paper, we do not distinguish between different types of positivism, e.g. logical positivism, falsificationism and neo-empiricism.

[3]Given that in this paper we discuss the prevalence of 'gapspotting' techniques (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011), in the interests of reflexivity we acknowledge here that we are engaging in some gapspotting ourselves.

Table 1. Categories of articles in the Journal of Management Studies *(*JMS*) and* Academy of Management Journal *(*AMJ*), 1999–2011*

Categories	*JMS*	*AMJ*
Empirical articles	506	751
Quantitative articles	281	657
Mixed articles	14	18
Qualitative non-case-study articles	56	18
Qualitative case-study articles	139	49
Total number of qualitative (non-case and case-study) articles	**195**	**67**

capture qualitative research practices on both sides of the Atlantic (see Barry and Hansen (2008) for a discussion of transatlantic differences). This corpus allows insight into the 'state of the art' of qualitative research being published by the top management journal in Europe and its counterpart in the US.

We selected the period 1999–2011 for the analysis, guided by a number of considerations. First, one inspiration for the paper was a recent review of qualitative research practices in management journals (Bluhm *et al*. 2011). Bluhm and his co-authors provide a thought-provoking analysis, but we agree with their assessment that it could usefully be supplemented. They use a priori categories which do not accommodate non-positivist approaches. Moreover, they provide a different trade-off in terms of depth vs. breadth than we do by reviewing five journals (rather than the two in our review) by means of quantitative content analysis (rather than the in-depth textual analysis that we use). A second rationale for selecting this time period is that it captures signs of a tentative shift in attitudes towards qualitative research. As Bluhm *et al*. (2011) point out, the period after 1999 has been notable for the wider use and acceptance of qualitative research. Third, while we cover the same time period (1999–2008) as Bluhm *et al*. (2011), we also update it to include more recent publications.

The first challenge in our review was to identify all the qualitative articles that had been published in the selected time period. We categorized each article published in the two journals during the period under review according to whether it was conceptual or empirical; and, if empirical, whether it was quantitative, mixed or qualitative (whether case study or some other approach, see Table 1). We would argue that this approach allows us greater confidence in the results than had we used a keyword search. The classification resulted in 262 qualitative articles, which we then examined by means of a rhetorical analysis.

There is no single, standardized technique for the rhetorical analysis of scientific texts. The rhetoric of science is an eclectic, multidisciplinary field (Harris 1997) spanning literary criticism, cultural studies, linguistics, communication, philosophy and sociology. As a result of this diversity, there is little consensus on how a rhetorical analysis should be conducted: in particular, which textual features to study, what form of textual analysis to use and how to sample texts for analysis (Gross *et al*. 2002). Our approach took the form of an interpretive text analysis that went beyond the frequency counts of a priori categories characterizing traditional content analysis, and rather sought to analyse 'themes, meanings and patterns in textual data' (Gephart 1997, p. 585)[4] through an iterative process. In conducting a rhetorical analysis, the focus was on the persuasive aspects of texts; in other words, how authors convince their audience.

We began with an initial question as to whether and how authors used terms such as 'exploratory' and 'theory-building' to describe and justify their theoretical purpose. As the analysis developed, we realized that there were other relevant textual features by which authors persuade their readers about the legitimacy of how they have used qualitative research for theory development. As a result, we undertook a second round of analysis and close line-by-line reading of each text in order to explore these emergent insights. We consulted the literature on rhetorical analysis and found Gross *et al*.'s (2002) distinction between style, argumentation and presentation particularly useful for interrogating each text (see Table 2 for the main questions guiding the rhetorical analysis). We wrote a qualitative, open-ended memo about each article addressing the rhetorical features listed in Table 2. These memos did not just record the presence or absence of keywords and rhetorical features; rather, in line with an interpretive approach, we sought to retain the relevant text segment in which rhetorical strategies appeared (Seidel and Kelle 1995). In this way, the memos enabled us to record in-depth insights about the lin-

[4]Here, we are following Gephart (1997) in observing a distinction between (qualitative) interpretive textual analysis and (traditionally quantitative) content analysis. We acknowledge that not all qualitative researchers follow this distinction, and seek to reclaim the term 'qualitative content analysis'.

Table 2. Main questions for the rhetorical analysis

Rhetorical feature	Relevant questions
Style	1. Diction, i.e. what are the authors' word choices: do they explicitly use terms such as theory-building, exploratory, inductive, etc?
	2. Is the exploratory nature of the study regarded as a limitation? (i.e. apologetic rhetoric)
	3. Are there any figures of speech used when discussing the theoretical purpose/role of qualitative research?
	4. Are hedging, qualifying or amplifying words used?
Argumentation	5. Is the theoretical purpose made explicit? Does the author make the case for the suitability of qualitative research for this purpose?
	6. Are there any omissions or absences in the text (enthymemes, i.e. parts of the argument are missing as they are assumptions not made explicit)?
	7. What appeals to authority are there?
Presentation	8. Where in the text is the exploratory nature of the paper discussed, if at all?
	9. Do papers with an exploratory purpose have a gap-spotting introduction?
	10. Do papers with an exploratory purpose have a theory-building structure?

guistic repertoires used in each article, as well as enabling us to compare results across each article (Saldaña 2009).

Modern understandings of rhetoric regard it as a social practice: an 'intersubjective process of meaning making that . . . [represents] the advocacy of realities' (Engstrom 2010, p. 262). Given the social norms governing language use for academic writing, it is not a surprise that we found recurring patterns of style, argumentation and presentation in the data set. We term these patterns 'repertoires'. In doing so, we evoke the term 'interpretative repertoire' (or 'linguistic repertoire'), which was first coined by Gilbert and Mulkay (1982). A repertoire has been defined as 'broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions, common-places and figures of speech' (Potter *et al*. 1990, p. 212). The term has the advantage of capturing both the 'collectively shared social consensus' (Edley and Wetherell 2001, p. 443) underlying the use of these dominant linguistic patterns, as well as an individual's active agency in being able to choose among, and innovate in the use of, available repertoires. On the one hand, repertoires constrain individual rhetors, who follow them because of convention, social expectations or habit; on the other hand, individuals can deviate from typical patterns, experiment with existing routines and even switch (consciously or unconsciously) between repertoires.

As a result of the textual analysis, we identified three repertoires: the modernist, the revisionist and the subversive. It should be noted that we did not always find a consistent rhetorical positioning in the papers analysed. Six papers did not have a clear positioning of their theoretical purpose, so we excluded them from the more detailed analysis in this section. Also, we found that it was common for authors to mix – that is, draw on multiple – repertoires in the course of one paper. While we categorized each paper on the basis of what we judged to be its dominant repertoire, we acknowledge that multiple repertoires can be present even within a single article.

The prevalence of each repertoire in the two journals is presented in Table 3. From this table, it can be seen that we treated the articles as a single corpus for analysis, rather than seeking to track changes in rhetorical strategies over time. This would have required selecting a longer time period than we did, given the slow pace at which methodological habits change, as the literature review in the next section will show. While we did count the instances of each repertoire published per year within the period under investigation, this did not reveal any clear trends.

In line with an interpretive approach, we are not claiming that this is the most valid or unbiased reading of the corpus; other analysts might highlight textual features different from those we did. However, acknowledging the subjective nature of the textual reading does not mean that the analysis was unsystematic or untrustworthy. Rather, we sought to ensure a careful and thorough reading of each text. We did so by applying a standard set of questions across the texts, treating every text in a uniform manner and using multiple analysts. Given that we were a research team, one author was able to check the classification of articles by another. Any differences of opinion were jointly discussed and viewed as an opportunity to enrich our understanding rather than as a threat to reliability.

Before conducting the textual analysis, we undertook a review of the general literature on qualitative methodology. This allows us to place the qualitative articles that we analysed in their broader methodological context. These methodological trends form the context for the analysis (Selzer 2004), rather than

Table 3. The three repertoires in case and non-case studies in JMS *and* AMJ*, 1999–2011*

Type of article	Repertoire					
	Modernist		Revisionist		Subversive	
Case study articles *JMS*	59	53.2%	35	57.4%	45	50.0%
Case study articles *AMJ*	24	21.6%	17	27.9%	8	8.9%
Total cases	**83**	**74.8%**	**52**	**85.3%**	**53**	**58.9%**
Non-case-study articles *JMS*	15	13.5%	7	11.5%	34	37.8%
Non-case-study articles *AMJ*	13	11.7%	2	3.2%	3	3.3%
Total non-cases	**28**	**25.2%**	**9**	**14.7%**	**37**	**41.1%**
Grand total	**111**	**100.0%**	**61**	**100.0%**	**90**	**100.0%**

the disciplinary literature to which each paper is seeking to contribute. In the course of the first reading of the relevant methodological literature, we had already identified the importance of the 'modernist' tradition of qualitative research, and this informed the labelling of the repertoires. Having identified the repertoires in use, we conducted another reading of the literature, delineating the key trends corresponding to the three repertoires. We now turn to this second reading.

Modernist qualitative research and its reconstruction

In this section, we trace how methodological debates have evolved about the role that qualitative research can legitimately play in theory development. We commence with what we term, following Denzin and Lincoln (1994), 'modernist' qualitative research. The modernist period had its high point in the 1950s and 1960s, but still reverberates today. Grounded theory and the case study are the methodologies[5] on which we concentrate, given their popularity in management research (see Lee (1999) on the popularity of grounded theory and Piekkari *et al*. (2009) on the case study). By 'modernist' grounded theory, we mean the version(s) devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967); by 'modernist' case study, the positivist form articulated by Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1984, 2009) among others, and which Platt (1992) has shown is a major departure from earlier case-study traditions. The discussion in this section centres on how modernist justifications and assumptions, which base the legitimacy of qualitative research on its generative, exploratory role, have increasingly come under challenge. We therefore confine ourselves to modernist views on the theoretical purpose of qualitative research, rather than other aspects of doing research, such as choices for data collection.

Modernist grounded theory and the case study

We use *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the starting point, not only because it was the first sustained treatment of the theoretical potential of qualitative research; in addition, it continues to shape methodological thinking (Locke 2001). Despite its lasting influence, the book was very much a product of its time. The positivist overtones of *Discovery* have been widely discussed and critiqued (e.g. Fendt and Sachs 2008). Glaser and Strauss's defence of qualitative research reflected and reinforced the distinction between discovery and verification proposed by logical positivists, notably Hans Reichenbach (for a more recent articulation, see Hunt (2002)), and which was widely accepted by social scientists at the time. Glaser and Strauss (1967) did not question the discovery/verification distinction (Glaser was trained by Paul Lazarsfeld, who was heavily influenced by logical positivism), but rather attacked what they saw as the privileging of verification. Their book was an attempt 'to strengthen the mandate for generating theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 7).

In order to defend and codify theory generation, Glaser and Strauss also sought to resurrect the status of qualitative research. They rejected the notion – which they attribute to Lazarsfeld and his collaborators (e.g. Barton and Lazarsfeld 1961) – that qualitative research is just the 'preliminary, exploratory, groundbreaking work for getting surveys

[5]We refer to grounded theory and case studies as research strategies or methodologies; that is, the 'theory of how inquiry should proceed' (Schwandt 2001, p. 92). In doing so, we seek to distinguish them from the specific techniques and tools – the methods – for conducting inquiry.

started' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 15). Instead, Glaser and Strauss sought to promote the theoretical potential of qualitative research. In *Discovery*, they deliberately avoid the 'exploratory' tag as atheoretical and, instead, seek to emphasize the 'generative possibilities' of qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 17). At the same time, they assert that quantitative research can be used for theory generation.

In their book, Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 18) develop and use a 'rhetoric of generation' that is intended 'to balance out that of verification'. It is well known that Glaser and Strauss's rhetoric of generation is highly inductivist. Their 'comparative method' enables the 'systematic *discovery* of the theory from the data of social research' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 3; our emphasis). The starting point of the comparative method is to enter the field 'without any preconceived theory that dictates, prior to the research, "relevancies" in concepts and hypotheses' (p. 33). Conceptual categories and the relationships between them must rather be allowed to 'emerge' from the data. This rhetoric has continued to exert considerable influence – perhaps because of, not in spite of, its positivist and objectivist framing (see, e.g. Stebbins (2001) for a recent example).

Eisenhardt (1989), whose influence on qualitative management research rivals that of Glaser and Strauss (Ravenswood 2011),[6] also borrows heavily from Glaser and Strauss, and she regards herself as complementing their original manifesto. She cites the 1967 book 12 times in her paper, and acknowledges that she has sourced some key concepts from it. Her debt is perhaps even greater than she concedes, given that her roadmap is couched in modernist rhetoric similar to that of Glaser and Strauss in their original 1967 book. She agrees that 'theory-building research is begun as close as possible to the ideal of no theory under consideration and no hypotheses to test' (Eisenhardt (1989, p. 536), and that existing theoretical concepts can be a source of bias. She also makes the same empiricist argument that permeates *Discovery*; namely, that theories 'grounded' in empirical data are more likely to withstand testing: 'The likelihood of valid theory is high because the theory-building process is so intimately tied with evidence' (Eisenhardt (1989, p. 547).

While Eisenhardt accepts the binary divide between theory generation and verification, she does make some important modifications. First, she deepens the divide by insisting that the former is the preserve of qualitative (or at most, mixed method) case studies, while the latter should be conducted by means of large-scale hypothesis testing. A second modification lies in her depiction of discovery and verification as sequential – although complementary – stages in the research process, rather than two distinct (even rival) approaches to theorizing. Yet at the same time, she subtly downplays the degree of exploration and induction involved in theory-building, breaking with Glaser and Strauss by advocating 'a priori specification of constructs' (Eisenhardt (1989, p. 536).

Revising grounded theory: Straussian pragmatism and abduction

The modernist tradition in qualitative research has, in turn, come under challenge, and there has been increasingly a questioning and 'repositioning' of grounded theory (Bryant and Charmaz 2007). The first important contribution was from Strauss himself who, together with his co-author Corbin (Strauss and Corbin 1994), provides a self-critical assessment of the original book. Caught up in the need for 'rhetorical' persuasiveness, he and Glaser 'overplayed the inductive aspects' in *Discovery* and 'greatly underplayed both the potential role of extant (grounded) theories and the unquestionable fact (and advantage) that trained researchers are theoretically sensitized' (Strauss and Corbin 1994, p. 277). In redressing this imbalance in his later work, Strauss's revisions go further than Glaser could tolerate; this, in fact, was the main source of disagreement between the two of them. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 35) regard existing literature as a potential 'stimulus' to research; a review of the literature can yield topics that have been under-researched or that require further clarification. Glaser (1992, p. 31), in contrast, is adamant that '[t]here is a need not to review any of the literature in the substantive area under study'. Glaser has remained steadfastly, even stridently, inductivist in his approach.

[6]The other important influence on the modernist case study, Yin (1984), does not draw inspiration from grounded theory, referring to Glaser and Strauss's classic only once, and in later editions of his book he is keen to differentiate the case study from grounded theory (e.g, Yin 2009). His intellectual debt (unsurprisingly given his training as an experimental psychologist) lies rather with Donald Campbell, who as well as being an authority on social experiments did turn his attention to qualitative research (Campbell 1975). Yin differs from Eisenhardt in that he advocates multiple purposes for the case study – however, his 'exploratory' case study is more widely used than his 'explanatory' version.

Neither Glaser nor Strauss reflected extensively on the philosophy of science underpinning their rhetorical styles and methodological approaches (Bryant and Charmaz 2007), although some statements of their divergent allegiances can be found. Glaser (1992, p. 7) sees himself as operating within the Lazarsfeldian tradition in which he was trained, asserting that 'the fundamentals of Grounded Theory . . . are in very large measure drawn from the analytic methodology and procedures of inductive quantitative methodology' pioneered at Columbia University in the 1950s and 1960s. In his later work with Corbin (Strauss and Corbin 1994), Strauss explicitly repudiates positivism and aligns himself with the American pragmatist tradition that was his intellectual heritage. Accordingly, they state that 'truth is 'enacted' (p. 279) and research is 'interpretive work' (p. 274; see also Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 22).

This link between Strauss's later work and its pragmatist roots has been emphasized by a variety of authors who argue that Strauss's position could be characterized as abductive rather than inductive. The concept of 'abduction', first proposed by the pragmatist philosopher Charles Peirce, provides a means of reconceptualizing the relationship between theory and data. Abduction as a form of scientific inference is triggered by the 'surprise' that occurs when an observation does not fit prior conceptions or hypotheses (van Maanen *et al*. 2007). Authors have argued that grounded theory is compatible with the concept of abduction; that it had abductive elements 'from the start' (Reichartz 2007, p. 215) and that there is merit in a 'methodological reconstruction' of grounded theory as an abductive approach to research (Haig 1995).

Constructivist approaches

In recent years, critical, constructivist and interpretive research methodologies – such as critical discourse analysis, postmodernism and hermeneutics – have gained increasing attention. These approaches have already been extensively reviewed elsewhere (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009; Prasad 2005), so our contribution is rather to show how they have provided a reconstruction of the modernist traditions of grounded theory and the case study. This has led to sustained questioning of the exploratory purposes associated with qualitative research, as well as dualisms associated with theorizing (e.g. theory-building vs. testing). Non-positivist approaches view scientific inquiry – at least in the social sciences – as an interpretive, reflexive process. Accordingly, authors working in these traditions position their theoretical contributions as being (critical) interpretation, deconstruction and even emancipation – but not exploration.

Charmaz (2006) is the most prominent author who has sought to rescue the analytical strategies of grounded theory from its 'objectivist' roots. In her 're-visioning', grounded theory is doubly interpretive: both data and analysis are social constructions. Rather than 'emerging' in an unproblematic way from the data, theory is acknowledged to be the product of the researcher's subjective interpretations. The categories generated from coding and analysis are 'interpretive frames' (Charmaz 2006, p. 140), not potentially predictive statements. Theories are produced, not discovered. Data, too, are not slices of reality, but rather the co-construction of meaning by the researcher and participant. Neutrality and lack of bias are not possible, no matter how well-trained researchers are or rigorous their methods. Charmaz (2006) rejects the notion of induction and, like other revisionists, prefers the abductive label.

Just as grounded theory has been reinterpreted by later generations of scholars, alternatives to the modernist version of the case study have appeared in the methodological literature (for a recent review, see Welch *et al*. (2011)). Stake (1995) is an early and influential advocate of a constructivist approach to case studies. He is critical of those who frame the case study as an instrument for drawing general inferences from the particular (Stake 1995), insisting on the value of studying the particular and appreciating the 'intrinsic value' of the case. However, compared with the literature on grounded theory, there have been relatively few constructivist reinterpretations of the case study.

To conclude our reading of the methodological literature, we have traced how modernist traditions are not just being challenged from the outside by anti-positivist alternatives, but, importantly, are also being revised from within. The traditional insistence on the theoretical purposes of exploration and inductive theory-building has given way to greater pluralism and paradigmatic diversity. Modernist rhetoric is being challenged and replaced. The question now remains: to what extent have these developments been absorbed by management researchers? Do we see greater diversity in how management researchers position their theoretical purpose? Have management researchers publishing in key journals in the field escaped from modernist rhetoric?

Results

This section discusses the three repertoires – which we term modernist, revisionist and subversive – that were found in qualitative studies published in *AMJ* and *JMS*. We find that the methodological trends analysed above are reflected to some extent in empirical studies: the first two repertoires have their roots in the modernist tradition of qualitative research and its variants, while the third repertoire draws on constructivist approaches. Numerically, the modernist repertoire was the most popular, although it did not represent an absolute majority, comprising 42% of the corpus. The discussion of each repertoire in this section is separated into the three types of linguistic resources on which the analysis centred: style, argumentation and presentation. As well, we pay particular attention to the tensions and inconsistencies within and between the three repertoires.

Category no. 1: modernist repertoire (n = 111)

Authors who draw on this repertoire use similar vocabulary for legitimizing and framing the theoretical purpose of their studies to that found in key modernist texts. They see qualitative research as suited to exploration as opposed to theory-testing. However, they tend not to follow the fine distinctions observed by some methodological authorities – for example, Glaser and Strauss's preference for 'generation' over 'exploration' – but rather use terms such as exploration, induction and theory-building synonymously. In this category, 83 out of the 111 articles were case studies.

Style. The language of induction, exploration of the new, emergence from the data and theory-building predominate in this repertoire. Positivist jargon, such as 'bias' or 'internal and external validity', is still influential in establishing the scientific rigour of qualitative research (e.g. Rasmussen *et al*. 2011). However, we did find authors who personalize their accounts through the use of personal pronouns (see Snejenova 2005), which suggests some overlap between the modernist and the subversive repertoires.

Authors drawing on this repertoire may also set up an explicit contrast between theory-building and induction, on the one hand, and theory-testing and deduction, on the other. For instance, Zhao *et al*. (2005, p. 137) specify that 'we are developing theory through inductive study *rather than* testing propositions drawn from existing theory' (our emphasis). Noda and Collis (2001) distinguish between inductive frameworks derived on the basis of in-depth empirical research and deductive models validated through hypothesis testing.

Such papers might also end on an almost apologetic note about their contribution: 'Of course, these conclusions being purely exploratory, further research is needed to confirm them' (Bouty 2000, p. 64). Authors' apologetic rhetoric chiefly revolves around the nature and number of the cases selected, or the way in which context is an obstacle to generalizability:

> The cases present a limited set of decisions from which to generalize. The selection of cases was biased; only cases with societally desirable outcomes were presented. The sample was designed to be homogeneous, in consonance with methods for developing grounded theory. (Meszaros 1999, pp. 993–994).

> Although these propositions provide rich insight into the development of joint ventures, the context within which the propositions were developed have to be kept in mind. The contextual factors set the boundaries of generalizability and thus limit the extent to which this framework will be able to predict beyond the contextual limits. (Büchel 2000, p. 655).

Some studies (both case studies and other forms of qualitative research) explicitly state that they followed a grounded theory methodology, but this was modernist grounded theory rather than its more recent variants. As an example, the following quote clearly echoes Glaser and Strauss's version of grounded theory. Theoretical insights are discovered in the data through an inductive process, without surrendering the ultimate goal of generalizability:

> Since a grounded theory approach is dedicated to the discovery of relevant categories and relationships that develop new theoretical outlooks, we were cognizant and cautious to ensure that our findings were indeed entrenched in the real-life observations . . . [W]e adhered to the doctrine of 'discovery as our purpose', while respecting the need to triangulate and validate our theory building in order to enhance generalizability and transferability of our results. (Pablo *et al*. 2007, p. 694)

The influence of grounded theory goes beyond the papers that are explicitly positioned as following this methodology. Even those authors who do not

explicitly state that they are applying a grounded theory methodology might describe their approach to data analysis as 'having followed a grounded theory approach' (Lee *et al*. 2000, p. 1215; see also Büchel 2000, p. 643); or authors might describe their analytical process as being '*equivalent* to "open coding" as performed in grounded theory' (Balogun and Johnson 2004, p. 527; our emphasis). Alternatively, the theory-building process is portrayed as resembling grounded theory, even though 'it does not adhere rigidly to either the precepts or the methods' (Tengblad 2006). As well as using grounded theory rhetoric, authors adhere to a description of the analytical process as being solely or largely inductive.

Argumentation. Among the articles in which a modernist repertoire dominates, the suitability of a qualitative approach to exploratory research objectives is very much taken for granted. Most authors do not feel the need to justify why qualitative methods are suited to exploratory research, or why their studies are best described as exploratory. For authors who discuss this explicitly, there is little choice but to select qualitative methods:

> there is a lack of research on [the topic] . . ., suggesting that a more exploratory/theory building approach is appropriate. (Beverland 2005, p. 1008)

> we adopted a grounded, interpretive approach for the purpose of exploratory richness, as little theoretical precedent exists for deductive inquiry in this domain. (Nag *et al*. 2007, p. 827)

> we took an inductive multiple case study approach for this study . . . because the study seeks to explore new theoretical ground. Doing so in an emerging market context requires field work, since theories and research instruments developed and used in developed markets may not be readily applicable in an emerging market context. (Zhao *et al*. 2005, p. 135)

The emphasis on exploration and novelty could give rise to contradictions and inconsistencies within this repertoire. Authors justify their approach on the basis that they are filling a research gap or studying an unexplored research problem or phenomenon. However, in mature areas of research, it is perhaps debatable as to whether 'exploration' is an appropriate figure of speech. As Alvesson and Sandberg (2011, p. 249) have argued in their critique of 'gap-spotting', typically it is not that the research area is actually unexplored or even neglected; authors are rather adding to existing literature. But given the inductivist logic on which the modernist repertoire is based, there is little choice but to present the starting point as being little or insufficient theory.

Presentation. Another tension we found in this repertoire related to the reporting of an inductive study. In their 1967 book, Glaser and Strauss (1967) point out the 'internalized professional mandates' that compel researchers not just to devote their energies to testing theory, but also to writing according to the 'verification rhetoric' (p. 7). They note how even qualitative researchers who might be generating theory nevertheless use verificationalist terms and underplay the generative aspects of their work. Forty-five years later, authors are now using generative terminology, but may still write up their papers deductively (see e.g. Busby 2006).

There were variations on this pattern. While some authors present their findings in a traditional deductive format with the research questions, literature review and even the model that emerged from the data placed upfront, they point out that this is the reverse of the actual research process. Edwards and Ram (2006, p. 901) provide a framework early in their paper, but they specify this 'emerged through empirical inquiry'. Others attempt to reflect the research process in the way they structure the paper. Thus, Pratt *et al*. (2006, p. 236), who explicitly take a grounded theory approach, place much of their literature review after the findings section: 'Because our interest was in building and enriching theory, the bulk of our theory lies at the end of the paper'.

Authors in this repertoire rely heavily on visual representations to communicate their theoretical contribution. The visual language of exploration and theory-building is manifested in models or figures that depict the 'emergent' structure of data (such as first-order categories, second-order themes and overarching dimensions). Such visual representations were replicated by other qualitative authors using this repertoire (e.g. Creed *et al*. 2010; Dacin *et al*. 2010; Nag *et al*. 2007; Pandza 2011).

Category no. 2: revisionist repertoire (n = 61)

Authors making use of a revisionist repertoire do not explicitly challenge the assumption that theorizing is the progression from discovery to verification, but they nonetheless redefine the role for qualitative research in this process. They position qualitative

research as suited to later stages of the theory development process, such as theory refinement or testing. To this extent, they are challenging the assumption, well entrenched in the modernist repertoire, that the role for qualitative research is exploratory theory-building. The papers that we coded as having this as their dominant repertoire were mostly case studies (52 papers compared with 9). They included articles whose authors claimed to be from an interpretive paradigm, as well as those following a more traditional, positivist approach. Compared with the modernist repertoire, this category is internally more diverse.

Style. Modernist vocabulary is still evident in this repertoire, with authors drawing on terminology such as 'grounded', even though they are not strictly following grounded theory, and they selectively apply Eisenhardt's theory-building roadmap. However, alongside traditional terminology, there was also experimentation with new terms, and a search for more appropriate descriptions. One strategy in use is a rhetoric of contrasts; in other words, to state what the purpose is *not*:

> We adopted a looser design than a precise hypothesis-testing one, but we did not adopt a 'grounded theory' strategy. (Ferlie *et al*. 2005, p. 119)

> Of the two inductive methodologies, grounded theory and analytic induction, we chose analytic induction . . . (Bansal and Roth 2000, p. 719).

> The aim of this study was *theory elaboration*, obviating the need for theory generation through a purely inductive, grounded analysis. (Maitlis 2005, p. 23)

These three quotations are similar to the extent that the authors are all at pains to differentiate their approach from grounded theory. The authors of the first quotation are not very precise about their approach, simply designating it as being not straightforwardly inductive. It was common for revisionist authors to take this approach and similarly avoid the term 'exploration' when denoting their theoretical purpose, instead stating that they are seeking to 'refine', 'augment', 'extend', 'build on' or 'follow' existing theory – with 'extend' the most common option (see e.g. Benjamin and Goclaw 2005; Chreim *et al*. 2007; Jarzabkowski 2008; Lok 2010; Tyrrall and Parker 2005).

Turning to the second and third quotations above, what is striking is that the authors attempt to provide a label for their alternative approach: analytical induction or theory elaboration. 'Analytic induction' is a term with a long history. Glaser and Strauss (1967) critique the concept in their book, but it has been revived by Bansal and Roth (2000). 'Theory elaboration', the term that Maitlis (2005) uses above, is a concept popularized by Lee *et al*. (1999). They position theory elaboration in-between generation and testing: pre-existing theory informs the research design, although formal hypotheses are not proposed as in a theory-testing study. Other *AMJ* studies also make use of the term – perhaps not unsurprisingly, given that Lee was an editor of the journal.

Two sets of authors (Harryson *et al*. 2008; Zander and Zander 2005) describe their approach as 'abductive', stressing the movement between theory and empirical data. Some authors do not explicitly use the term abduction, but instead stress that their studies contained both inductive and deductive elements:

> Our approach was and is also partly deductive (theory inspired) and partly inductive (data inspired). (Denis *et al*. 2001, p. 812)

> The study was deductive in the sense that theoretical perspectives serve as guidelines for data collection and analysis and it was inductive because the understanding of the phenomena was advanced on the basis of empirical findings. (Pajunen 2006, p. 1266)

Others leave behind induction altogether and resort to a theory-testing rhetoric throughout their paper. This could come in the form of proposing explicitly worded hypotheses or propositions (Carr 2005; Filatotchev and Toms 2006; Glynn and Lounsbury 2005), using the language of hypothesizing (e.g. 'lead us to hypotheize that . . .'; see Edwards *et al*. (2005)) or, more loosely, articulating a set of expectations (thus Czaban and Whitley 2000 repeat phrases such as 'We expected that' five times in the introductory part of their paper). Interestingly, none of these authors is defensive or apologetic about the use of qualitative research for these non-exploratory purposes.

Argumentation. The distinctiveness of argumentation in this repertoire relates to how authors justify their engagement with prior theory. The authors we found who explicitly seek to position themselves as

not undertaking 'pure' grounded theory make the argument that this resulted in stronger theory development – or at the very least, a more efficient analytical process:

> Pure induction was balanced against early structure, to avoid the peril of 'drowning in data'. (Ferlie *et al*. 2005, p. 119)

> The positive argument, with which we identify, is for an iterative approach to complex issues wherein a priori theorizing lends direction to an investigation but does not constrain the development of fresh ideas. (Harvey and Denton 1999, p. 899)

The incorporation of prior theory is presented as an advantage, and something that 'can provide the foundation for a new study' (Maitlis 2005, p. 23). Of all the authors drawing on this repertoire, Jacobides (2005, p. 468) is perhaps the most forceful in presenting his 'inductive study' as incorporating the best of both worlds: 'while building on existing literature', his approach also 'allows new analytical insights'. While they may not always use the term 'abduction' explicitly, some authors locate the rationale for their qualitative study in an unexpected event, puzzle or surprise that disturbs existing understandings. Lægreid and Serigstad (2006) observe the aim of their paper is to explain why an expected outcome predicted by theory did not occur: '*This [outcome] is somewhat surprising* . . .' (Lægreid and Serigstad 2006, p. 1395; our emphasis). In Whiteman and Cooper (2011), the manoeuvre is explained very explicitly:

> This paper did not start with a gap in the literature; rather, it began with a surprise . . . Instead of ignoring this surprise, we took the advice of Weick and Sutcliffe: 'You'll probably know when something unexpected happens because you'll feel surprised, puzzled, or anxious . . . Trust these feelings. They are a solid clue that your model of the world is in error'. (Whiteman and Cooper 2011, p. 893)

Puzzles may also be the result of unresolved debates or confusion in existing literature, which authors then position themselves as resolving or 'unravel[ling]' (Graebner 2009, p. 436). Snell and Wong (2007) refer to 'a conceptual conundrum that prior research studies have been unable to resolve' (p. 884). They portray 'previous investigators' as having 'struggled', a comment which is mildly critical of existing literature. We found a handful of authors who went much further, basing the rationale for their paper on the limitations of existing models and explanations (e.g. Clark and Soulsby 2007, p. 933). Given the shortcomings of existing literature, the theoretical objective is stated as being 'to advance an alternative account' (Cornelissen 2006, p. 684) or provide 'a different perspective' (Tihanyi and Hegarty 2007, p. 789). Authors who take this more critical stance depict themselves as revising, reconceptualizing, retheorizing and reanalysing existing understandings (e.g. Zander and Zander 2005). The departure from existing theory can be seen in the repeated use of phrases such as 'In contrast to' (e.g. Peltokorpi *et al*. 2007, p. 51).

Papers in which a revisionist repertoire dominates are typically not overly concerned with justifying the use of qualitative research, with many authors not even broaching the topic explicitly. Rather, the suitability of qualitative research is either taken for granted, or the benefits are raised without reviewing the accompanying drawbacks. The discussion of limitations resulting from the chosen method is mostly brief, even perfunctory (for an exception, see Snell and Wong 2007), and focusing on the issue of generalizability. A less defensive tone towards the use and contribution of qualitative research is therefore a feature of this repertoire.

Presentation. We found some variation in practices within the revisionist repertoire when it comes to article structure. Some of the authors in this category are similar to modernists, in that they conclude with propositions, signalling that they are seeking to move towards generalizable models, such as Bansal and Roth (2000). However, they provide a modification to this traditional theory-building structure by also providing an initial model, thus making the theoretical starting point vs. end point clear. The preliminary model is modified on the basis of the empirical findings, concluding with a revised model and propositions. The few authors who used this device describe their initial model as tentative or even 'skeletal' (Denis *et al*. 2000, p. 1068) – a striking figure of speech. Other revisionists draw on the quantitative tradition of formulating hypotheses (or propositions) at the start of the paper (e.g. Carr 2005).

Even among authors who do not utilize a theory-testing rhetoric, much of the theoretical development in the paper could occur up front, before the presentation of the empirical findings. In these articles, the

common practice we found is to denote the empirical study as an 'illustration' of the theory. For example, Filatotchev and Toms (2006) describe their theoretical purpose as being to extend an existing theory. They present a revised model in the early part of the paper 'in which several further strands of theory are synthesized' (p. 411), then use the case as 'an empirical illustration' (p. 418). Because the theoretical development occurs at the start of the paper, the role of the empirical section in contributing theoretical insight is downgraded.

'Gapspotting' in the introduction of journal articles is a standard practice in the revisionist repertoire – not a surprise given that Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) find this it to be pervasive in management journals. They label the alternative to gapspotting as being 'problematization', and we did find this to be a minority practice within the revisionist repertoire. Minimal or no gapspotting is largely found amongst those authors who take a critical stance towards existing literature. For example, instead of identifying a gap in the literature, Czaban and Whitley (2000) begin by setting up the 'conflicts' between two different views right from the very first sentence of their paper. Similarly, Rojas (2010, p. 1263), instead of making a gap the feature of his first paragraph, points to a 'central debate' in management research.

Category no. 3: subversive repertoire (n = 90)

Unlike in the first two categories, authors who draw on this repertoire do not position their studies in terms of theory-building/theory-testing, induction/deduction or exploration/confirmation – dichotomies that are deeply entrenched in the modernist category. Rather, they define their theoretical purpose as an endeavour to gain in-depth understanding of an issue or viewpoint and use empirical data to illustrate the theoretical point (e.g. Blackler and McDonald 2000; Pye 2002; Whitley *et al*. 2003; Yakura 2002). Compared with the other categories, the papers that we coded as subversive are more evenly divided between case studies (53 papers) and non-case studies (37 papers).

Style. Many authors in this category employ discourse analysis, which is associated with a well-established and distinct vocabulary (Coupland 2001; Hardy and Maguire 2010; Khaire and Wardhwani 2010). Bell *et al*.'s (2002, p. 1081) study deconstructs discourses and 'involves exploring the paradoxes that arise in relation to the dominant meanings' which texts generate. The repertoire is characterized by reflexive language and absence of a modernist vocabulary. Hopkinson (2003, p. 1948) engages in a dialogue with her audience: 'By discussing my own interpretation and juxtaposing this with the words of the narratives, the reader's interpretation may take account of both.' Humphreys and Brown (2002, p. 934) even regard their methods section as a 'rhetorical artifact', which is an extreme form of reflexivity in our sample.

We identified two sub-categories of subversive repertoire, which differ from each other as to the use of the term 'exploratory' and its variants. In the first sub-category, authors employ the term 'exploratory', but attach different meanings to it compared with their peers using the other repertoires. In this sub-category, the notion of 'exploration' refers to the process by which authors access the meanings and experiences of their research participants. Ram (1999, p. 892) uses 'exploratory' as a synonym for 'provide insight'. Zilber (2002, p. 237) 'explored institutionalization as an interplay between actors, actions, and meanings' in organizational daily life. Similarly, Hallier and James (1999, p. 53) explain that the purpose of using semi-structured interviews was 'to explore the meanings that mentors and trainees attached to these transitions' that they were interested in. In this regard, exploration is well suited to interpretive methodologies, owing to the complexities and inconsistencies inherent in people's everyday behaviour and attitudes (Musson and Duberley 2007). Thus, there is evidence to suggest that the concept of 'exploration' is being reclaimed and reinterpreted as a means of gaining in-depth understanding of local, emic meanings and remaining open to alternative perspectives. These authors do not associate 'exploratory' with being the first step towards eventual hypothesis testing.

In the second sub-category, authors – explicitly or implicitly – challenge the notion of exploration. Some authors introduce an alternative vocabulary – to 'theorize' – in order to avoid the use of theory-building/theory-testing labels associated with the modernist repertoire (Goodrick and Reay 2010; Hardy and Maguire 2010; Hopkinson 2003; Khaire and Wardhwani 2010). Yanow and Tsoukas (2009, p. 1358) explain that 'we have sought to theorize the different sorts of responses' encountered in the field. The purpose of the study by Salaman and Storey (2002 p. 148) is to 'identify, analyse and theorize,

managers' accounts of innovation within organizations'. Wright and Manning (2004, p. 625) explicitly differentiate themselves from a grounded theory approach because their 'research approach . . . goes beyond the data of the research site . . . to locate sensemaking practices in the larger social formation'. However, the case-study researchers in particular struggle to distance themselves from positivist exploration via rhetorical means, while still keeping with the interpretive tradition. Ram (1999, p. 875), who describes his work as exploratory, points out that 'comparatively little is known' of the phenomenon under study and that 'existing theories are not well developed'. This quotation reveals what we found to be a typical association between the case study and exploratory, theory-building research. Not surprisingly, we identified case authors who used a mixture of subversive and modernist repertoires (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Maguire and Hardy 2009).

Argumentation. From the perspective of the modernist scholar, the goal of 'understanding' may appear atheoretical and modest, even unambitious, as the purpose of a study. Yet, the authors in this category consider illustration a powerful form of gaining theoretical insight and a means to give voice to individuals or groups that tend to be marginalized or silenced such as middle managers (Balogun and Johnson 2004), minority employees (Zanoni and Janssens 2007), and gay and lesbian priests (Creed 2003). They also argue for the suitability of qualitative methods in order to uncover complexities inherent in organizational life and to capture temporal dynamics (McCabe 2004; Ram 1999).

The main philosophical position in this category is (social) constructivism, as opposed to the positivistic stance dominating the previous two categories.[7] Coupland and Brown (2004, p. 1326) adopt 'an explicitly constructionist approach in their efforts to understand how the identities of Shell evolve through electronically mediated conversations'. In this category, findings were not induced from the data in an unproblematical way. Rather, authors explicitly pointed out that they themselves had an active role to play in constructing the storyline:

> [w]e do not claim this to be an objective process and other researchers might utilize different categories to explain the data. We make no apology for this . . . In crafting our story . . . we refrain from imposing an authoritarian interpretation that insists on identifying with the intentions of the authors. (Ng and De Cock 2002, p. 23)

> This kind of interpretive analysis is by its very nature 'subjective' and therefore characterized by various 'biases'. In our case, it is most important to note that we have been actively involved in reconstructing the empirical material as participant observers and interviewers. (Vaara *et al*. 2005, p. 605)

As the above quotations show, the authors in this category are methodologically well informed and do not apologize for their personal involvement as research instruments. McCabe (2004, p. 850) even confesses that 'I am not neutral in all of this and my sympathy rests more with the interpretations offered by the staff, as opposed to what I feel are the aspirations of management.' Viewing subjectivity as an inherent characteristic of the research process is a clear distinguishing feature in relation to the other repertoires.

There is, however, variation among the articles as to the explicitness of their philosophical stance. Several papers in the first sub-category subscribe to their philosophical position in a milder, more indirect way. Townley (2002, p. 167) explains how the conceptual framework assisted in 'making sense of the explanations that were offered by the research participants'. In the second sub-category the authors argue more forcefully by, for example, denying generalization as an objective of knowledge production altogether:

> The research design was therefore concerned with the *particularity* of knowledge in context, based on interviewing managers who had been key players in the development strategies of the organization. (Vince 2006, p. 351, emphasis in the original)

> My primary objective, as stated, is to demonstrate fragmentation of organizational construction in one context and my empirical work focuses therefore upon local theory rather than grand narrative. I do not wish to imply that the particular performative constructions I locate in one context have broader currency. (Hopkinson 2003, p. 1947)

[7]Other philosophical positions were phenomenology (Blomberg 2004; Sandberg and Pinnington 2009), critical theory (Harley and Hardy 2004; Kelemen 2000; Levina and Orlikowski 2009; Salaman and Storey 2002), even postmodernism (Harley and Hardy 2004; Hopkinson 2003).

Overall, the authors often use their philosophical position as an argument for the theoretical purpose and methodological choices.

Presentation. Authors in the second sub-category explicitly reject the modernist view of theorizing as a progression from discovery to verification, which is also visible in the write-up of these articles. While papers using modernist rhetoric often conclude with propositions, this was not found among the subversive papers. In some papers the introduction is followed by a methodology section, not a literature review as typically is the case (Laurila and Ropponen 2003).

Noorderhaven *et al*. (2007, p. 1368) conclude that their qualitative comparative study into cultural values of Japanese and Dutch business people is complementary to survey-based studies, not a prelude. When outlining future research avenues, Kelemen (2000, p. 495) does not call for theory-testing studies, but makes a strong case for more micro-level, interpretive research:

> This paper adds to the critical understanding of the TQM phenomenon . . . This relationship needs to be deconstructed further through a more detailed language-focused inquiry of TQM talk, for example via discourse or conversational analysis.

Similar calls to probe insights more deeply were also made by other scholars such as Salaman and Storey (2002), Vince (2006) and Yanow and Tsoukas (2009). Thus, in discussing further research, the authors do not apologize for the commonly perceived weaknesses of qualitative studies.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we have analysed journal articles from the perspective of the 'rhetoric of science', rather than the more traditional approach of reviewing them in terms of their disciplinary content. We have argued that the ways in which authors construct the theoretical purpose and contribution of a qualitative study are deeply embedded in often unacknowledged philosophical assumptions, qualitative traditions and rhetorical strategies. The 'rhetoric of science' lens has enabled us to examine how qualitative researchers formulate and legitimize the use of qualitative research for developing theory. The results suggest the modernist repertoire has endured, but they have also highlighted ways in which authors can break away from its limitations. Attention to rhetorical choices is, we would argue, critical in achieving a more diverse future for qualitative research in which multiple philosophical traditions are accepted, and qualitative research is used for a range of theoretical purposes.

In their review of qualitative research, Bluhm *et al*. (2011) express 'cautious optimism' that management is nearing a 'tipping point' in terms of acceptance of qualitative research. We broadly agree, but with some reservations. Our review has certainly identified that the alternatives to the modernist repertoire are, taken together, in the overall majority. However, our fine-grained textual analysis has revealed a more complex picture. First, and perhaps most significantly, the case-study tradition is more conservative than non-case-study approaches: Case studies are under-represented in the subversive category (58.9% compared with 72% in the total sample; see Table 3). Second, the inductivist 'generative rhetoric' of the modernist tradition is clearly the reference point for the other traditions. Rhetorical devices from the modernist tradition still appear in articles that we coded as predominantly revisionist or even subversive, suggesting that authors taking alternative approaches continue to have trouble breaking free from its influence.

Third, editorial policies and personalities matter. As would be expected, the European *JMS* was overall more open to diversity than the American *AMJ*. However, we found that while *JMS* had been quite diverse, since 2009 the emphasis has shifted back to the modernist repertoire. This, together with our tracing of the 'theory extension' rhetoric back to a specific editor of *AMJ*, suggests that the editorial team does have an impact in promoting particular rhetorical choices. Given its dependence on these broader contextual factors, genre change is not necessarily a linear process.

The modernist repertoire, while not overall in the majority, is still the single most dominant one. Yet the analysis suggests that it contains considerable tensions and contradictions. We found that typically, exploratory papers are not in fact a journey into the unknown, as they are firmly based in existing literature. The theory-building/testing distinction is difficult to maintain – and non-positivist authors would argue that it is not even worth maintaining. 'Exploration' and 'induction' have become problematic terms, applied to such a broad range of theoretical endeavours that they have lost their original meaning. The term 'exploration' is itself a

rhetorical figure of speech, and one that is potentially limiting.

A comparison between text (the rhetorical analysis) and context (methodological literature) can provide further insight. While the reconstruction of grounded theory has gained ground in the methodological literature – although less so when it comes to the case study – the authors we analysed refer to modernist rather than constructivist grounded theory. We found little explicit use of the concept of abduction. The trend towards reclaiming modernist traditions, and infusing new meaning into established terminology, has not yet been popularized in the management journals. While this divergence between methodological theory and research practice is not surprising, it does suggest that management scholars (and their reviewers) have been unwilling or unable to surrender the legitimizing power of modernist rhetoric.

Given that in our analysis of the 'state of the art' in *AMJ* and *JMS* we only have access to the end result of the publication process – we did not interview authors about their intentions and experiences in undertaking and publishing their studies – an explanation as to why modernist rhetoric is still so influential in management journals lies outside the scope of this paper. Certainly, a study that examines how manuscripts are changed in the course of the review process would be revealing. The instances of mixed repertoires that we found in a single paper may well be due to pressures on authors to conform to different rhetorical practices. We hope that one result of the study is to enable those readers who also review for journals to be sensitized towards the multiple rhetorical traditions in use by qualitative researchers, and to check for consistency of approach rather than insisting on conforming to a specific repertoire.

Some readers might well inquire why the dominance of modernist rhetoric poses a problem in management research. We would argue that it is indeed a concern, because it limits the contribution that qualitative research can make to theory development. Rhetoric can legitimize and empower, but it can also constrain and disenfranchise. The dominance of modernist rhetoric means that even though the methodological literature has increasingly recognized the diverse theoretical contributions that qualitative research can make, this pluralism is not reflected in the pages of two key journals in the management discipline. Qualitative research that does not adhere to modernist aims and assumptions is likely, we would suspect, to find it more difficult to gain acceptance.

There is, however, also cause for optimism about the future of qualitative research in management. Our discussion of the different rhetorical choices that management researchers make suggests that greater diversity is possible, for both positivists and constructivists. Positivist researchers who adhere to the traditional discovery/verification dualism nevertheless can escape from the exploratory role of qualitative research, and position their studies as 'extending', 'illustrating' or even 'testing' theory. We also found a continuum among constructivist researchers: some use traditional terms such as 'exploratory', yet seek to reappropriate them, while others seeks to escape from modernist terms altogether. We are not seeking to adjudicate among these different options; rather, we suggest that all have a role to play in providing qualitative researchers with rhetorical devices that more powerfully convey the theoretical purpose of a study, and in using qualitative research for theoretical purposes for which it has traditionally not been seen as a legitimate choice.

Once qualitative and exploratory research are decoupled, there is also potential for rediscovering the potential of quantitative research for exploratory purposes. Interest in exploratory techniques for quantitative research received more attention in the 1970s with the publication of Hartwig and Dearing (1979) and Tukey (1977). These authors defend the role of exploration and suggest techniques for exploring quantitative data. Hartwig and Dearing (1979) maintain that exploratory research is a state of mind that adheres to openness and iteration. They invite researchers to revisit the exploratory analysis of data by using 'a new vocabulary' that serves the vital purpose of emphasizing the fundamental difference between exploratory studies and more traditional approaches in quantitative research (p. 13).

In 1967, Glaser and Strauss wrote that they wanted to 'broaden the picture of what sociologists can do with their time and efforts' (Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 7). Forty-five years later, we echo their remarks in relation to qualitative management researchers. In this paper, we have used a 'rhetoric of science' lens to broaden the picture in two ways. First, by focusing on rhetorical strategies and assumptions, we are seeking to encourage a debate about practices that tend to remain implicit. Second, we are providing management scholars with a variety of options for the future that go beyond the exploratory straightjacket that currently restricts the way in

which qualitative research is used. The review has shown that methodological traditions do change, evolve and undergo reassessment, and we hope to have encouraged change through greater reflexivity about how, as a community of scholars, we present, justify and legitimize the theoretical contributions of qualitative studies.

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