

Evaluative Practices in Qualitative Management Research: A Critical Review

Gillian Symon, Catherine Cassell¹ and Phil Johnson²

School of Management, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham TW20 0EX, Surrey, UK, ¹Leeds University Business School, Maurice Keyworth Building, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK, and ²Sheffield University

Management School, Conduit Road, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK

Corresponding author email: Gillian.Symon@rhul.ac.uk

This paper critically reviews commentaries on the evaluation and promotion of qualitative management research. The review identifies two disjunctures: between methodological prescriptions for epistemologically diverse criteria and management journal prescriptions for standardized criteria; and between the culturally dependent production of criteria and their positioning in editorials and commentaries as normative and objective. The authors' critical social constructionist analysis surfaces underlying positivist assumptions and institutional processes in these commentaries, which they argue are producing (inappropriate) homogeneous evaluation criteria for qualitative research, marginalizing alternative perspectives, and disciplining individual qualitative researchers into particular normative practices. The authors argue that interventions to encourage more qualitative research need to focus as much on editorial, disciplinary and institutional practices as the practices of individual researchers, and they make recommendations for changes that may allow qualitative management research to develop in a more supportive context by recognizing philosophical diversity as legitimate.

Introduction

Qualitative management research is an umbrella term for a range of approaches to research (e.g. Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Myers 2012; Symon and Cassell 2012) that draw on a variety of epistemologies (e.g. Duberley *et al.* 2012), including critical theory, postmodernism and interpretivism. This diversity is seen to be one of its strengths (Bluhm *et al.* 2011), but also opens up the issue of how such work can be fairly evaluated (Bettis *et al.* 2015). Consequently, a variety of potential evaluation criteria and recommendations for best practice for qualitative management research have been outlined (e.g. Bansal and Corley 2011; Pratt 2009). Our purpose here is not to add more criteria to this mix. Rather, we want to critically review the criteria and recommendations for best practice already proposed, drawing out general themes concerning evaluation processes, and highlighting the implications of current strategies for

encouraging qualitative research in the management discipline.

We approach this review of evaluative practices from the position that knowledge is socially constructed (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001) and see this perspective as providing novel insights into the continuing debates about what constitutes legitimate qualitative research. While other commentaries on the nature of management research in a changing culture may be based on underlying critical and social constructionist perspectives (e.g. Alvesson and Sandberg 2012; Grey 2010), the specific debate on quality criteria for qualitative management research has remained largely immune to these perspectives, relying more on a skills-based or empiricist account of knowledge. However, we suggest that it is different philosophical stances on knowledge production that lie at the heart of the difficulties of providing quality criteria for qualitative research. On the one hand is an understanding that knowledge exists 'out there' and can be discovered, objectively tested or

verified and, on the other, that knowledge is socially produced, 'provisional, mediated, situated [and] contested' (Blackler *et al.* 1998, p. 76). So while many commentators are trying to encourage qualitative researchers to conform to sets of quality criteria that appear to be generally applicable to all forms of qualitative research, they are doing so based on a particular view of knowledge production that sits uneasily with the philosophical stances embedded in some types of qualitative research.

In investigating how qualitative management research has been pursued and discussing how qualitative research should be conducted, we need to be aware of the broader processes by which systems of knowledge production justify particular practices and marginalize others. From the review of evaluative practices that forms the basis of this paper, we want to provide an alternative perspective on the challenges of publishing diverse forms of research that acknowledges the wider social construction and institutionalization of academic practices. In other words, we want to move away from a concentration on what individual qualitative researchers could 'do better' to recognize that they are not the only actors in the network of relations that is management research.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a review of the 'criteriology debate' (Schwandt 1996) within the methodological community. This ongoing debate concerns whether it is feasible or appropriate to produce generalized evaluative criteria for qualitative research. As an outcome of this review, we argue for the importance of contingent criteria that can encompass the diversity of the research conducted under the umbrella term 'qualitative research'. Secondly, through an analysis of reviews of methodological diversity within management journals and journal editorials, we analyse how this debate has played out in the management field specifically. From this we identify a fundamental disjuncture between the framing of the qualitative criteriology debate in the methodological community and that of management research commentators. We demonstrate how the contingency advocated by the former is at odds with the standardization of the latter.

Consequently, we then explore possible explanations of this disjuncture within the institutional practices of the management research community. Reviewing empirical and critical accounts of management research practice, we demonstrate how the production of criteria is culturally and temporally dependent. This analysis exposes a second disjuncture between evidence of quality criteria as subjective

and socially constructed and their positioning as objective and normative by management commentators. We see this latter positioning as itself a function of cultural and institutional pressures towards standardization. We argue that we also need to pay attention to these types of processes and practices to bring about change. Subsequently, we consider what changes may be required that enable the identification of excellent qualitative management research without contorting the distinctive nature or diversity of qualitative research. Finally, we also consider the implications of our arguments for the future of criteriology in management research.

Our aim is to disrupt hegemonic discourse, prompting reflexivity and debate so as to militate against moves towards standardization despite the known plurality of qualitative research. We want to draw attention to the processes of institutionalization that shape these strategies, and to encourage the consideration of alternative strategies that do not focus solely on the individual researcher and that might encourage the publication of a range of diverse types of qualitative research, even in the most prestigious management journals.

Criteriology debates in qualitative research

When any evaluation of management research is undertaken, criteria of some kind are implicitly, or explicitly, deployed (Savall *et al.* 2008). Indeed, evaluation criteria form a boundary without which it would be difficult to prevent poor quality, untrustworthy or even illegitimate work from entering the mainstream. However, any evaluation is a somewhat precarious process fraught with epistemological ambiguities – even though it may be often, by default, tacitly presented as a relatively non-contentious deployment of benchmarks grounded in a consensus (e.g. Spencer *et al.* 2003). Consequently, it is not surprising to find some debate about the relevance of quality criteria to qualitative research in the general methodology community. Sparkes (2001) summarizes the different approaches to criteriology in the qualitative methodology literature as: replication (imitating conventional (quantitative) validity criteria); parallel (adaptations of conventional criteria); diversification (accepting a range of different criteria as suitable to different approaches); and letting go (a more radical position that advocates the rejection of any sort of criteria based on validity claims in favour of criteria based

on the moral, ethical and political consequences of the research). The following chronological analysis explicates how the thinking around these different perspectives evolved.

The traditional criteria of internal and external validity and reliability were originally devised to eradicate technical deficiencies during the deployment of hypothetico-deductive methodologies in the statistical analysis of causal relations and the pursuit of nomothetic knowledge (see Schwandt 1996). However, many have argued that qualitative research cannot and should not be assessed by the same criteria as those applied to quantitative research (e.g. Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2008; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

As a response to these challenges, commentators throughout the social sciences considered alternative criteria that focused on the impact of research processes on research sites and findings, with the intention of enhancing 'naturalism', or ecological validity, which quantitative methodologies were construed as lacking (e.g. Cicourel 1982). Perhaps the best known early formulation of a comprehensive list of alternative criteria for assessing qualitative research is that by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Here, they emphasized the need for qualitative researchers to provide self-critical audit trails that allow audiences to judge for themselves the rigour of the research. They also suggested the replacement of conventional criteria by four general principles (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) which combine to enable the assessment of the trustworthiness of qualitative research. By revealing aspects of themselves and the research process through a traceable audit trail, qualitative researchers could demonstrate their 'hard won objectivity' and fulfil key aspects of Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criterion (Seale 1999, p. 161). Such criteria can thus be seen to 'parallel' the validity criteria of quantitative approaches (see Sparkes 2001).

Their 1985 criteria were conceptualized to have general applicability but, as they later admit (Guba and Lincoln 1989, 1994), they failed to recognize sufficiently the possibility of a philosophical contradiction between positivist epistemological commitments that demanded that inductive descriptions of cultures should correspond with actors' inter-subjectivity, and interpretivist commitments that suggest that people socially construct versions of reality. Consequently, we see the rise of 'diversification' approaches that seek to make evaluation criteria specific, even to particular methods (e.g. interviews, Kvale 1996; ethnography, Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993;

grounded theory, Fendt and Sachs 2008; case studies, Cepeda and Martin 2005).

However, as different epistemologies may enact the 'same' method in different ways, it is difficult to produce standard evaluative criteria at the level of method (e.g. Correa 2013). Therefore it seems more appropriate to have different criteria for different epistemologies. In a rare example of such a discussion published in a management research outlet, Johnson *et al.* (2006) developed 'a criteriology that enables different sets of evaluation criteria to be *contingently* deployed so that they fit the researcher's mode of engagement' (Johnson *et al.*, *ibid.*, p. 134, *italics in original*). Here, four sets of assessment criteria are presented, derived from the varying ontological and epistemological commitments of schools of thought evident in the management and organization field: positivism, neo-empiricism, critical theory and postmodernism (see Table 1). The aim was to create a flexible heuristic device to sensitize researchers to the different criteria associated with different philosophical commitments.

We can see from this framework that work coming from different perspectives may vary considerably in the type of outcomes seen to indicate quality. Some of these criteria move away from the preoccupation with validity in the sense of following correct procedures or approximating 'reality', towards a concern to evaluate research in terms of outcomes such as problematization and liberation. Indeed, Guba and Lincoln (1989, 1994), as a response to the criticism that their original criteria remained positivistic, replaced 'trustworthiness' with 'authenticity' criteria. Inspired by Habermasian philosophy, they argued that research findings should represent an agreement about what is considered to be true. In order to demonstrate authenticity, researchers must show how different members' realities are represented in any account (fairness). Moreover, researchers must also show how they have helped members to develop a range of understandings of phenomena and to appreciate those of others (ontological and educative authenticity), while stimulating action (analytical authenticity) through empowerment (tactical authenticity) to challenge hegemonic regimes of truth. Such criteria align with those associated with critical theory (see Table 1), and with Sparkes' (2001) notion of 'letting go', being partly concerned with assessment against the outcomes of the research (educating and empowering participants) and not just evaluation concerning how the research was conducted. This latter position has also been recommended by other commentators, such as Smith

Table 1. Different criteria for different epistemological perspectives, adapted from Johnson *et al.*'s (2006) *contingent criteriology*

Epistemology	Assessment criteria	Example questions to ask of the text
Positivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal validity • External validity • Construct validity • Reliability 	<p>Is the process described in sufficient detail to be replicable?</p> <p>Is the sampling sufficiently random/extensive and the analysis sufficiently rigorous for results to also pertain to other samples?</p>
Neo-empiricism (Interpretivism)	<p>Internally reflexive audit trail demonstrating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credibility • Dependability • Confirmability • Ecological validity • Transferability/logical inference 	<p>Is evidence provided that this is an authentic representation of what happened?</p> <p>Have alternative explanations been considered and negative cases analysed?</p>
Critical Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodation • Catalytic validity • Epistemically reflexive dialogue • Discursive democracy 	<p>Has the researcher engaged in reflexive consideration of their own position?</p> <p>Have hegemonic regimes of truth been identified, unsettled and challenged?</p> <p>Does the research lead to possibilities for change?</p>
(Affirmative) Postmodernism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving voice to previously silenced textual domains • Unsettling of the hegemonic • Articulation of incommensurable plurality of discourses etc. • De-centring the author through multivocality 	<p>Have assumptions and commitments been deconstructed?</p> <p>Is analysis and argument subjectively credible?</p> <p>Has the author reflexively considered own narrative and elements of its production?</p>

and Hodkinson (2005), particularly as there is little 'methodological orthodoxy in qualitative research yet criteria are usually procedural' (Spencer *et al.* 2003, p. 42).

Within the methodological field, the criteriology debate continues. There are arguments that the qualitative research field needs universal criteria for political reasons, and Tracy (2010) has produced a list of 'big tent' criteria which, as the name implies, are specifically oriented to providing a general list that can cover all forms of qualitative research. However, those applying such criteria can then run into difficulties. Gordon and Patterson (2013) endorse Tracy's criteria, but want to make ethics an overarching framework (as opposed to merely one criterion) in line with their particular epistemological commitment to a 'womanist caring' framework. In other words, the universality of the criteria has foundered against the epistemological commitments of the researchers. As a consequence, methodologists now suggest that, while the qualitative research community may work towards 'bridging criteria' (Ravenek and Rudman 2013) that provide some commonality, these will always need to be tempered by paradigm-specific criteria (Morrow 2005) and the flexibility to recognize that different epistemologies will interpret the

same criteria differently (Ravenek and Rudman 2013).

Additionally, commentators argue that recognizing research as a political concern does not imply trying to mimic quantitative research in producing a universal set of assessment criteria, but rather:

to move forward with the construction of a more democratic setting so that differences between scientists and scientific communities can be dealt with, and the right of researchers to promote and develop different paradigms and research options can therefore be guaranteed. (Correa 2013, p. 209)

In sum, there is a growing consensus in the methodology community that any assessment criteria need to allow for the various philosophical commitments inevitably underlying any research design. Such an alternative mode of evaluation requires epistemological reflexivity on the part of both the researcher whose work is being assessed and those undertaking any assessment (Amis and Silk 2008).

We now turn to review how such criteriological debates have evolved in the management discipline specifically. There are several potential sources of material that address this debate in management research. Initially, we focus on reviewing articles that

have addressed the extent and nature of qualitative research in management research, as this is the main way in which concerns about the quality of such research have been raised in our discipline. However we also review literature that addresses broader criteriology matters in the management research area – this literature is leaner and is supplemented by general commentaries on the current development of the management discipline. In the final section of the paper, we review proposals for institutional change in academic management practices in relation to their potential to extend the criteriology debate in the field. We do not review in this paper general management methodology textbooks, partly because these are oriented to more basic methodological procedures, but also because our analysis largely addresses debates in those outlets considered the most prestigious forms of publication in our discipline, and within which the international peer-review process leads to the setting of quality standards.

Qualitative criteriology in management research: review methodology

We draw on two main sources to analyse how concern over the evaluation of management qualitative research has been addressed: reviews of method use in management studies journals; and *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ) editorials. These sources tend to mix up empirical evidence, commentary and recommendations, and we draw on all the sources equally to pursue our analysis.

First, we sought to identify systematic reviews of methodological diversity within the field. Using the Business Source Premier database, we deployed the search terms ‘research design’, ‘research methodology’, ‘organiz’, ‘research quality’, ‘validity’, ‘reliability’, ‘qualitative research’, ‘review’ and ‘publication’ in different combinations to pinpoint potential review papers. Although some reviews covered similar topics, they were classified under different keywords. Hence, after each search, we read the abstracts of the articles to determine relevance. Our criteria for relevance were: first, that it was possible to identify a clear definition of qualitative research within the review study; and, second, that the review focused on management and organizational research only. Reviews identified from allied areas – such as lean manufacturing (Jasti and Kodali 2014) and international business (Welch *et al.* 2011) – were excluded. In

addition, we also examined two journals that specialize in methodology within organization and management: *Organizational Research Methods* and *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*. Eight reviews were identified that had considered the extent of publication of qualitative research within various subsets of management journals. A summary of these reviews can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that there is some consistency in the journals selected by the authors of the articles we identified for review, with the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly* and *Journal of Management Studies* featuring most regularly. Moreover, apart from the review in *Organizational Research Methods* (which focused on publications in that journal only), there was one journal that was part of every review: the *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ).

In contrast to most other management journals, AMJ has published several editorials that reflect on the nature of qualitative research and provide guidelines to encourage qualitative researchers to publish in the journal (e.g. Bansal and Corley 2011; Gephart 2004; Pratt 2009). Given the journal’s centrality in the above reviews of content and its high citation rates, these editorials seemed an important source of information about how qualitative research is positioned and evaluated in the discipline. Moreover, in the UK, AMJ is ranked very highly in lists of journal quality, which are used by universities as evaluation mechanisms, thus encouraging conformity to its agenda (Mingers and Willmott 2013). Any position statement issued by AMJ is therefore of significance to general management academic practice.

As a similarly international journal, but with a UK base, we also reviewed the content of the *Journal of Management Studies* over the same period. Unlike AMJ, there were few editorial statements; indeed, these only occurred when there was a change of editors (e.g. Clark and Wright 2009; Cornelissen and Floyd 2009). None of these editorial statements focused exclusively on qualitative research or indicated the position of the journal with respect to qualitative research. Therefore, we did not find the same sort of in-depth and focused material for analysis in a comparable European journal as we did in AMJ.

Consequently, for our second review source, we examined the editorials of each issue of AMJ over a 15-year period (2000–2014) to analyse the nature and extent of advice provided for qualitative researchers about quality criteria. This is the period over which

Table 2. Analysis of reviews of the publication of qualitative research in management journals

Authors	Focus of the research and search terms (identifiers) used	Journals analysed	Quantity of qualitative research published	Comments on criteria
Podsakoff and Dalton (1987)	Content analysis of the research design of published studies. Studies classified by research design on 12 dimensions, e.g. level of analysis, sample size, type of dependent variables, number of dependent variables.	All articles in 1985 in AMJ, ASQ, JAP, JOM, OBHDE.	Qualitative or interpretive research is 'rarely seen' (p. 426).	Reviews Rogers' criteria for adoption of innovation and concludes that ethnomethodological approaches cannot deliver on those criteria which is why qualitative research is rarely seen.
Scandura and Williams (2000)	Content analysis of the research strategies of published studies using McGrath's (1982) eight types of research strategies classification, e.g. computer simulation and field experiment.	All empirical articles in ASQ, AMJ, JoM between 1985–87 and 1995–97. Aim to identify triangulation in methods and types of validity in use. 264 empirical articles.	Comment on the increased use of field studies, but do not comment explicitly about qualitative research.	Field approaches discussed in relation to positivist validity criteria and triangulation.
Gibbert <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Content analysis of published case studies. Definition of case studies: 'Empirical papers that reported results based on primary fieldwork in one or more for-profit organizations, in which no experimental controls nor manipulation were involved and which used multiple sources of data' (p. 1469).	All cases published between 1995–2000 in AMJ, ASQ, CMR, JIBS, JMS, LRP, OSci, OStu, Sloan MR, SMJ.	10% of all published articles are defined as cases, N = 159, about 6% of these are qualitative.	No reference made to alternative criteria for qualitative work. Positivist validity criteria encouraged.
Aguinis <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Content analysis of the different methods addressed in the journal. Used 13 different types of qualitative research as part of the classification, but the numbers in each of the different types were so small that no variation could be identified through the analysis.	All articles published in ORM, 1998–2008. Aim was to review the first 10 years of ORM and also to see how the methods published there linked into studies in other top journals.	10% identified as qualitative.	Refer to Pratt (2008): qualitative researchers in order to get their research published should make it more palatable to quantitative positivist reviewers, embed in and break from existing theory, balance data presentation and interpretation, describe analysis adequately.
Plowman and Smith (2011)	Content analysis of methods used. Qualitative research defined as that which takes place in a natural setting with primary data obtained through observation, interviewing or documents (including images). Conclusions are derived by working with language rather than numerical analysis.	All articles between 1986 and 2008 in ASQ, AMJ, OSci and JMS.	621 papers identified as qualitative. Percentage of empirical papers using qualitative research: ASQ 21%, AMJ 8%, OSci 29%, JMS 10%.	No comments made about criteria.

Table 2. Continued

Authors	Focus of the research and search terms (identifiers) used	Journals analysed	Quantity of qualitative research published	Comments on criteria
Bluhm <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Content analysis of methods used. EBSCO/ISI abstract, keyword and title search of 5 journals using terms including 'qualitative', 'ethnography', 'interviews', 'case study', 'content analysis', 'discourse analysis' and more.	Qualitative research published between 1999 and 2008 in AMJ, ASQ, JVB, JMS and OStu. Content analysed each article on four criteria: theoretical purpose; research design; transparency of methods; and analysis.	Total 198 articles, focus on factor analytic qualitative research and the dismissal of other techniques including post-modern, hermeneutics etc. Encountered an extremely limited number of articles that used those techniques.	Recommendations for qualitative research: consider and elaborate the theoretical purpose and contribution; justify the chosen context and unit of analysis; triangulate findings through multiple data collection methods; model the styles of respected authors who constantly publish in the top journals; provide transparency in data analysis through the use of audit trails.
Welch <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Rhetorical analysis of published qualitative case studies. Categorized qualitative case study and non-case study articles.	Qualitative based empirical papers in AMJ and JMS 1999–2011.	Of 1256 empirical articles, 262 were qualitative (21%). Analysis of the rhetorical practices of qualitative researchers. Identified three: modernist, revisionist and subversive.	Modernist rhetorical practices are more prevalent. This restricts the diversity of philosophical positions and theoretical opportunities.
Üsdiken (2014)	Content analysis of methods used. 'Qualitative research defined as case studies, ethnographies, textual analysis, narrative inquiries, action research projects and the like, even with occasional numerical information that may have been provided to supplement the analysis which otherwise relied on qualitative evidence' (p. 776).	All articles in AMJ, AMR, ASQ, OSci, SMI, BJM, JMS, OStu, HR, IJMR 1960–2010.	1960–70, 5.3% 1980–90, 9.8% 2000s, 19.6% of the research published is qualitative.	No comments made about criteria.

the journal has actively been discussing the role and potential of qualitative research through editorial statements. Ninety issues of AMJ were published through this period, of which 82 contained statements from the editor or a member of the editorial team. These contained, for example, advice about publishing in the journal (e.g. Colquitt 2013) and commentaries on the journal's approach to a range of contemporary management issues (e.g. Morrison 2010). From those 82 editorials, five explicitly focused on qualitative research and provided criteriological recommendations for publication (Bansal and Corley 2011, 2012; Gephart 2004; Lee 2001; Pratt 2009). We reviewed each of these for the quality criteria they advocated. A summary of the recommended criteria can be found in Table 3.

In summary, our analysis and review of these different sources focused on three different issues, which we go on to discuss in the next section:

- How qualitative research is defined, identified and the extent of its publication.
- The presentation of evaluative issues and commentators' engagement with criteriology debates.
- The types of quality criteria in use.

Qualitative criteriology in management research: review findings

Reviews of journal content suggest that the extent of publication of qualitative research in management journals has changed over time (see Table 2). The most recent – and the most extensive – review by Üsdiken (2014) found that there was an increase in the amount of qualitative research published over the 40-year period examined, with qualitative research representing around 20% of the research published during the most recent period. From our perspective, this is a positive indication, although 20% seems a low proportion. However, there are two caveats here. First, qualitative research is found more within European journals than in US journals, and the divide between what is published in these different groups of journals is growing. Secondly, Üsdiken's definition of qualitative research is not clear, but appears to be quite broad (e.g. also encompassing various types of transformations of qualitative data to quantitative metrics). Consequently, we turn now to consider this specific issue of the definition of qualitative research across our sources.

Looking across the reviews, whereas some provided detail about how the term 'qualitative research'

was being defined (e.g. Plowman and Smith 2011), most identified qualitative research in terms of the use of particular methods (e.g. Üsdiken 2014) or methodologies (e.g. Scandura and Williams 2000). The plurality of the field is reflected in the variety of search terms the commentators used; supporting the assertion in the methodological literature that producing generalized criteria for such a diverse field may be problematic (Johnson *et al.* 2006). Identifying qualitative research largely in terms of method potentially disguises wide variety in the application of such methods (e.g. through different epistemological lenses). Additionally, this may indicate problems with the reviews themselves as potentially over- or under-inclusive, such as we have suggested in relation to Üsdiken's (2014) review. For example, Welch *et al.* (2013, p. 247) suggest that the review by Bluhm *et al.* (2011) is based on 'apriori categories which do not accommodate non-positivist approaches'. Consequently, taking a more social constructionist viewpoint on knowledge production, we recognize that, even in the way that qualitative research is defined, we may see implicit articulation of particular epistemologies, which then colours criteriological recommendations.

Turning to the nature of the engagement with criteriology, there is evidence to support the assertion that, in order to publish qualitative research in prestigious journals, it would have to mimic positivistic criteriological conventions (cf. Bengtsson *et al.* 1997). For example, Gibbert *et al.* (2008) sought to identify the extent of reference to the (positivist) criteria of internal validity, construct validity, external validity and reliability in their review of 159 case studies. Through the coding process, the authors report that they 'also coded for the use of [validity] measures ... [devised] by authors with an interpretivist or constructionist stance (e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985, Glaser and Strauss 1967), yet we did not find any such reports' (Gibbert *et al.* 2008, p. 1470). In other words, there is no evidence from their review that any of the alternative criteria devised for qualitative research in the general methodological literature are used or reported in the research reviewed. Indeed, it appears that qualitative case study research specifically may continue to legitimize its conclusions through conventional (positivist) strategies of verification.

The AMJ editors also explicitly consider criteria for the publication of qualitative research (see Table 3), often borrowing from the evidence of published 'high-quality' work to endorse specific criteria. However, when we examine this advice in

Table 3. *Criteria from AMJ editorials*

AMJ editorial	Definition of qualitative research	Quality criteria recommended
Lee (2001) On qualitative research in AMJ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined in Lee's (1999) book. • Can be found from looking at good exemplars in AMJ. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Makes a substantial contribution to management theory and to our field's empirical knowledge' (p. 215). • 'Testing formal and deduced hypotheses or by proposing broad research propositions induced from the data' (p. 215). • 'Methods fully described' (p. 215). • 'The study's value-added contribution to our field's body of theoretical and empirical knowledge is more readily apparent' (p. 215). • Answers the 'so what' question.
Gephart (2004) Challenges and opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-method • Interpretive ('employs the meanings in use by societal members to explain how they directly experience everyday life realities.' p. 455). • Naturalistic ('studies phenomena in the environments in which they naturally occur' p. 455). • Inductive. • 'It relies on words and talk to create texts' (p. 455). • 'Highly descriptive' with emphasis on 'situational details' (p. 455). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research should be embedded in a current research programme. • An effective review of literature that points to a lacuna in the literature that the study can address. • Need to state goals or research questions at the outset. • Definition and explanation of key concepts that guide the research through disclosure of theoretical background. • Audit trails so that the reader knows how categories or themes were discerned in data and how key decisions were made in the research process. • Conclusions that revisit research questions and consider the broader implications of the research.
Pratt (2009) Better paths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Understanding the world from the perspective of those studied (i.e., informants)' (p. 856). • 'Examining and articulating processes' (p. 856). • Inductive OR deductive OR both (p. 856). • Possible to analyze qualitative data quantitatively (p. 856). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the methods section includes 'the basics'. • Discuss why the research is needed. • Consider whether the research builds new theory or elaborates existing theory. • Provide a rationale for this context and this 'unit of analysis'. • Show data in a 'smart fashion'. • Demonstrate how findings were derived from data. • Consider using organizing figures and how the 'story' can be told. • Consider 'modeling' the style of authors who consistently publish qualitative work.
Bansal and Corley (2011) Good craftsmanship	<p>No explicit definition, however:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Intimacy with the phenomenon of interest.. which often captures the informants' experiences' (p. 235). • 'The use of non-traditional data sources' (p. 235). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate theoretical contribution. • Engage scholars in an intellectual conversation. • Demonstrate methodological rigour. • Provide transparency of process, including describing data sources and analysis procedures. • Researcher voice. • Convey a clear connection between data and theory. • Present the work in an interesting, easy to navigate and exciting manner
Bansal and Corley (2012) Unique attributes of a qualitative paper for AMJ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative papers advance theory by building it inductively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Build theory inductively' through: 'short, multipurpose front end'; 'long, robust back end'; 'comprehensive, personal and transparent methods; and creative data displays' (pp. 509–511). • 'Tell the story through a theory and data narrative' (p. 511). • 'Embrace the process not the plan' through tight interweaving of theory and data stories; an iterative process (p. 512). • Creative data displays.

detail, we suggest that these recalibrations could result in methodological restriction rather than the pluralism they seem to endorse. Gephart (2004) points to the paradigmatic diversity evident in qualitative research, while emphasizing the need for symmetry between the paradigmatic stance and the methodology deployed. However, he then moves on to some generic problems in qualitative submissions to AMJ and their solutions, which will improve the standard of research (see Table 3 for a summary of his suggested criteria for good practice). In other words, Gephart proceeds to make generic specifications, thereby potentially precluding the diversity initially acknowledged.

This fundamental disjuncture between recognition of plurality and suggestions for change is also apparent in Pratt's (2009) editorial, whose focus is on inductive forms of qualitative research and the challenges these face in the AMJ review process, given there is no prescribed formula or 'boilerplate' for determining quality (as there is for quantitative research). Pratt's aim is to help authors and evaluators of qualitative research by taking them down 'better paths', while avoiding making qualitative research appear quantitative. The difficulty here again is that, unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is an umbrella term under which a wide range of philosophical positions coexist. Hence, in contrast to the philosophical consensus evident in quantitative management research, a 'boilerplate' is unachievable regardless of whether it is desirable (Scheurich 1997; Schwandt 1996).

In contrast, Bansal and Corley (2011, p. 237) state their desire to avoid 'premature convergence to a specific style', and there is an acknowledgement that there may be debate on these issues. For example, whereas one of the editors suggests they see merit in the consistent specific (coding) style seen to be emerging in the journal as providing a template for new authors, the other is cautious about this as potentially marking a trend towards mimicking a standardized style of presentation. This therefore moves towards some acknowledgement of the potentially detrimental effects of a particular journal 'style'. Indeed in a commentary produced for the US journal *Organization Science* (OS), Daft and Lewin (2008) argue that OS specifically wants to avoid the type of parochialism found in the Academy of Management (AoM) journals.

However, Bansal and Corley (2011) only go as far as acknowledging there may be debate about whether research reports should be written in a consistent

style. Their quality criteria (see Table 3) speak of epistemological commitments to one form of interpretivism in particular (e.g. methodological rigour being defined mainly in terms of transparency in data analysis through extensive descriptive detail and audit trails). A similar constraint is found in Bluhm *et al.*'s (2011) review of the assessment of progress of qualitative management research in the preceding decade (see Table 2). Their aim is to identify the aspects of qualitative research that 'best contribute to continued advancement' (Bluhm *et al.* 2011, p. 1868). However, they limit their recommendations to what they describe as 'positivist and interpretivist approaches to qualitative research ... [that] ... often follow the principles of grounded theory' (Bluhm *et al.* 2011, p. 1868). Their reason for explicitly excluding alternative philosophical traditions from consideration is that they constitute such a small proportion of published work in their review of top journals (10%). We are thus faced with a tautological situation: papers taking alternative perspectives are not already published in these prestigious journals, therefore recommendations that might encourage their publication are not articulated. From our social constructionist perspective, we note that the way in which the pool of evidence is constructed becomes highly significant. Bluhm *et al.*'s (2011) construction of the extent of the qualitative research domain – what should count as viable qualitative research – has the potential to marginalize alternative epistemological stances.

Looking across the criteria in Tables 2 and 3, we can see overlap in the evaluative criteria identified. This consistency might encourage us to think that these criteria in some way reflect a shared ideal. However, they fail to capture the nature of much qualitative research. For example, in different ways, they all emphasize the importance of the researcher demonstrating objectivity in how data have been collected and analysed. In doing so, they encourage conformity to positivist standards (see Alvesson and Sandberg 2012). By default, they exclude those qualitative approaches inspired, for example, by critical theory or postmodernism, that, given their epistemological rejection of any possibility of a neutral observational language, must engage in alternative ways of evaluating their qualitative research.

The significance of this limitation is highlighted through the more fine-grained inductive textual analysis of Welch *et al.* (2013). Taking a more social constructionist view of knowledge, they examine the rhetorical strategies through which authors argue the theoretical contribution of their qualitative case study

papers. Although they note that some papers draw on different practices, most could be categorized as underpinned by ‘modernist’, ‘revisionist’ or ‘subversive’ rhetorical approaches. The use of the term ‘modernist’ draws on Denzin and Lincoln (1994) and refers to the presentation of qualitative research as suitable for exploration as opposed to theory testing. ‘Revisionist’ rhetorical practices position qualitative research as only suited to later stages of the theory development process. Authors drawing on ‘subversive’ rhetorical practices define their theoretical purpose as ‘an endeavour to gain in-depth understanding of an issue or viewpoint and [the] use [of] empirical data to illustrate the theoretical point’ (Welch *et al.* 2013, p. 256). In other words, researchers in this third group reject the modernist concepts of theory-testing and theory-building through empirical data, but rather treat their qualitative ‘data’ more as a source of understanding and insight, their work as a way of giving voice, and are reflexive about their own roles as researchers. The authors conclude that the inductive, generative rhetoric of the modernist tradition is prevalent and, therefore, authors taking alternative approaches continue to have trouble breaking through. Consequently, they argue that attention to rhetorical phrasing is crucial in achieving a more diverse future for qualitative research in which multiple philosophical positions are accepted.

Such an analysis, and our own social constructionist perspective on knowledge, encourages us to look more closely at the quality criteria suggested by the commentators we review. Perhaps the most commonly advocated quality criterion for qualitative research is that it should be ‘transparent’. This is advocated as necessary for reviewers and readers to be reassured that the researcher has pursued a credible methodology and that their findings are therefore justified. This requirement is presented as unobjectionable and reasonable, but raises various issues. For example, Bluhm *et al.* (2011) encourage transparency as enabling replication, removing researcher bias, allowing the assessment of internal validity, allowing the assessment of the accuracy of findings, and encouraging the standardization of practice. These are all the concerns of positivist approaches. In contrast, much qualitative research accepts the subjectivity of the knowledge production process and is not aiming for replication, accuracy, standardization or to remove researcher bias. So while these terms are presented as neutral, they mask a number of positivist assumptions.

Additionally, we might argue that quantitative research is far from transparent unless one is an

expert in complex statistical techniques. Thus, in a research world dominated by quantitative research, we may speculate that the reason for emphasizing transparency in qualitative research is because many readers are not familiar with the processes of qualitative research, expect them to equate with quantitative research (i.e. to be objective mechanisms or practices applied in a standard fashion) and feel that, if the whole process were mapped out in detail, they might discover the sequence of procedures that has delivered the truth.

Furthermore, in line with our arguments about the diversity of qualitative research, ‘transparency’ is polysemous and might be interpreted differently from different epistemological perspectives. Indeed, in a review of the general methodology field, Ravenek and Rudman (2013, p. 452) are clear that, even within qualitative research, ‘thoroughness and transparency will mean different things in a constructivist grounded theory compared to a critical ethnography or participatory research’. For example, from a critical theory perspective, transparency might mean that the participants were actively involved and democratically participated in the knowledge production process (the audience for the transparency here being the participants). It is clear from Bluhm *et al.* (2011), however, that transparency should be taken to mean providing a lot of detail on procedures. Lee (2014, p. 319) argues that this is to mistake the nature of quality criteria: ‘the techniques of data generation are often treated as if they were equivalent to criteria’; if the proper techniques have been followed, the paper must be of high quality. In contrast, he argues, the ‘goodness’ of data should rather be predicated on ‘the type of analytic task that the data are meant to serve’ (Lee 2014, p. 320).

Our further concern here is that the dominance of one agreed set of criteria may threaten to undermine the very characteristics of qualitative research that are valued by the research community. Indeed, as Bansal and Corley (2011) have argued, in AMJ there has been an increase in ‘factor analytical’ type qualitative research (studies that encompass rigorous and increasingly fragmentary coding schemes and measures of inter-rater reliability). Cornelissen *et al.* (2012) also note that the ‘essayist’ style of writing is in rapid decline in US management research publications, yet, as Tracy (2012) argues, the accepted deductive style of journal presentation works against telling the complex story of qualitative research practice, and the rewriting of an inductive process as a deductive one often opens up the research to additional criticism.

The knowledge base of management research is being constructed partly in relation to whether authors can conform to a certain style of writing that draws its inspiration from a modernist perspective. Overall, we suggest that, where management researchers have engaged in criteriology debates, their interventions have the potential to restrict the methodological pluralism they seek to recognize because of the way they are constructing what would count as credible knowledge.

In the general methodological literature, it is quite commonly argued that criteria should vary according to different underlying purposes of the research, as reviewed earlier (Sparkes 2001). However, as referenced above, management editorials/reviews seem to draw on the presumption that standardization is a good thing. This implies that there is an emergent disjuncture between the general qualitative methodology literature and the prescriptions of management commentators. Here, the latter seem to be emphasizing the need for warranted knowledge to be able to demonstrate its objective foundations in a positivistic fashion, while the former accepts the relevance of alternative epistemological stances and, thus, criteriological diversity as legitimate. Indeed, given that very little of this material is referenced in the commentaries reviewed (see Bansal and Corley 2011; Bluhm *et al.* 2011; Pratt 2009), we argue more generally that there is insufficient engagement with the manifest and long-running criteriology debate in methodological circles by management research commentators, and an apparent failure to recognize the complexities of the debate.

At the end of the last section we identified three main issues arising from our review concerning the establishment of qualitative criteria for management research, which we then went on to explore in more detail. This exploration has revealed that those three issues are thoroughly interlinked. In particular, the extent of publication of qualitative papers – clearly in the minority in the most highly cited outlets for general management research – may shape the nature of the engagement with criteriology: advocating positivist-friendly criteria in order to fit in with the dominant perspective despite the monological implications of this strategy. What is also clear is that there has been an increase in recent years in empirical articles and commentaries that have considered the position and extent of qualitative research, and that have advocated criteria for its evaluation. This may reflect a desire to encourage qualitative research, but the timing of this may also reflect the increasing auditing of

research processes in academic institutions, the rise of ‘status lists’ of journals and the ever more stringent requirements regarding tenure in US universities. In the next section, we explore further the underlying institutional issues that are shaping this process of knowledge production.

Interpreting the review: the social construction and institutionalization of criteriology

How can we then account for the apparent disjuncture between methodological and journal prescriptions for quality criteria? Here we consider alternative ways in which we might view the nature and purpose of assessment criteria. An analysis of two empirical studies of the evaluation of qualitative research (Pratt 2008; Savall *et al.* 2008) offers some initial insight, suggesting that lists of criteria should be construed not as stable independent adjudicators of knowledge, but as both dynamic and shaped by cultural considerations.

In Pratt’s (2008) survey of qualitative research published in top US journals, he argues that editor/reviewer qualities affect the review process, i.e. it is not entirely ‘objective’ aspects of the paper that affect the final judgement. Furthermore, Savall *et al.* (2008), in an analysis of reviews of qualitative papers considered by *Revue Sciences de Gestion* (RSDG) over 28 years, noted that ‘very few points of convergence are to be found among the reviewers, and even fewer points of strong convergence for the same reviewer over time’ (Savall *et al.* 2008, p. 534). In other words, while they could identify shared criteria, these were not consistently applied. In addition, Savall *et al.* (2008) claim that criteria changed over time, from more of a concern with ‘internal validity’ issues in the early years to a concern with ‘external validity’ issues in later years as the intellectual context changed. Thus criteria also appear to be shaped by prevailing interests and commitments of the time.

Pratt’s (2008) study focuses on US journals, and he acknowledges that there may be differences between North American and European journals in their treatment of qualitative research (see also Üsdiken 2014). Similarly, Bluhm *et al.* (2011) conclude that the North American papers they reviewed seemed to give more attention to providing a ‘transparent’ account of their methods than their European counterparts, which accepted less detailed accounts. Consequently, it appears that assessment criteria may not

just vary according to implicit epistemological commitments, time and prevailing interests, but are also a product of their cultural milieu.

Our conclusion from these empirical studies is that the issue is not just about judging qualitative research using appropriate criteria, but that what constitutes appropriate criteria varies according to context and culture. Where there is cultural variance in interpretation and weighting of importance, standard criteria are difficult to establish with reference to some over-arching touchstone. Criteria are themselves social constructions, products of cultural and epistemological contexts, rather than neutral regulators of truth claims. Nevertheless, positivist epistemological concerns are not just being imported into our definitions of qualitative assessment criteria, but also, more broadly, into our thinking and knowledge about what such criteria represent and can achieve. In other words, we argue that a second disjuncture exists between an understanding of the social and cultural production of assessment criteria and the development of criteria that assume reference to some external juridical authority.

Given this, and the agreement in wider methodological circles that research informed by different types of philosophical commitments should be evaluated differently, why do management scholars and reviewers continue to advocate standardization? To understand this, we must examine in more detail the way in which the 'problem' of publishing qualitative research is being addressed through considering the homogenizing forces of the institutional practice of academic global knowledge production.

We argue that the standardization of qualitative research is a product of the institutionalization of particular knowledge production processes. Van Maanen (2011) suggests that what much qualitative research has in common is not shared techniques or a coherent knowledge base, but resistance to the normative, the institutionalized practice, the accepted understanding. So seeking to institutionalize such a practice through standardization seems paradoxical. It is the institutionalized context of academic practice that can explain this seeming paradox, and why there is a divergence emerging between methodological debate and management research practice. We need to pay attention to the context, which is creating a felt need for standardized templates of practice, for example the institutional environments of the journals, the management academic community, the managerial practices in universities, and the career needs of individual academics. Qualitative researchers are of course not

alone in facing these pressures, but may suffer disproportionately as they work outside (and potentially challenge) the conventional (Symon *et al.* 2008).

The intention of calls for best practice lists is to control and regulate qualitative management research. Qualitative research has longstanding problems with legitimacy in the management research field (Pfeffer 1993) and is being disciplined through criteriological means. In this sense, quality criteria lists are themselves agentic – possibly beyond the intentions of their devisors – powerful players in the process of defining the research practices of qualitative researchers in culturally specific ways. As we have seen above, the potential problem with this approach is destroying that which it seeks to nurture. Editors of AMJ have acknowledged that much innovative work in the management field stems from qualitative research (e.g. Rynes 2005), and hence their praiseworthy attempts to widen access to the journal as an 'ethic of care' (Gabriel 2010, p. 770). However, the best practices suggested may narrow the field (see Bansal and Corley 2012; Welch *et al.* 2013) through defining a particular type of legitimate practice for qualitative research: demonstrating transparent and exhaustive methods that '(celebrate) discipline and diligence rather than imagination' (Alvesson and Sandberg 2012, p. 145). Paradoxically, while acceptance into US academy journals may provide legitimacy for qualitative research, gaining that legitimacy may be at the expense of losing epistemological integrity and diversity.

The power relations here are asymmetric: qualitative authors need prestigious journals more than vice versa (as high rejection rates testify). While journals want to encourage the best research to publish in their area, they also need to maintain exclusivity. Gardner *et al.* (2010) draw attention to this quite directly when they acknowledge that publishing more novel types of research is a risky option for journals, potentially leading to the journal itself being evaluated as low quality. Journals are then themselves in a cycle of knowledge production that enforces the reproduction of 'safe' papers. Hence, the onus on qualitative researchers is to modify their beliefs and practices through conforming to (journal-defined) standards of practice rather than the modification of the journals' practices. Some forms of research (such as critical theory and postmodernism), however, would find it impossible to conform, such that, as Grey (2010, p. 685) argues, what is 'marginalized is not research of poor quality but research that is of particular types'.

Establishing generic lists of criteria is conventionally presumed to provide a useful tool for reviewers. But peer-review processes are recognized as fraught with difficulties (Gabriel 2010; Tsang 2012), and we have pointed out above some of the potential problems of applying criteria in this way. Of further interest is what has led to this situation. We argue that the lack of scholars in our field who have a good general understanding and appreciation of different perspectives, and are therefore able to judge both quantitative and qualitative research within their own purviews, is a symptom of the disciplining of the knowledge production process. As management academics, we have worked out increasingly refined ways of achieving valued goals, leading to greater fragmentation and specialization of the academic labour process, such that we have increasing pockets of specialism (Ritzer 2009). We need lists of criteria to compensate for lack of knowledge and, yet, despite greater specialization, we expect the wide variety of approaches under the umbrella term 'qualitative research' to be assessable by a general set of criteria.

What is the individual qualitative researcher to make of this situation? As we have shown, much work has gone into suggesting ways in which qualitative researchers may present their work more persuasively. With the effort that goes into article production and the pressure to publish, it is small wonder that academics would like to be given a set of criteria that will guarantee their work will be taken seriously and accepted by a decreasing pool of 'approved journals'. As Alvesson and Sandberg (2012) argue, there is the danger here that such processes produce the 'journal publication technician'. However, there are limits to what changes the individual qualitative researcher can instigate within an academic context where they are under constant pressure to prove their worth in the 'audit society' (Power 1999). We argue that it is time to consider other stakeholders in the process and the changes that may be required at other levels in order to encourage the publication of diverse qualitative research studies.

Strategies for change

Given the conclusions of our review, how may we encourage change in this area? In strengthening the odds of being published in highly cited journals, the onus has been predominantly on qualitative researchers themselves to make their papers 'unasailable' (Pratt 2008) by reorienting their work to

reviewers who may not be expert in the methods, to journals that only accept particular formats, and to readers who need convincing of the general approach taken. While there are some actions that qualitative researchers could take to improve quality, it is also important to recognize the network of relations within which qualitative researchers are situated, and which may constrain the degree of agency they have in this process (Gabriel 2010). As above, it is this broader, socially constructed system of knowledge production and practice that legitimizes standardized criteria. Therefore, it follows that, if we want to bring about change in research practice, we also need to focus on these types of processes and practices. Here, we review, critique and further develop recommendations for mobilizing changes in the management research community emanating from a variety of sources. A summary can be found in Table 4. This table includes changes already pursued and may also include strategies currently being considered by journals, as these may not be made public.

In the recommendations that follow we aim to suggest incremental changes that could be contemplated now rather than radical sweeping changes to knowledge production. Our suggestions are within the existing academic framework and, consequently, perhaps currently more feasible with respect to legitimating qualitative approaches specifically. However, such changes may well lead to institutional change in an incremental way.

In terms of editorial practice, one of the most explicit signals of promoting qualitative research has been to appoint expert qualitative researchers as associate editors and editors. As Welch *et al.* (2013) highlight, editorial policies and personnel influence the type of qualitative research published, and this is a strategy that has been used by a number of European and US-based journals. Indeed, Daft and Lewin (2008) argue that *Organization Science* has adopted a decentralized editorial structure specifically to encourage diversity, their 22 senior editors facilitating 'a broader publication philosophy and world view than any single editor or small group could provide' (Daft and Lewin 2008, p.182). Editors have their own views about what is good qualitative research, and their own epistemological preferences are important to these judgements. We may presume that such editors have an understanding of different perspectives and an appreciation of the diversity of qualitative research.

Rather than offering only prescriptions for how qualitative researchers can make their work more

Table 4. Suggestions for mobilizing change

Stakeholder	Suggested intervention
Journals	<p>Appoint expert qualitative researchers as (associate) editors.</p> <p>Initiate and publish editorials about criteriology debates.</p> <p>Consider other types of research outcomes such as justice, ethics and impact.</p> <p>Promote and celebrate diverse approaches and methods.</p> <p>Commission analysis of reviews received by qualitative researchers.</p> <p>Recognize a wider range of success criteria for journals.</p> <p>Move towards alternative presentation formats.</p> <p>Encourage reviewers to be explicit and reflexive about their own assessment criteria and competence.</p> <p>Encourage debate, negotiation and mutual learning between reviewer and author.</p> <p>Provide training for reviewers that includes enlarged developmental role.</p> <p>Make internal audits of review practices publicly available.</p> <p>Appoint ombudsperson to report on the fairness and quality of the review process.</p> <p>Engage in continual cycle of reflection and development of assessment process.</p>
Management research community	<p>Promote diverse methodological content in doctoral level training.</p> <p>Resist moves towards inappropriate standardization and work towards equal rights for divergent ways of understanding.</p> <p>Recognize our own agency and reflect on our own publishing behaviours and discourses.</p> <p>Encourage already successful members of community to champion change.</p> <p>Encourage diversity and recognize legitimacy of range of publication outlets.</p>

publishable, editorials could present the debates about criteriology, such as we have outlined earlier, thus seeking to address the emergent criteriological disjuncture we have described. Such debates may encourage the consideration of other important research outcomes (distinct from theoretical advancement and rigour) such as justice, ethics and positive social impact (Correa 2013).

Editors could also take responsibility for promoting and celebrating research that has adopted novel approaches, and methodologies that challenge preconceptions about what constitutes high-quality research. While we see calls for more qualitative research in various journals, we have seen that this tends to be seeking qualitative research of a particular kind, rather than encouraging diversity. More generally, journals may want to reconsider what constitutes success criteria for the journal, perhaps moving towards more risk-taking publishing practices, fulfilling the needs of a wider range of stakeholders. Such a move may entail a change in current publication practices, such as considering alternative presentation formats, which may be more accommodating of the needs of qualitative research: for example, the recent developments in using visual media within qualitative research (e.g. Davison *et al.* 2012). Indeed, the US AoM has already begun this process in developing the new journal *Academy of Management Discoveries*, which will showcase multimedia research. Similarly, UK Government pressures to publish funded work in open

access journals (Finch Report 2012) provide a challenge to the current institutional context of journal publication, and may have begun to loosen the accepted framework of academic knowledge production.

While journals may publish editorials concerning their acceptance of qualitative research, it is in the (private) peer-review process that these judgements are actually made. With respect to the review process, reviewers should be encouraged to be reflexive and explicit about their own epistemological commitments and, therefore, the assessment criteria they may be (otherwise implicitly) applying (see Correa 2013). Indeed, as noted above, the increasingly fragmented nature of management research may lead to increasingly narrow areas of speciality (Ritzer 2009), and Pratt (2008) has suggested that some of the problems experienced by qualitative researchers may lie in the hands of reviewers who have insufficient training in qualitative methods. Given that Bedeian (2003) has suggested that over a third of AoM journal reviewers submit reviews of papers in which they have no expertise, reviewers perhaps need to be more honest with themselves over their competence to review particular papers (Tsang 2012) – and this has to be from a methodological perspective and not just a theoretical one. Authors are disempowered by the review process and, given there are few topics in management research that are not debatable, the review process could be reoriented from one of subservience to

reviewer concerns (Daft and Lewin 2008) to one that is more a process of mutual learning. Indeed, Tsang (2014, p. 191) suggests that 'authors should be given more voice in deciding the changes they would like to make'. In this, the editor or associate editor also has a role, in facilitating discussion and development. It may be that training for an enlarged developmental role for editorial teams would be beneficial.

The monitoring of journal content presented by Bansal and Corley (2011) potentially works well as some form of corrective. As they conclude, their review has already revealed a potentially constraining norm developing in AMJ and consequently steps can be taken to challenge this. Complacency is not an option, given Daft and Lewin's (2008, p. 178) observation that 'the evidence suggests that papers published in peer reviewed journals rarely live up to the editorial aspirations, partly because as a journal evolves over time its focus systematically narrows to reflect the orthodoxies of the community of scholars that emerges around it'. We argue that reflexivity on the part of journals continues to be essential but, in addition, the results of any internal audit of review practices could be made public, including a general analysis of what is desk rejected and the reasons for this. Indeed, most of the AMJ editorials helpfully give some brief review of reasons for rejection, and Clark *et al.* (2006) also provide this insight for the *Journal of Management Studies* (although this is not specific to qualitative methods).

Currently, however, these commentaries may also raise more issues. Brief allusions to the need for 'rigorous execution' (Clark *et al.* 2006, p. 656) or concerns that 'constructs and measures are inadequately operationalized' (Clark *et al.* 2006, p. 660) hint at general evaluative criteria derived from positivist concerns. Rather than rigorous methodological execution, journals could reorient to 'plausible' methodologies (Daft and Lewin 2008, p. 182) and rigorous theory development. Additionally, given the particular struggles of qualitative research to be heard, there could be more monitoring of the peer-review process (see Savall *et al.* 2008) to identify where implicit assumptions may encourage or discourage particular developmental opportunities. Gendon (2008) advocates introducing the position of ombudsperson, which may help prevent innovative papers being rejected for myopic reasons. These ombudspersons could publish reports on the fairness and quality of the review process, and therefore action the suggestions that we have made above. Such monitoring and assessment needs to be a continual cycle of

reflection and development of the assessment process (see Gardner *et al.* 2010).

We are not advocating here that all qualitative research is equally acceptable or that there should be no evaluation at all. Rather, the evaluation process could recognize the responsibilities of the review and publication process as much as the authoring process. We are noting here the significant roles of editors in the institutional context. However, addressing editorial processes and practices – although encouraging a move towards a duty of care (Gabriel 2010) – is on its own insufficient. Rather, there is an onus on the management research community more generally to address some of these challenges.

An ongoing concern highlighted earlier is the specialization of researchers within a particular area and the perceived lack of qualitative methodological expertise. This failure to encourage the development of qualitative research skills has been noted in the management education literature (Cassell *et al.* 2009), where there have been some concerns about the outputs of doctoral-level research training programmes. For example, Lowery and Evans (2004) question the predominance of the teaching of quantitative methods in business schools by asking whether this focus is because 'they are the only ones we know how to teach' (Lowery and Evans 2004, p. 318). This concern with the development of qualitative expertise in qualitative methods is in stark contrast to actions around research methods training at doctoral level in the UK, where interventions have been designed to enhance quantitative skills (e.g. Economic and Social Research Council 2013). As a management research community, and as members of business and management schools, we are ideally placed to influence the development of curricula in this area to address the current imbalance.

Furthermore, it is important that, as a general management research community, we recognize our own agency within these knowledge producing processes (Greenwood and Suddaby 2006). For example, many of the readers (and the authors) of this paper are: editors of journal quality lists; research audit panel members; business and management school research deans who use journal lists; editors; and reviewers. Hence, we are ideally placed to challenge such practices and resist moves towards inappropriate standardization through our own publishing behaviours and practices and our support for others. One way in which we can start to challenge institutional processes regarding journal lists, for example, is to be more reflexive over how our own discourse

creates and maintains this situation. As Alvesson and Sandberg (2012) point out, when we discuss the journals in which we are publishing in the corridors of business schools and bars at conferences, we are actively involved in the identity regulation of others (Alvesson and Willmott 2002) by normalizing publication in top journals only.

Generally, institutional theory suggests that change is likely to come from those at the periphery of institutional fields, who benefit less from the status quo (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and we might view qualitative researchers as in this position (Symon *et al.* 2008). However, Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) also highlight the importance of centrally placed organizational actors – those who seem to benefit most from the status quo – in championing change. In considering the impact of institutional processes on accounting scholars, Humphrey and Lukka (2011) suggest that the responsibility for encouraging change lies with senior academics who have the opportunity to improve things at various levels, ranging from their practices on the ‘shop floor’ in promotion decisions to their impact as editors and reviewers. This might include encouraging diversity in the range of publication outlets seen as legitimate, thus rectifying some of the power asymmetries that result from relying on citation indexes as indicators of quality, which enables a relatively small number of high-quality journals to dictate the nature of the management research field (Mingers and Willmott 2013). Indeed, recently we have seen the publication of reflections on the UK Research Evaluation Framework (REF) process from members of the business and management panel that suggest overreliance on journal lists to judge research may not be an effective strategy (Pidd and Broadbent 2015).

In summary, in terms of the development of criteriology within the management research community, we are advocating more reflexivity, not just in relation to individual researchers, but on the part of the journals themselves. We suggest journals, at a detailed level, look more closely at the language in which they phrase their quality criteria for qualitative research practice. At a broader level, journals could encourage critical appraisal of reviewing and editorial practices, including the wider effects of these as they interact with the current structuring of knowledge production within the management research community. We advocate an acceptance of pluralism with respect to the epistemological groundings of qualitative research, and the development of journal structures that might

iteratively and continually review (emergent and informal) journal processes and products to maintain this heterogeneity. We also suggest further development of opportunities to surface assumptions and reveal the contested nature of taken-for-granted positions and perspectives.

To the extent that other institutional practices (such as citation indexes) are still in place, we may ask what would prompt stakeholders to engage in new practices that may threaten their own career paths? We do not see these suggestions as necessarily career-limiting for any particular individuals. Indeed, for qualitative researchers, they may be career-enhancing, allowing more of their work to be taken seriously, evaluated according to relevant criteria and to be published in a wider range of outlets. AMJ's editorials were written to encourage the publication of qualitative research, recognizing that this can often be some of the most innovative and influential research produced. While we are suggesting that current strategies for rectifying this situation are rather limited, our intervention should not be career-limiting for editors, but rather enhancing for their journals as encouraging the publication of more of this innovative research. For Deans, advantages could include more recognition of some of the innovative research currently pursued in their own institutions and the potential for the publication of more of their colleagues' work. Indeed, our overall strategy attacks this problem on various levels, and we would advocate this as a collective effort involving the management discipline in a general rethinking of what types of knowledge are being reproduced in our existing system.

Conclusion

Through our review, this paper contributes to the ongoing debates about what constitutes appropriate criteria for evaluating qualitative management research (Johnson *et al.* 2006; Welch *et al.* 2013) and how we could encourage the publication of qualitative research. Our goal in this paper has not been to produce more criteria for qualitative research. Rather, we have sought to analyse the nature of the criteriological debate itself as it is made manifest in reviews and commentaries within the management research community. Taking a social constructionist perspective, our analysis has highlighted the disciplining effects of the institutionalization of knowledge practices. As such, our paper makes three significant contributions to the debate.

First, we establish two important disjunctures: between methodological prescriptions for epistemologically diverse criteria and management journal prescriptions for standardized criteria; and between the culturally dependent production of criteria and their positioning as normative and objective. In the first case, we argue that commentary in the management discipline has not kept up with developments around criteriology, and as a consequence, runs the risk of restricting developments in theoretical thinking. In the second case, we see the difference between the 'front stage' enactment of agreed objective standardization of practice and the 'back stage' processes of deployment in social contexts (Goffman 1959). We argue that, in seeking to change everyday practice, we also need to pay attention to these hard-to-control backstage processes through surfacing and challenging the rhetoric and hidden assumptions of reviews and commentaries.

Secondly, applying a social constructionist view of knowledge production to the criteriological process reveals new insights. This perspective has encouraged us to examine in detail the criteria suggested, surfacing underlying knowledge constituting assumptions and suggesting alternative readings of these. This alternative reading may give us pause for reflection as we consider whether such criteria may encourage specifically positivist concerns and goals to the detriment of alternatives. We argue that this is not simply a 'technical' issue of methodology, but highlights the processes of how knowledge production is disciplined through processes of legitimation and homogenization. As management researchers, we need to be aware of these processes and alert to their potential effects. Here, we have sought to give voice to other perspectives, which may be marginalized or silenced through this process.

Third, this type of alternative perspective draws attention to the effects of current strategies of interventions that focus on the individual and seek behavioural change only at this level, disciplining such researchers into particular normative practices. Our contribution here is to widen this perspective and suggest alternative strategies that move beyond the individual researcher to other stakeholders and broader strategies.

As noted above, our analysis adopts a particular perspective, not previously adopted with respect to the evaluation of qualitative management research. It is, however, one perspective, and we acknowledge that there are alternatives. There are academics that would not agree with our view of knowledge production, and it is their right to do so. We are not rejecting positivist

styles of research, merely encouraging appropriate sets of evaluation criteria and seeking to give voice to perspectives that might be disenfranchised. By advocating a contingent criteriology, we are encouraging a more reflexive evaluation of research stemming from a range of epistemologies (e.g. postmodern, post-colonial, critical). We could therefore be said to be advocating another type of prescriptive framework, this one, however, based on pluralism, rather than on the advocacy of one epistemology as a reflection of what is currently published. However, coupled with this pluralist framework of criteria, we also argue for greater reflexivity on the part of journal editorial staff and reviewers in their application of any type of criteria, and a move away from the continual call for qualitative researchers to 'do better' to a recognition that other actors could also 'do better'.

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