

Primer: Qualitative Research in Strategic Management

Strategic Management Journal [originally posted September 2014; updated October 2014]

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Introduction: [Multiple On-Ramps to the Qualitative Freeway](#)

Richard A. Bettis, Alfonso Gambardella, Constance Helfat, Will Mitchell (co-editors, the *Strategic Management Journal*), September 18, 2014. DOI: 10.1002/smj.2317

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The *Strategic Management Journal* encourages studies using qualitative empirical methods that investigate important research questions and phenomena in order to generate new insights. We believe that qualitative research often provides a means of identifying generalizable patterns concerning important questions in the field of strategic management.

The range of topics to which qualitative research has contributed in strategic management is wide and deep. Topics include those such as innovation, top management, collaboration across firms, diversification, acquisitions, new ventures, internal organization, top management teams, decision making, organizational learning,

dynamic capabilities, strategic renewal, and more. Although some qualitative research focuses on processes, other studies address structural phenomena, documenting both of these at a level of detail and nuance that can be difficult or impossible to achieve using only quantitative methods. Each type of focus also provides a basis for theorizing and future empirical work.

Qualitative research can also spark debates on many questions. A few examples include: How can firms balance exploration and exploitation? When do cognitive heuristics facilitate or constrain strategic decision making and firm performance? When do managers help or limit strategic change? How do firms' strategic actions interact with social welfare?

Multiple routes to insights

Qualitative work can follow multiple routes to generating insights. Qualitative work sometimes builds deductively on prior work to provide a framing logic that cases serve to illustrate and assess, whether via interpretations, predictions, or other insights that researchers can apply beyond the specific context of a study. Qualitative methods can also begin inductively with more open-ended questions concerning unexplored issues and phenomena with the goal of providing insights that inform scholarship in strategic management more generally. In parallel, qualitative work can provide rich nuance about empirical phenomena, whether by extending prior research or exploring new contexts.

Thus, the *Strategic Management Journal* welcomes qualitative research both as a means of theory building and as a route to identifying important phenomena or unidentified aspects of previously explored phenomena that in turn can form the basis for future research. Qualitative analysis can be applied to single cases or to multiple cases simultaneously. Whether via a single case or multiple cases, a key feature of qualitative research involves identification of patterns, as a basis for theory development and/or further empirical investigation.

The opportunity and challenge of multiple methods

Scholars approach qualitative research using a multiplicity of methods. This poses both an opportunity and a challenge for researchers. The opportunity is clear—multiple qualitative methods provide more options for research. But

the challenge arises because the multiplicity of qualitative methods can also lead to unproductive debates between authors and reviewers, in which the conversation focuses more on preferences for particular forms of qualitative method than on the content of the research.

In our view, the debate about preferred methods often is an unfortunate distraction from the primary goal of research: to develop informative content that raises and addresses important questions. We believe that there are many valid approaches to qualitative analysis, each of which can push forward research in strategic management.

Pointers to methods

To encourage multi-faceted design of qualitative studies, we asked several active scholars to prepare a brief outline of their approaches to qualitative methods for empirical research, along with references to more detailed explanations of their approaches. Each of the individuals that we approached immediately and enthusiastically agreed to participate. We have now received these pointers, and have posted them on the “Editorials & Primers” page of the *SMJ* website [<http://smj.strategicmanagement.net>].

By making these pointers available on the website together with this editorial as a Primer on Qualitative Research in Strategic Management, we hope both to provide a useful guide to a variety of qualitative methods and to emphasize that researchers in strategic management can use a range of different approaches to qualitative research.

The current pointers include discussions of: qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 2014); the use of qualitative research to investigate “how” questions (Antebi, Lifshitz, and Tushman, 2014); methods for first-order and second-order analysis (Gioia, 2014); the use of multiple case studies to build theory (Eisenhardt, 2014); grounded theory (Mitchell, 2014); and qualitative approaches to strategy-as-practice research (Whittington, 2014).

Addition (October 2014): We have added a thoughtful pointer on rhetorical analysis (Suddaby, 2014).

These approaches provide thoughtful ways to address qualitative research; scholars are welcome to think of them as structured frameworks they might use for their own studies.

Clearly, this is not an exhaustive list of all existing or potential approaches to qualitative research – we very much encourage scholars to find other routes to relevant qualitative work, including developing new techniques when appropriate. Nonetheless, the pointers provide a set of on-ramps to the qualitative freeway.

Explaining your choice of methods

We also have a suggestion for authors who are preparing qualitative work for submission to the *Strategic Management Journal*. We suggest that the methods section of the paper describe the type of qualitative method that you have chosen – whether an established method or an approach that you have refined to suit the needs of your research – and explain briefly why it suits your research context. For many papers, it may also be useful to prepare a more extensive discussion of the approach and its relevance for the research context, which can be attached as an appendix to the paper. The goal here is to be explicit about what approach you are using, why you have chosen it, and how you have implemented it. This will help provide a clear basis for discussion about the methodology with reviewers – and, ultimately, the broader audience. In turn, this will help move the discussion from the process to the content of the research.

Most generally, we strongly encourage multiple forms of qualitative research in *Strategic Management Journal*, whether based on new approaches or following existing routes. As with quantitative empirical research, we expect researchers to hold to the highest standards of rigor in applying their chosen method. Nonetheless, as in all research, a method is but a means to an end – of gaining a better and more accurate understanding of all facets of strategic management.

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All references: This primer and on-line at <http://smj.strategicmanagement.net/editorials-and-primers.php>

Using Qualitative Research for “How” Questions

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Qualitative data and methods, and associated inductive theory building, are powerful research tools, but not always. A first question to ask is when to use them. We argue that qualitative data and methods are most useful when addressing uncharted questions and terrains (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Because less is known in such contexts, existing theories might not apply.

Rich descriptions are often needed to jumpstart our understanding of these novel contexts. For instance, qualitative methods are well suited to identify the challenges that open, community based innovation pose for incumbents (Lakhani, Lifshitz, and Tushman, 2013). Similarly, interviews and observations can help understand the practices that incumbents might engage in to defend their legitimacy in morally contested markets (Anteby, 2010). Because, we don't know how open innovation or morally contested markets operate, qualitative data are our best bet at starting to understand them.

Once established that qualitative data and methods are well suited to our research question, the next question is how to properly use them. Many scholars have written insightful books on proper use of qualitative data: see, for instance, Charmaz (2012) and Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007). Therefore, our goal is not to reiterate those guidelines.

Instead, we want to point out a common misstep that novice qualitative scholars often commit. They immediately try to use their data to answer a “why” question. However, qualitative data generally tend to first answer “how” questions.

By asking “how” questions, qualitative data get at underlying mechanisms. For example, what are the contrasting mechanisms of open versus closed innovation (e.g., Benkler, 2006) or just

how are exploitative innovations processes different from exploratory innovation (e.g., O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013)?

Insights on underlying mechanisms about how things get done help us, in turn, understand “why” questions – e.g., why are incumbents reluctant to adopt open innovation (Lakhani et al., 2013), why are some structures more effective in exploring (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013), or why occupational identities can drive employees' efforts and actions (Anteby, 2008)?

But trying to answer a “why question” upfront is often a huge misstep; doing so can easily lead to overlooking the painfully labor-intensive steps needed to analyze and re-analyze qualitative data. Yet it is only by clearly laying out and understanding how things work that we can figure out why things work the way they do. Or at least that's the way, we believe, qualitative data and methods are best used.

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Theory Building from Multiple Cases

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Building theory from case studies is a research method that involves using one or more cases to create theory – i.e., theoretical constructs, propositions linking those constructs, and the underlying theoretical logic of those propositions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The theory is emergent in that it is developed by recognizing the patterns of relationships among constructs within and across the cases.

This method has been used to develop theory about diverse strategy topics such as strategic decision making (Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano, 2000), internal organization of large firms (Martin and Eisenhardt, 2010; Gilbert, 2005), alliance strategy (Ozcan and Eisenhardt, 2010), and acquisition integration (Graebner, 2009). Classic research has relied on this method as well (Chandler, 1962). Papers using this method are disproportionately regarded as the “most interesting” research (Bartunek, Rynes, and Ireland, 2006).

The cases at the heart of the method are rich, empirical descriptions of a focal phenomenon. They typically rely on a variety of data sources such as interviews, surveys, historical sources, and blogs that allow triangulation of information. Replication logic is critical to building theories from case studies. That is, each case serves as a distinct experiment that stands on its own as an analytic unit.

Like a series of related laboratory experiments, the cases are discrete experiments that serve as a replications, contrasts, and extensions (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). While it may seem subjective, well-done research is actually reasonably objective because the close adherence to the data constrains the researcher. Data provide the discipline as mathematics does in formal modeling.

Although single case studies can be effective, a larger number – between 4 and 12 – is typically more powerful. A larger number of cases bolsters the support of the emergent propositions, sharpens them at a more exact level of abstraction and makes the emergent theory more

generalizable. For example, Bingham and Eisenhardt (2011) study “simple rules” heuristics using cases from Singapore, Finland, and the U.S. Use of multiple cases in multiple countries enables a more generalizable theory to emerge rather than simply a single-country perspective.

More cases also can enable theoretical extensions. For example, Ozcan and Eisenhardt (2010) studied how entrepreneurs formed alliance portfolios in the nascent wireless gaming industry. Some of the entrepreneurs began at the start of wireless gaming, but others entered about 2 years later which provided the opportunity to develop theory that distinguished between initial and late entrants.

Theory building from cases is particularly useful for research questions that are wide open with little prior theory or empirical evidence. The first step is often an extensive literature review that reveals an important gap in the extant literature. For example, Graebner (2009) studied acquisition from the perspective of the seller after realizing that the extant literature focused almost exclusively on buyers. Hallen and Eisenhardt (2012) studied tie formation after recognizing that the literature ignored tie formation efficiency – i.e., how long it took to form a tie, and whether the tie was with a preferred partner.

Questions of “how” and “why” are particularly well-addressed. In contrast, questions about “how often” or “which variable is more important” are not as well-addressed (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

A major reason for the popularity and relevance of theory building from cases is that it is a useful bridge between rich qualitative evidence and the more common large-scale deductive research. Since the method is deeply embedded in empirical data, it is likely to produce accurate, interesting, and testable theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, it is a useful complement to the dominant deductive research methods within strategy.

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A 1st-Order / 2nd-Order Qualitative Approach to Understanding Strategic Management

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One of the most important purposes of good qualitative research is to create new ways of understanding strategic management by discovering or fashioning new concepts and theories that have both originality and utility (Corley and Gioia, 2011). Clearly, we need a deeper understanding of the *processes* by which strategic thought and action unfold (see Langley, 1999). Developing better theories of how strategic managers think and act requires an approach that is adequate at the level of meaning of those actually living the strategic experience *and* adequate at the level of scholars theorizing their experience.

To meet the first criterion we first need to assume that executives are “knowledgeable agents” – i.e., people who know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions to us. A major role for the researcher, then, is to give an adequate account that captures the meaning of the executives’ experience in their own terms (which I term a “1st-order account”). Of course, another major role for the researcher is to discern patterns in the data, to surface concepts and relationships that might escape the awareness of the informants, and then formulate them in theoretically-relevant terms (which I term a 2nd-order account).

In my way of doing research, the research report and especially the findings narrative involves a systematic presentation of both a 1st-order analysis (faithfully using informant-centric terms) and a 2nd-order analysis (using researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions).

Taken together, the reporting of both orders of analysis can produce qualitatively rigorous research that demonstrates links between the data and the induction of new concepts that portray strategic management processes. 1st-order accounts most often depend on semi-structured interviews; 2nd-order accounts often utilize qualitative data analysis packages to discern concepts and relationships.

Interviews should of course be supplemented by multiple data sources (e.g., archives, field

observation, media documentation) to establish context. At the 2nd-order level I and my collaborators give particular attention to nascent concepts that do not seem to have adequate theoretical referents in the existing literature (e.g., ‘sensegiving’ from Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991 and “identity ambiguity” from Corley and Gioia, 2004) or existing concepts that “leap out” because of their relevance to a new domain (“optimal distinctiveness” from Gioia, Price, Hamilton, and Thomas, 2010).

Once all the relevant 1st-order terms/categories and 2nd-order concepts/themes/ dimensions have been identified, we assemble them into a *data structure*. Constructing a data structure is a pivotal step that not only allows the visualization of important theoretical relationships, but also shows the reader the progression from raw 1st-order data to theoretically relevant 2nd-order concepts. As important as a data structure might be, however, it is nonetheless a static picture of a dynamic phenomenon, and process research doesn’t actually investigate processes unless the static picture can be converted into a motion picture.

Therefore, it is critical to keep a focus on the ultimate goal of building a dynamic inductive model that: 1) is grounded in the data (as exemplified by the data structure) and 2) captures the informants’ experience in dynamic theoretical terms (as shown in the model). Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) provide a more detailed description of the philosophy and execution of this approach.

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Grounded Theory, With or Without Priors

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Context: Qualitative scholarship using grounded theory methodologies suits research contexts in which prior research provides only limited relevant theoretical framing for the empirical phenomenon of interest, while the empirical context provides a sufficiently detailed environment to generate the basis for new theory (i.e., basic assumptions, primary concepts, major causal mechanisms that connect the concepts).

The approach draws from seminal work by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). Similar ideas also appeared in contemporary discussions of institutional economics (e.g., Ward, 1966).

The primary goal of grounded theory research is to identify meaningful patterns that help understand what is happening within the empirical context and how the actors in that context solve problems or undertake new activities.

Principle steps: Grounded theory methodology involves five primary steps.

1. **Data collection:** Typically based on field notes and other qualitative information; sometimes including quantitative data; data collection often occurs sequentially, with each step informed by what the scholar has learned in prior steps.
2. **Coding:** The scholar identifies key points within the data, sometimes including memos about potential relationships within the data.
3. **Concepts:** Sorting codes to identify those with similar content.
4. **Categories:** Grouping of similar concepts.
5. **Theory:** Explanations about relationships among concepts and categories.

Some scholars then iteratively compare the explanations in step 5 to new data and, in turn, refine the codes, concepts, and categories in order to generate more robust theory.

The method does not seek to describe all aspects of an empirical context. Instead, the goal is to identify a core set of theoretical concepts and

mechanisms that arise within the context and, ideally, apply to similar contexts.

The sequence typically leads to probability statements (hypotheses) about the relationship between concepts/categories. The validity and strength of the theory and related hypotheses are based on perceived fit, relevance, range of application to multiple contexts, and adaptability to changing conditions.

Variations – priors versus no priors: Glaser and Strauss ultimately differed in their views on whether scholars should take prior literature into account when beginning a grounded theory project. Grounded theory scholars following the Glaser tradition prefer to generate new theory without considering prior research, believing that the prior work risks constraining new insights (see Glaser, 1992). Strauss, by contrast, suggests that it is sometimes appropriate to begin a project with a tentative set of expected codes, while leaving room for new ideas to emerge (see Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

A variation of the Straussian “prior informed” approach involves developing initial general “orienting propositions” based on prior literature, then using grounded theory techniques to extend and refine the propositions into more specific hypotheses (for an example, see Zhao, et al., 2005); the “orienting proposition” approach is appropriate when prior research provides a partial frame for the new empirical context but does not provide sharp enough theory to develop a priori hypotheses.

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Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)

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Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) formalizes the logic of case-oriented comparative research and elaborates an analytic approach centered on its principles. This analytic approach is comprised of a set of interrelated strategies and techniques that both bridge and transcend the qualitative-quantitative divide in social research. While the application of QCA entails data analysis, this analysis occurs in close dialogue with cases and with theoretical and substantive knowledge.

QCA's key features include five elements:

1. *Allowance for causal complexity:* QCA privileges causal complexity, allowing for the possibility that causation may be both conjunctural and equifinal. When causation has these qualities, several different combinations of conditions may be linked to the same outcome.
2. *Integration of case-based and other forms of substantive knowledge:* QCA works best in a dialogue with cases and/or substantive knowledge. This knowledge sets the stage for the specification of relevant causal conditions, the calibration of crisp-set and fuzzy-set membership scores, and the resolution of 'contradictions' (cases with the same causal profile but different outcomes).
3. *Use of the method of elimination:* QCA uses truth tables and controlled case comparisons to eliminate causal conditions in an incremental, context-bound manner. The method of elimination is superior to both Mill's method of agreement and his indirect method of difference because the focus is on eliminating causal conditions, not confirming them.
4. *Focus on set theoretic and quasi-set theoretic relations:* QCA seeks to identify sets of cases that share an outcome. If cases with a given configuration of causally relevant conditions share an outcome, they constitute a subset of the cases with the outcome. This set-theoretic pattern supports an argument of sufficiency, assuming this

interpretation is corroborated with other evidence, usually case level.

5. *Case-oriented counterfactual analysis:* An important feature of QCA is its use of theoretical and substantive knowledge to define 'easy' counterfactuals—hypothetical cases that resemble empirical cases in all respects except one, with the one difference making the outcome more likely in the hypothetical case than in the empirical case. The use of easy counterfactuals makes it possible for QCA users to emulate the practice of conventional, small-N comparative research.

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Strategy-as-Practice (SAP)

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Strategy-as-Practice researchers typically conceive of strategy as a kind of work. As such, strategy is seen as something people do, as well as something that organizations have. A common way of organizing the field is via three categories: *practitioners*, those who do strategy work (especially managers and consultants, but potentially others); *praxis*, episodes of actual strategy work (e.g., boardroom strategy discussions, strategy retreats, or strategy communication events); and *practices*, the tools of strategy work (the regularized means by which strategy work is done, analytical, discursive, organizational, and material).

Strategy-as-Practice research is foremost an empirical domain, therefore. It is open to a number of theoretical perspectives, including the sensemaking, institutional, and organizational routines traditions in organization theory. Strategy-as-Practice research also draws frequently on various kinds of practice theory, including those of Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, and Schatzki. Likewise, Strategy-as-Practice researchers make use of a range of empirical methodologies, including ethnography, video-ethnography, photography, participant observation, discourse analysis, interviews, and surveys.

Strategy-as-Practice researchers adopt both variance and process approaches. The Strategy-as-Practice ‘case study’ is often defined at the level of particular episodes (e.g., meetings or projects), rather than at the level of a whole organization. Accordingly, outcomes are not only defined in terms of organizational performance (e.g., profitability, growth, or survival), but also in terms of the effectiveness (defined in locally-relevant terms) of particular practitioners, practices, or episodes of praxis.

Although Strategy-as-Practice researchers use many different approaches to explore their empirical domain, recent research has become more attentive to three themes.

1. Strategy-as-Practice research is focusing increasingly on practices with wide generality (e.g., strategy retreats, analytical

tools, material technologies, consultant interventions).

2. Following from the first, Strategy-as-Practice researchers make more use of structured comparison, taking advantage of sharp empirical focus on types of episode, practice, or practitioners.
3. Strategy-as-Practice research is supplementing its original ‘micro’ orientation with efforts to situate particular episodes or cases within a larger (‘macro’) picture, aiming at practice improvement or critique.

Nevertheless, Strategy-as-Practice research is likely to remain diverse, according to the demands of its empirical field.

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Rhetorical Analysis

a.

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Rhetorical analysis is a research method that seeks to understand how symbols and text are used strategically. It is based on the assumption that humans are unique in their use of symbols and that symbolic action not only reflects reality but also helps to construct it.

Rhetoric originated in ancient Greece (Aristotle, 1932) and provided the dominant mode of reasoning in western civilization until the advent of science. There is a contemporary renaissance in the popularity of rhetorical analysis, driven by an emerging awareness of a massive explosion in the production of text and symbols (Burke, 1966), the creation of new media for their dissemination (McLuhan, 1964) and a growing understanding of their power (Foucault, 1972).

This is particularly true in the context of management where considerable research has demonstrated the importance of rhetorical strategies in constructing legitimacy (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), facilitating change (Green, 2004), creating organizational identification (Cheney, 1983), and determining what constitutes economic knowledge (McCloskey, 1998).

A broad variety of techniques have been developed over the years that focus attention on the various ways in which text and symbols persuade. Core techniques include the following:

1. **Kairos:** Any analysis of persuasive speech must be particularly attentive to the context within which the rhetorical act occurs. Kairos, literally the “opportune moment”, refers to the critical confluence of place, time, culture and audience in determining the effectiveness of an argument.
2. **Persuasive appeals:** Aristotle identified three basic categories of argument; appeals to logic (*logos*), appeals to emotion (*pathos*) and appeals to character (*ethos*). Although in contemporary use, scholars tend to evaluate the effectiveness of one appeal over another, Aristotle clearly assumed that the effectiveness of an argument relied on the interaction of all three rhetorical appeals.

3. **Canons:** Cicero, the Roman orator, shifted the focus of rhetoric from an analysis of the persuasive elements of text and symbols to a focus on the generic structure of persuasive speech. He identified five “canons” of effective speech; invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery.
4. **Tropes:** Tropes, commonly called “figures of speech”, are rhetorical devices that persuade by connecting immediate arguments to large ideological meanings. A common rhetorical trope, for example, is synecdoche, in which a part of an object is used to refer to the whole – i.e. “hired hands” refers to workers. Burke (1969) identified four “master” tropes – irony, synecdoche, metaphor and metonymy. Foucault (1972) observed that dominant tropes during particular historical epochs determine what can be known (*episteme*) and form the basis of his method of deconstruction.
5. **Medium:** While most classical approaches to rhetoric have attended to analyzing the structure and content of the message, McLuhan (1964) focused on the important role of how the message is communicated. His popularized mantra, “the medium is the message”, raised analytic awareness of how different media platforms favor different types of persuasive appeals.

These techniques reflect but a small portion of the varied devices used to analyze persuasive speech. There are important practical implications of the use of persuasive speech to initiate action. Politicians have devoted considerable resources to understanding how persuasive text can be converted to votes, finance executives are keen on identifying how verbs in analyst reports can generate higher stock values and advertisers are obsessed with the relationship between symbols and product sales.

Rhetorical analysis, thus, offers a critical foundation to a broad and growing range of qualitative techniques that use inductive methods to understand the strategic use of language.

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