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# 1 Qualitative research in HRM: innovation over stagnation

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Qualitative research methods are now common in social sciences and particularly research on relations at work such as industrial relations, industrial sociology and human resource management (HRM). However, to date semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews seem to dominate publications, with occasional job observation and ethnographical studies appearing. This book explores the actual and potential contribution of qualitative research methods to progressing understanding in the broadly interpreted field of HRM and considers innovative methods to broaden inquiry further.

Miles, a seminal writer in these methods, noted in the 1970s that “qualitative data tend to overload the research badly at almost every point: the sheer range of phenomena to be observed, the recorded volume of notes; the time required for write up, coding, and analysis can all be overwhelming” (1979, p. 590). Significant technological developments have occurred since this time with, for example, digital recorders, ubiquitous desktop and notebook computers and hand-held devices (for example, personal mobile phones) that can be used for video and photographic recording now readily available. Additionally, transcription software (for example, Dragon Naturally Speaking) and analysis software (for example, NVivo) have been designed to support the qualitative researcher. This rapid development and technology and software has allowed the validity of qualitative techniques to flourish in recent decades providing new insights to data and also allowing researchers to experiment with qualitative data collection techniques that otherwise might have been impossible, or too costly.

The book is divided into four parts with respected international authors contributing from their various fields of expertise. Authors were asked to choose a form of qualitative data collection and/or analysis they were experienced in using, and to consider how it could be used in the broad field of HRM. The term “innovative” is used here to mean rarely used in the field of HRM. To explain this using an example, one could hardly call historical analysis innovative, however, we contend that given historical

analysis is rare in the modern business school where HRM research is typically housed, using a historical approach to modern problems is innovative for the HRM researcher.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The first step in any research undertaking, whether primary or secondary research, is the determination of the design to be used.<sup>1</sup> In qualitative research, potential designs range from pure laboratory experiment and quasi-experiment to field-based survey, interview, observation and participant observation. More than one of these methods may be used in a particular study. Such multi-method research or triangulation is aimed at determining whether the findings from one method converge with or diverge from the findings from another method or methods. The more that the findings from multiple methods converge, the more confidence one has in those findings, and the converse is true as well.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its key importance to the qualitative research process, a particular research design may lead to a change in the original design. In essence, this is what occurred in the famous Hawthorne study. In that work, the researchers intended to measure the effects of lighting (or, as it was expressed and measured at the time, candle wattage) on worker productivity. To do so, a field-based quasi-experiment was created in which six employees of the Hawthorne plant were assigned to an enclosed space (that is, room) in the plant in which the workers continued their regular work of producing and assembling certain components of telephones and in which the researchers could control the amount of lighting. In the original research design for this study, the concept of a work group or team was nowhere to be found. Rather and based on the prior industrial engineering-based work of Taylor (1911), who focused on the effects of job design and redesign on worker productivity, the Hawthorne researchers focused on the effects of an external, environmental characteristic of work, namely, the amount of lighting (or candle wattage), on worker productivity. It was only after the accidental discovery during the Hawthorne study that lighting was not positively correlated with productivity that the researchers began to consider that something other than lighting might be affecting such productivity. To determine what that “something” was, the researchers decided to talk with – interview – the workers. After doing so, the researchers concluded that the strong “we-feeling” among those workers was key to explaining why their productivity was very high even under the condition of extremely poor lighting. The concept of we-feeling

was subsequently relabelled “group norms” and quickly became central to organisational behaviour and HRM – and has remained so ever since.

By contrast, studies conducted by Roy illustrate how a qualitative research design may have considerable staying power (Roy, 1952, 1959). As with the Hawthorne researchers, Roy was also interested in the determinants of worker productivity. However, his preferred research design was that of participant observation. For this purpose, Roy became hired as a production worker in several different settings and systematically documented his experiences therein. This approach, which continued throughout his career as an industrial sociologist, enabled him to show how workers could obtain a certain amount of autonomy even under highly restrictive production requirements and how such autonomy could positively affect productivity (Roy, 1959). But he also showed how group norms could form and be maintained such that they restricted worker productivity (Roy, 1952).

Also notable about these particular studies is that while they are regarded as leading historical examples of qualitative research, they also illustrate that “data” for such research may be both quantitatively and qualitatively obtained and analysed. Hence, substantial quantitative data were obtained during the original Hawthorne studies, and those data have been extensively analysed by many subsequent researchers (for example, Levitt and List, 2011). By contrast, data of the type obtained by Roy and other participant-observation researchers are highly qualitative and are typically analysed ethnographically (for example, Burawoy, 2001).<sup>2</sup> In both instances, however, the choice of research design is key as is the lesson that no particular research design is immutable. A design can and should be changed based on unanticipated factors and findings.

As previously mentioned, the Hawthorne studies and Donald Roy’s and Michael Burawoy’s research are just a few of the many studies that have used qualitative data to give us new insights and understandings in the field of HRM. What is the state of HRM studies at the moment though? Saunders and Townsend (forthcoming) have examined the changes in empirical, qualitative research articles in ten top ranked journals. As we can see in Table 1.1, Saunders and Townsend found that there was, with some variation between journals, a 10 per cent reduction in the publication of interview-based, qualitative research articles in 2013 compared with the same journals a decade earlier in 2003. Does this mean that qualitative research is no longer fashionable in business schools? Experienced researchers like John Godard (2014) caution against the “psychologisation” of business schools and the focus on quantitative research that comes with that shift. We suggest that similar to these classic studies of the industrial sociology era – a body of literature many of today’s HRM

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Table 1.1 Published interview-based articles, comparison 2003 and 2013, ten top ranking journals

Field	Journal name	2003	2013	% change	Total interview articles
		Interview as %	Interview as %		
General Management	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	55.74	32.43	-23.31	46
	<i>British Journal of Management</i>	62.50	39.47	-22.03	25
	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Management</i>	40.00	17.78	-22.22	16
HRM/ Employment Relations	<i>Industrial Relations</i> <sup>a</sup>	11.54	9.38	-2.16	6
	<i>Human Resource Management</i>	47.05	23.68	-23.37	17
	<i>Work, Employment and Society</i>	55.17	62.79	+7.62	43
	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>	50.00	47.83	-2.27 <sup>b</sup>	20
Organisation Studies	<i>Human Relations</i>	57.89	47.17	-10.72	47
	<i>Group and Organisation Management</i> <sup>a</sup>	6.25	4.55	-1.70	2
	<i>Organisation</i>	72.73	66.67	-6.06	22
Total		45.89	35.17	-10.62	244

*Notes:*

<sup>a</sup> As there was a small number of relevant interview-based articles in IR (6 of 58) and GOM (2 of 42 empirical articles) the authors included another journal from these categories (*Human Resource Management* and *Organisation*, respectively) into the analysis.

<sup>b</sup> Rounding effect.

*Source:* Adapted from Saunders and Townsend (forthcoming).

researchers “grew up” on – qualitative research can be both innovative and timeless when designed well.

It is commonly accepted that the design of a research project should relate specifically to the research questions for which the researcher seeks answers. Not all questions lend themselves to qualitative inquiry, and often there is an under-reporting of qualitative data in quantitative research reporting (Saunders and Townsend, forthcoming). In Chapter 2, Roslyn Cameron examines a sample of mixed method studies published in the HRM journals to determine the role of qualitative methods in mixed

methods study designs. The analysis has a specific focus on the role of qualitative methods in terms of key dimensions that characterise mixed methods studies: purpose; priority of methods; implementation (sequential or concurrent); and design. The author finds that this approach to HRM research offers opportunities to add perspectives to phenomenon and complex research problems. Mixed methods are also shown to assist in leveraging off strengths of one data collection approach and countering the weaknesses of the other(s).

Rebecca Loudoun and Keith Townsend suggest in Chapter 3 that quantitative approaches to research tend to lend themselves to longitudinal studies far easier than qualitative studies but they argue that this does not mean qualitative research cannot be longitudinal. It is usually easier to see that one number is higher or lower than the other in a quantitative analysis and hence make interpretations of how the matter at hand has changed over time. It can be more difficult though to interpret swathes of interview transcripts and infer meaning about experiences of change. The chapter reports on two time periods of a qualitative, longitudinal study where the researchers experimented in the quantifying of qualitative data – specifically, the use of keywords – in an attempt to find a baseline for measuring differences in employee experiences at a multi-site organisation. In addition, the chapter demonstrates how this approach to data collection and analysis provides a nuance of data that is not available with survey data collected.

In the final chapter in Part I, Chapter 4, Sally Sambrook considers the use of autoethnography design in research projects showing that when researching highly personal aspects of HRM, such as employee engagement, autoethnography provides a novel and more nuanced understanding of HRM phenomena.

## INNOVATIONS IN DATA SOURCES

Following the design stage, the next step in the research process is to determine the source of the data. Part II of the book considers the many sources available to the researcher beyond the traditional interviews with workplace actors. In Chapter 5, Richard Johnstone suggests that in order to engage with the regulatory framework surrounding HRM, researchers may need to examine labour law rules and principles. The chapter provides an introduction to doctrinal (sometimes called “analytical”) legal research, and discusses other approaches to researching law that draws on qualitative social science research methods. Using the law is hardly innovative, but it is rare within the realm of HRM.

Sheryl Ramsay, Sara Branch and Jacqueline Ewart focus their chapter

(Chapter 6) on the important, innovative contribution that news media research can make to the field of HRM. Through an exploratory study into workplace bullying, the researchers analyse the public representations of HRM issues through the use of news media. The authors point out that news media can allow the researcher to consider aspects of public perception of HRM issues like workplace bullying, for example.

Throughout the early days of the democratisation of the internet, James Richards used “workplace blogs” for some innovative research. His chapter (Chapter 7) looks at conducting research with employee bloggers – employees often suspicious of outsiders and not an easily recruited source of workplace information. Conventional gatekeepers, such as HR managers, will often take a dim view of employees talking to researchers about taboo topics, like workplace misbehaviour and discontent. Richards provides an insider take on four key methodological challenges and dilemmas faced when conducting a qualitative study of employee blogging practices.

Many researchers will have been exposed to the HR manager who seems to hold the view that their organisation is organised around a wonderfully innovative model of people management that will leave all employees engaged and excited about work, while enhancing performance and productivity levels. In reality, this is rarely the case. To avoid what could be referred to as “analysis amnesia” it is occasionally important to consider the entire body of work on a research topic rather than simply focusing on research advances and seminal studies. Indeed, when it comes to many topics in both research and practice, there is more than a century of research throughout the industrialised era alone. In Chapter 8, renowned industrial relations historian Peter Ackers takes a modern journey throughout historical research arguing a historical view to modern analysis is an important innovation from which HRM researchers could well benefit.

Similarly, in Chapter 9 Kerrie Unsworth and Matthew Hardin draw on ideas that are very old, philosophical methods to illuminate to HRM researchers that there are many ways to look at the problems of the modern workplace. The authors argue that by using philosophical methods and thinking about HRM and work in different ways new insights may be possible that elude researchers using other inductive or deductive techniques.

## INNOVATIVE DATA COLLECTION

The third part of this book hosts six chapters on innovative data collection techniques. It begins with Chapter 10 and a contribution from Keith

Townsend, who adopted a method from the “solution-focused therapy” field, where people would traditionally be visiting a psychologist and be asked (with a preamble) if a miracle occurred and their life was perfect, what would be different? Townsend’s team asked this question of employees in a workplace as an experiment in data collection. They were very interested to understand if a traditional “problem-focused” interview style would collect the same, or comparable, data to a “solution-focused” approach.

With the advent of the ubiquitous hand-held phone/camera, the general public seems to be visually documenting almost every moment of their lives, more so than in any other era in time. Why should we not adopt this innovation as a research method? In Chapter 11, Catherine Cassell, Fatima Malik and Laura Radcliffe explore the use of photo-elicitation methods in a study of how people manage their daily work–life balance and conflict. In doing so, the chapter outlines some important methodological issues for those who seek to use these methods and concludes that photo-elicitation techniques have much to offer HR researchers.

In another chapter that draws on the qualitative research element of a mixed methods project, Céline Rojon, Mark Saunders and Almuth McDowall outline in Chapter 12 how the repertory grid technique can be used as the first stage within a sequential mixed methods research design. After explaining the method, its usage in HRM and related fields, an example of individual workplace performance research illustrates its utility for informing survey design.

In a similar vein to Chapter 3, Werner Nienhüser in Chapter 13 explores the basic concept behind the free verbal associations (FVA) method that the spontaneous associations a person makes in connection with an object (such as “work” or “tax”) reflects his or her attitude towards that object. The chapter explains FVA using the example of a telephone survey of 3203 individuals about their attitudes towards employee participation in decision-making, an ongoing research matter in the HRM field.

Laura Radcliffe (Chapter 14) explores another data collection technique that is not new per se, but is innovative in the field of HRM research. The chapter explores the use of diary studies to highlight the importance of capturing, and understanding, complex daily practices and experiences. The author found this approach to have the ability to look at issues in a new light, uncovering important new insights and helping to understand the daily dynamics of complex issues and experiences.

The final chapter (Chapter 15) in Part III, presented by Mark Learmonth and Michael Humphreys, explores the idea of “autoethnographic vignettes” – theoretically informed stories (vignettes) drawn from our own lives (auto) about our observations of working life (ethnography).

The authors explore the value and potential impact of practitioner knowledge within academic writing, especially writing concerned with the lived experience of working lives. The chapter notes some pitfalls to avoid as well as some ideas for those who are interested in constructing their own vignettes. In an important link to the practitioner community, the authors suggest this approach can improve the working relationships between practising managers and academics, potentially providing insights into topical and perhaps difficult organisational issues.

## INNOVATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Conversations about data analysis with a scholar who performed empirical qualitative research throughout the early stages of modern HRM in the 1980s would differ in many ways from the use of computer technology used in analysis in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In Part IV, the chapter by Julie Cogin and Ju Li Ng (Chapter 16) outlines how computer-supported software can be used in qualitative HRM research. Even though a number of different computer packages have been available for many years, they remain relatively underutilised by HR scholars. Despite the numerous advantages, the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) has not been without controversy, and the authors explore some of the “myths” and “truths” of CAQDAS with recommendations for effective use in HRM research.

Gail Clarkson presents cognitive mapping procedures in Chapter 17 as a way to structure and simplify thoughts and beliefs, to make sense of them and communicate information about them. Cognitive mapping, Clarkson argues, might usefully be employed in the context of cross-cultural HRM research and the use of mapping methods is considered in the context of one research study. This approach is found to hold great potential in the context of large-scale studies. The author recommends casual cognitive mapping for researchers looking to elicit and compare anything other than a small number of cause maps on a longitudinal or cross-sectional basis.

The final contribution, from Richard Winter (Chapter 18), illustrates another element of mapping, specifically how to derive behavioural role descriptions from the perspectives of job-holders. Code mapping of interview data and the use of role maps reveal the personal meanings managers attribute to their work roles and social interactions – proactive behaviours often missing from traditional approaches to job analysis. This is an excellent but underutilised means of analysis for various aspects of HRM research.

The authors of the chapters and the editors of this volume are passionate

qualitative researchers who all see a great deal of value in the way qualitative research can illuminate the field of work. We hope that this book serves as both a guide and inspiration to current and future qualitative researchers.

## NOTES

1. Primary research is research in which new data and documents are created and analysed. Secondary research is research in which existing data and documents are analysed. In primary research but not in secondary research, the researcher determines the research design to be used. To illustrate using an example discussed further below, the original Hawthorne study was designed by Mayo, Roethlisberger and Dickson (see Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). It was not designed by other researchers, such as Franke and Kaul (1978), who subsequently reanalysed data from the Hawthorne study.
2. A classic field-based study that employed an observation-based research design and also featured combined elements of quantitative and qualitative analysis is Coch and French (1948).

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