

FROM THE EDITOR

QUALITATIVE DISCOVERY: EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION AT *AMD*

INTRODUCTION

So you think you have got great qualitative data. Why should you consider submitting to *Academy of Management Discoveries (AMD)*? The answer is three-fold. First, *AMD* is a welcoming home for qualitative research. Qualitative methods are naturally well suited to the empirical exploration that *AMD* focuses on (Arino, LeBaron, & Milliken, 2016). In fact, more than half of the articles (54 percent) published in *AMD* have used qualitative methods, either in a mixed-methods approach (seven articles) or on their own (23 articles). This is a remarkably high percentage of qualitative articles in a top-tier management journal, especially when compared with the *Academy of Management Journal*, which recently reported an all-time high submission rate of 20 percent for qualitative research (Bansal, Smith, & Vaara, 2018).

Second, *AMD* is becoming a journal where scholars publish groundbreaking qualitative research. Empirical exploration pushes boundaries. Authors of *AMD* qualitative articles see our journal as the place where they can break new ground—explore the unknown, the puzzling surprises, and questions that emerge from deep engagement with empirical phenomenon. When we ask *AMD* authors about their qualitative studies, these are the types of answers we get:

“As researchers, we wanted to understand what was unfolding out there right in front of our eyes, that’s why we started our research project . . . with a rather broad searchlight . . .” (Kornberger, Leixnering, Meyer, & Höllerer, 2018: 315, Author’s Voice).

“I was excited to shadow a professional firm that many of us don’t know about, yet directly influences our lives on a day to day basis.” (Rahman & Barley, 2017: 405, Author’s Voice).

“[This paper in *AMD*] actually was born out of earlier research . . . we found these curious gender differences . . . and we scratched our heads . . . this led us to . . . start asking that question why? . . . Why is the empirical data showing us this?” (Bullough & Renko, 2017: 23, Author’s Voice).

Third, we want authors to think of *AMD* as a publishing outlet for frame-breaking qualitative research. One way in which *AMD* is frame-breaking is that a

detailed description of a novel phenomenon or surprising relationship can be a sufficient contribution on its own. In addition, *AMD* provides latitude for authors to play with different formats for articles, to engage in a more transparent discussion about how the research was actually conducted and shaped, and to leverage the affordances of an online journal to present their data and findings in novel ways.

If you are considering submitting to *AMD*, what are some things to keep in mind? Our goal for this “From the Editors” (FTE) column is to answer some of the most common questions that we are asked about the journal with respect to qualitative research: What does an *AMD* discovery look like? How to build *AMD*-style rigor? And what does plausible theorizing in *AMD* involve? By drawing on examples of qualitative research published in *AMD*, we hope to give readers a clearer idea about what the journal is looking for and to highlight some of the groundbreaking and frame-breaking research that is already taking place. In addition to a review of recent exemplary qualitative articles in *AMD*, we draw from the “Author’s Voice” feature in *AMD* articles to provide additional guidance and inspiration.

WHAT DOES AN *AMD* DISCOVERY LOOK LIKE?

Whereas the word “discoveries” may at first glance seem quite grandiose, we are not suggesting that we all need to be Darwin. Rather, *AMD* qualitative articles need to be able to abductively or inductively offer something empirically “new,” without necessarily understanding all the theoretical mechanisms behind it. *AMD* qualitative studies typically start with an empirical reality as opposed to a theoretical position. Authors need to use a rigorous methodological approach and take a deeper look at results that are surprising, to better understand the nuances and rule out alternative explanations. In addition, a key part of empirical exploration is to “road-test” emerging discoveries against what we already know from the literature.

Discoveries in *AMD* take a variety of forms—the mission of *AMD* is to publish phenomenon-driven empirical research that theories of management and organizations neither adequately explain nor predict. *AMD* publishes both abductive and inductive qualitative research, as long as it engages in empirical exploration to (1) surface new phenomenon, (2) identify and explore surprising relationships, or

(3) offer insights or plausible resolution to contradictory findings.

Surfacing New Phenomenon

Scholars frequently use qualitative methods to explore new or poorly understood phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; van Maanen, 1979) and this category accounts for most of the qualitative articles published in *AMD*. Whereas novelty on its own can be appealing and can lead to gripping narratives, surfacing new phenomenon at *AMD* must be in the service of advancing knowledge about organizations and organizing. Discoveries can come from studying novel contexts or phenomenon—examples of this kind of qualitative research in *AMD* include novel forms of organizing in response to the refugee crisis (de la Chaux, Haugh, & Greenwood, 2018; Kornberger et al., 2018), the career progression of stand-up comedians (Reilly, 2017), the mindfulness in action of U.S. Navy Seals (Fraher et al., 2017), the pathways to entrepreneurship for pop-up and underground restaurateurs (Demetry, 2017), and the changing nature of offshoring work (Leonardi & Bailey, 2017).

How do researchers identify these new phenomena? Happenstance is a regular feature in *AMD* articles. Authors often come across their research contexts by chance: “My relationship with [the firm in the study] is like so many things, a series of accidents” (Meyer, Lu, Peng, & Tsui, 2017: 5, Author’s Voice). Or Demetry (2017) writes: “I was watching late night TV . . . early on in my PhD and they featured this organization . . . it was a really hot pop-up underground restaurant in Chicago and it was presented on this late night TV show as the coolest thing to do right now . . . And I was just completely struck by how bizarre this was” (Author’s Voice, p. 188). Sometimes the awareness of new phenomenon emerges from a collision with preconceived ideas of what “should be.” Reilly (2017) describes his preconceived notions about the career progression of stand-up comedians this way, “I had this kind of outdated idea . . . what I discovered was it wasn’t that . . . It was . . . a very networked based field . . . That’s one of the things I . . . articulate within this particular article” (Author’s Voice, p. 146).

Scholars also engaged in discovery when they realized that the phenomenon they were studying could not be explained by existing theory, either because this was a new form of organization or organizing or because no theories were a good fit. For example, Meyer et al. (2017) studied an extreme case of microdivisionalization—in which a \$32 billion Chinese multinational firm was reorganized into more than 2,000 teams operating as distinct micro-business units. Jarvenpaa and Välikangas (2016)

describe a 2-year “period of sense-making” during their analysis of data for their research project about research networks—they write, “No governance framework seemed to fit our observations. We saw no singular basis for authority within or across different research networks and no obvious ways to settle conflicts from the outset . . . We found the lack of governance rather puzzling (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), and refocused our research accordingly” (pp. 233–234).

A novel puzzle on its own is not yet discovery worthy. Rather, *AMD* requires authors to provide rich empirical evidence that clearly outlines the nuances of this organizational novelty through a rigorous assessment of the convergence and divergence in the data.

Exploring Surprising Relationships

Some discoveries in *AMD* arise from scholars noting surprising relationships. This often occurs as scholars are in the midst of their research, analyzing their data. For instance, during a study of entrepreneurship in one of the most dangerous places in the world, Bullough and Renko (2017) discovered a surprising relationship in their own initial survey data (women report lower perceptions of danger than men in Afghanistan, despite significantly great objective risk to women in all sorts of ways). This surprising relationship prompted a follow-up qualitative study to explain why. “In follow-up interviews, we uncovered that women business owners indeed recognize conflict, insurgents, and insecurity in their country, but secondarily to the obstacles they navigate closer to home” (Bullough & Renko, 2017: 21).

In a less extreme environment, Galperin (2017) also unearthed a surprising relationship between variables—the self-identity of tax preparers in the United States and their formal role as non-professionals. “I started thinking about why would there be such a distance between the self-perception of these workers and their formal status in the labor market, and what role may this distance play in sustaining the industry of tax preparation and, more generally, in other industries where services are produced on a massive scale” (Galperin, 2017: 218, Author’s Voice).

Likewise, Zuzul and Edmondson (2018) wondered why the company they were studying was having success with external legitimacy building but struggling with internal learning and advances in technology: “[We had] the chance to spend time in the field . . . and observe . . . in real-time. . . This deep contemporaneous access allowed us to discover the surprising relationship . . .” (Author’s Voice, p. 303). Finally, in an article cowritten by one of the FTE authors, Whiteman and Cooper (2016) conducted a decade-long study to understand how a forestry

company could get accreditation for good corporate social responsibility, alongside egregious on-the-ground realities for local communities, particularly women and girls. This led to the surprising finding that corporate social irresponsibility was not simply a firm-based construct but rather a systemic phenomenon that was aided by a loose collection of institutional actors through intentional and unintentional decoupling.

As with new phenomenon, a qualitative exploration of surprising relationships requires robust empirical evidence to support plausible theorizing on organizations and organizing.

Resolving Critical Anomalies or Discrepancies

The third type of “discovery” at *AMD* occurs when qualitative research helps to resolve anomalies or discrepancies that may arise from existing theory and/or empirical findings. For instance, Harvey, Currall, and Hammer (2017) undertook a 5-year participant observation study to shed light on inconsistent findings in the literature on the benefits of diversity in teams. Although it is not necessarily surprising that team dynamics change in boardrooms when new members join, the authors were able to identify how heterogeneity within the board contributed to overload, shifting power dynamics, and less-effective decision-making over time, as members increasingly focused on promoting individual agendas as opposed to making decisions related to fiduciary responsibilities.

In another example, Loewenstein and Mueller (2016) used qualitative data in a mixed-methods study to resolve an anomaly within the literature on creativity. As they reveal, “We both were puzzled by a bunch of findings in the creativity literature . . . showing all kinds of confusions about and disagreements over whether something was really a great paper or a great project, or not” (Loewenstein & Mueller, 2016:321, Author’s Voice). Using a three-study mixed-methods design, qualitative research among Chinese and U.S. participants was the starting point to develop an initial understanding about the cues that people used to assess whether products and processes were creative or not. Refining their analysis with quantitative data, they “discovered a disconnect between the conceptual definition of creativity used by creativity scholars and the lay implicit theories of creativity used by participants in China and the United States. This disconnect could explain why prior work has not found consistent differences between creativity assessments made by Chinese and Americans” (Loewenstein & Mueller, 2016: 336).

Qualitative articles at *AMD* can also help our field better understand the relationship between similar

constructs that have been theorized in different ways at different levels of analysis. In their study of U.S. Navy Seals, Fraher et al. (2017) “wondered how does the macro and micro inter-relate?” (Author’s Voice, p. 241). Using qualitative data and video ethnography, they described a novel understanding of “mindfulness in action” which helps to reconcile individual and collective mindfulness.

Presently, most *AMD* qualitative articles in this area focus on resolving anomalies. We also welcome qualitative articles that boldly address controversies inherent in organization and management topics.

HOW TO BUILD *AMD*-STYLE RIGOR?

When surfacing a new phenomenon, examining a surprising relationship, or resolving an anomaly or discrepancy, it is critical to make sure that your findings are robust. This necessitates deep engagement with the phenomenon and gathering sufficient data to rule out other plausible explanations. There are already a number of resources for management scholars about how to engage in rigorous qualitative research (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007; Pratt, 2009), and authors should adhere to best practices for whatever methodological approach they use. For example, authors using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) need to be sure that they have engaged in adequate theoretical sampling, have sufficient saturation, and have conducted a robust comparative analysis. In addition, because *AMD* articles focus on empirical discovery, there are some extra considerations for authors to keep in mind. We highlight two of these considerations: increased transparency about the research process and methodological innovation.

When researchers engage in empirical exploration, they are carving out new theoretical (and sometimes methodological) territory. However, when describing data collection and analysis, authors sometimes smooth out the bumpy road to discovery and present a more stylized and sanitized version of how the qualitative research process unfolded. By contrast, *AMD*’s stance is that transparency about how empirical exploration actually occurred increases the rigor of the research. Being more transparent about the role of the researcher in the research process and about how data were collected and analyzed can be frame-breaking. Doing so also demystifies the research process and provides a path forward for scholars who want to engage in similar kinds of empirical exploration.

Increased transparency about the research process at *AMD* is accomplished in several ways. First, all *AMD* articles include an “Author’s Voice” feature,

where authors provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse into how the article was constructed. Second, authors can incorporate reflections on their role in the research process into the article itself. For instance, Salge and Karahanna (2018) explain their sense-making process as they uncovered an anomaly during their research:

We did not begin this project expecting to find bots to be central actors protesting government corruption on Twitter. This was a discovery that emerged as part of our inductive approach . . . As bots replicated specific messages on Twitter, we discovered that they were central partly because they amplified the magnitude of content embedded in those duplicated posts. Therefore, our study was refined to not only provide answers to our initial research questions but to also shed light on the implications of our discovery through a post-bot-discovery exploration phase. (p. 34)

Likewise, Meyer et al. (2017) describe in their Discussion and Conclusion section how the review process prompted them to develop a new theoretical framework:

The key construct here is microdivisionalization. It is our construct, not Haier's [the company they were studying]. It emerged only after the reviewers battered the first draft of this article for lack of an organizing thread (we were trying to draw a distinction between self-management and Haier's term, "self-ownership teams"), and we stared at the data for nearly a week before realizing that the story was elsewhere, that Haier was trying to manage several thousand teams as if they were business units. (p. 17)

Third, authors can directly engage with issues of reflexivity as Whiteman and Cooper (2016) did when they made visible their own involvement in the research process. They write, "[W]e try to document the nonlinear and messy nature of this qualitative research and to help situate our emergent theorizing . . . We appreciate that this style may break norms within academic publishing in management studies but argue that this is part of its value (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993)" (p. 124). They enact this frame-breaking stance by incorporating portions of the correspondence between the first author and various key actors into their article, a kind of data which are rarely seen in qualitative articles. In addition, they include a personalized narrative as the prologue to the article.

AMD is also open to methodological innovation. *AMD* embraces a wide range of qualitative methodological approaches (Arino et al., 2016). Moreover,

studying a new phenomenon may require new methodological approaches. Even within established methodological approaches, qualitative scholars often have types of data—such as audio or video—which cannot be shared in their original form in a print-based journal. When these data are translated (into text or still images) to fit the constraints of a conventional journal article, some of the richness of the data is lost. When scholars have data that do not fit within the constraints of traditional data presentation, rigor increases when they are able to present these richer and more complicated forms of data to support their claims. *AMD* was deliberately designed to be an online-only journal to leverage new technologies that enrich and enable management research and to facilitate this kind of multimodal examination of organizations (LeBaron, 2017).

Multimedia can be a critical part of *AMD* qualitative articles because this element cues different senses, including emotions which help the reader understand the phenomenon more deeply. The original intent of the multimedia strategy still holds: "We wanted more than excellent articles with 'pretty pictures'; we wanted to deliberately use media enhancements to improve our social science" (LeBaron, 2017: 1). *AMD* authors make frequent use of these media enhancements. For instance, in Kornberger et al. (2018), color photographs of the Train of Hope volunteers working at Vienna's main train station brought the phenomenon that scholars were studying—the sharing economy of concern, help, and hope—to life. Similarly, Whiteman and Cooper (2016) used images and video links to bring the realities of local communities facing negative impacts of forestry and mining into stark relief. Rahman and Barley (2017) included a number of architects' sketches and images of computer renderings to show how the initial concept design evolved as the architects engaged in "situated redesign" to address unanticipated constraints. Another study uses visual mapping of meetings to illustrate the dynamics of team interactions (Harvey et al., 2017). Last, because *AMD* is an online journal, rich descriptions of phenomenon can go beyond text and static images to include video—Fraher, Branicki, and Grint (2017) use video excerpts to illustrate each of their key findings.

To date, *AMD* articles still hew to a conventional format—that is, introduction, literature review, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusion. However, *AMD* encourages innovation in article format as long as it is in the service of empirical exploration. New narrative formats for an article must fit with *AMD*'s mission and would still need to meet *AMD*'s standard for highly rigorous work, but there might be new ways of telling social science stories that vary from the

traditional form. If researchers are considering this approach, we encourage them to reach out to a member of the editorial team for guidance before they prepare their article for submission.

WHAT DOES PLAUSIBLE THEORIZING LOOK LIKE IN *AMD*?

Empirical exploration takes place at the frontier of theory. Making a home for this kind of research is what distinguishes *AMD* from other management journals, which have much broader missions. Plausible theorizing for qualitative research in *AMD* requires a rich description of the phenomenon or relationship, developing tentative claims or “first suggestions” about findings and working to narrow range of plausible explanations that could account for those findings. Depending on how novel the phenomenon is, plausible theorizing in *AMD* qualitative research can take the form of being a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). In other fields such as anthropology or sociology, thick descriptions have been able to stand on their own as a contribution (Goodall, 2010), but the field of management has not traditionally recognized this kind of pre-theory work.

Description becomes increasingly detailed and nuanced as more is understood about the phenomenon, and deep immersion in the field helps to illuminate phenomena. Rahman and Barley (2017) make the argument for ethnography being ideally suited to do this in their article about architects, where they study how the complexity of situated redesign varies across phases of a project. Reilly (2017) immersed himself in a 5-year participant observation study as a stand-up comic and identified the layered nature of careers in cultural industries. Demetry (2017) used a large number of interviews with entrepreneurs to gain insight into entrepreneurial motives and emergence. Golan and Bamberger (2015) make the case that typologies are vitally important for understanding phenomenon and developing theory, and they study a peer assistance program in a manufacturing plant to construct an empirically grounded typology of peer helping behaviors in organizations.

Developing a coherent and plausible approach to theorizing requires *AMD* scholars to narrow the range of possible explanations, which requires detailed empirical support. Elsbach and Bechky (2018) do an exemplary job of this in their qualitative study of how observers assess women who cry in professional work contexts. Their Data Analysis section (Elsbach & Bechky, 2018: 133–136) details how they coded and recoded data related to 100 crying events, moving back and forth between the data and the literature to rule out plausible explanations, and finally developed a framework that could account for their findings. In a figure in their article, they also illustrated

how the explanations they discovered mapped onto and elaborated existing theory related to perceptions of adult criers (Elsbach & Bechky, 2018: 146). Another great example of ruling in and ruling out plausible explanations is seen in Leonardi and Bailey’s (2017) mixed-methods study of offshoring work and innovation. They gathered qualitative and quantitative data—observations, interviews, social network data, and archival data—over 5 years. Their Methods section (Leonardi & Bailey, 2017: 120–126) describes how they collected and analyzed data in three separate phases, with each phase aiming at gaining a deeper understanding of phenomenon and uncovering some of the key practices that enabled offshore engineers to leverage their position in the social network to recognize and promote good ideas.

We recognize that the way that researchers rule in or rule out plausible explanations will vary based on the empirical phenomenon. A golden rule at *AMD* is that it is up to authors to decide how best to convey their qualitative findings. The key point across all articles is that they must provide extensive empirical evidence for supporting claims. This means that researchers should ensure that they have sufficiently broad variation in their data to examine a range of conceptual possibilities and home in on the most plausible explanation.

A final point to take into consideration is the need for boldness within plausible theorizing. Most, if not all, *AMD* articles (both qualitative and quantitative) do not seek to make incremental contributions. *AMD* does not require theory-testing or even specification of propositions that could underlie testable hypotheses. Instead, we aim for innovative conceptual discussions to explain novel empirical findings and to lay out the criteria and groundwork for down-the-road theorizing. This may be easier said than done. For instance, Vaskelainen and Munzel (2017) explained the difficulties of such an analytic “jump”: “We’re both young scholars and it took us some time to muster the courage to actually raise the analysis to the meso-level . . .” (Author’s Voice, p. 275). So, be bold in your submissions—and make sure you can back these up with extensive empirical evidence and a rigorous methodology.

CONCLUSION: PIONEERING QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS

It may be an exaggeration to say that qualitative researchers fall in love with their data because they get so close to the human condition. But certainly many of us have insightful stories to tell that are rich, and may be pioneering in terms of insight. Although *AMD* shares an obsession with methodological rigor with other top-tier management journals, we believe that we offer a unique publishing niche for a discovery-oriented kind of qualitative research. We are actively

seeking groundbreaking and frame-breaking studies that offer novel or understudied empirical insights. If you think you have got great data, and can answer a puzzle or two, consider the aforementioned guidance carefully, and submit early and often.

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