How to Publish Qualitative Entrepreneurship Research in Top Journals

Cited as:


Publishing in a top journal is often a challenge, and this seems particularly so for qualitative research. Nevertheless, six of the last ten winners of the Academy of Management Journal’s Best Article award (to 2011) are – you guessed it - qualitative. Clearly, qualitative studies are important and impactful. How then, can you improve your chances of publishing qualitative entrepreneurship research in a top journal? Drawing on my experience as an author, reviewer and editor, I hope to offer some guidance with this chapter. I begin with comments on some qualitative approaches seen in entrepreneurship research and then focus on areas in the manuscript and research process that often need special attention. Finally, I will share some observations regarding the writing process. Because I study, publish and review entrepreneurship research in fields such as marketing, management and international business, I use examples from across disciplines.

A. Qualitative Approaches – So Many to Choose From!

Many (most) of the qualitative papers that cross my desk rely on the case method. There are however, numerous ways to approach a qualitative investigation. For example, Table 1 reports recent publications from the Journal of Business Venturing, and shows that methods can range from depth interviews to archival data, phenomenological interviews or using a nation as a
‘case’. Other methods include (e.g.) analysis of narrative, participant observation and ethnography.

*Table 1 about here*

Given the variety of possibilities, if your research question warrants a qualitative method, take the time to identify which approach (or combination of thereof) might be most appropriate. Also consider which approach(s) might offer the greatest potential to make a methodological contribution. This is because one way to differentiate your work might involve employing something other than case research.

For a refresher on qualitative methods, I recommend three books. For fairly clinical but highly usable overviews, I like Creswell (2007) and Lee (1999). Another overview that provides interesting historical insight is found in Prasad (2005). I also recommend reading well-done studies from outside entrepreneurship. One example is Elsbach and Kramer’s (2003) investigation of how experts assess the creative potential of others. In this AMJ Best Article Winner, the authors use a combination of interviews, observation, participation and archival data to provide rich, multi-dimensional insight to how studio executives and producers in Hollywood assess the ‘pitches’ of screenwriters. Another example of rich work is Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) marketing classic: three years of ethnographic field work with Harley-Davidson motorbike owners.
If the case method is in fact, most appropriate for your research, I offer four suggestions. First, recognize that a particular strength of case research is that it generally integrates a variety of data sources (e.g. interviews, observation and archival data). As a result, case research may (e.g.) analyze narrative and take a phenomenological or ethnographic approach. This means that to do justice to your study, you will need an appreciation of both the case method and the other approaches embedded within that method.

Second, if your sole source of data is (e.g.) interviews of numerous entrepreneurs, do not refer to it as case research. Instead, recognize the method for what it is: depth interviews – a perfectly viable approach in itself. On a related point, to understand the role of interviews in case research, I suggest reading the AMJ Best Article by Graebner (2009).

Third, most case researchers cite Eisenhardt (1989) and some version of Yin (e.g. 2008). I suggest that you should also be very familiar with: 1) Eisenhardt and Graebner (1997), and 2) the various empirical studies conducted by Eisenhardt (one example is Ozcan and Eisenhardt 2009). By reading these papers, you will not only understand the richness of Eisenhardt’s arguments but see them applied to her investigations. My personal view is that if we were to critically assess the extant case research in entrepreneurship, it would pale in comparison to what Eisenhardt (and Graebner) recommend we do.

Fourth, if you cite Eisenhardt (1989) or Yin (2008), then follow their guidance. Too often, I see references to either of these authors followed up by a poor explanation (and implementation) of site selection, data collection and data analysis. For example, merely stating you have chosen
firms by theoretical sampling is insufficient. So too is a simple statement that you have selected polar cases. These decisions need to be explained, as does your process of reaching theoretical saturation. Similarly, if you are using a tool such as nVivo to analyze your data, explain why it is appropriate and how you use it.

B. COMMON WEAKNESSES – WHAT TO SPEND EXTRA TIME ON!

What needs extra attention in a qualitative manuscript? Useful insights come from Pratt’s (2008) study of the evaluative criteria-in-use at top-tier North American organizational and management journals. ¹ He found the top three criteria for a qualitative manuscript to be:

- contribution to theory (49%);
- transparent, exhaustive, well-articulated methods (49%);
- good writing - interesting and compelling (46%).

My experience leads me to agree with Pratt’s (2008) findings. They are discussed here in the context of issues that seem to require particular consideration for qualitative studies.

1. The Introduction and Literature Review

The introduction must be: 1) clear, 2) concise and 3) compelling. The first two points lead into the third in that if the introduction is clear and concise, it will be easy to read - and if it’s easy to read, it will be more compelling. However, your introduction must do more. It must compel the reader to want to read further. Thus, you have very few pages with which to articulate the need for research, its importance and what you expect to contribute.

¹ For authors trying to publish in US-based journals, I encourage you to carefully read George (2012). Although his focus is on getting published in AMJ, much of the advice is generally relevant and I support his views based on my own experience as an international author and my work as an editor and reviewer.
One way to write the introduction is seen in Jarzabkowski (2008). She separates her introduction and literature review quite effectively. The former is short and focused – no waffle. The latter discusses: a) the extant research on how managers shape strategy, and b) reviews the potential value of structural theory in understanding the dynamics of strategy shaping. Once her arguments are clear in the literature review, she has a solid basis for her decision to use qualitative methods.

A different type of example is found in Hollensbe, Khazanchi and Masterton (2008). They succinctly combine their introduction and literature review to identify their fundamental research question and three reasons as to why their study is important. This leads to a short summary of their method and a statement of contributions. The paper then moves directly into a richly detailed methods section.

The approach of combining the introduction and literature review (as taken by Hollensbe et al 2008) is quite common in qualitative research because an exploratory study is unlikely to have a rich theoretical foundation to draw on. There will still however, be some need to create a theoretical frame for your study. To do this, I recommend using the techniques discussed by Pratt (2008). One way is to build a ‘data sandwich’, i.e. where theory is presented before and after the data. My favorite example is Pratt et al.’s (2006) study of professional identity development in physicians. In the background section, they observe that the topic had already been examined with extant theories pertaining to careers and roles, socialization and identity construction. Importantly however, Pratt et al. (2006) clearly identify the limits of each of these theories. This foundation provides the first slice of bread in the data sandwich. They then present their results (the meat in the sandwich) and finally, ‘close’ the theoretical frame by showing how their data
fill in the missing pieces from each of the literatures. Thus, they add the second piece of bread to the sandwich. In so doing, they integrate and extend all three areas of extant theory.

A second approach from Pratt (2008) involves creating an ‘open-faced’ data sandwich: where the front end of the paper is set up to allow the theory to (largely) come after the data. Using Coviello and Joseph (2012) as an example, we argue that because we explore a complex social system, it is inappropriate to use a single theoretical lens to frame the study. Instead, we use the combined introduction/literature review to identify the need for research. This is the base of an open-faced sandwich. Later, we add the sandwich toppings with our data and draw on a range of theoretical arguments to inform our findings and develop propositions. For example, we integrate aspects of learning theory, resource-dependence theory, capability theory and effectuation logic, among others.

2. Methods
When reviewing the methods section of a qualitative study, my key questions are:

- Is a qualitative approach fully appropriate? Why?
- Is the chosen method appropriate? Why?
- Is the methods section believable? Why?
- Are the data collection approaches well-articulated? Sensible?
- Are the analytic approaches well-articulated? Sensible?
- Is the overall approach fully presented and potentially replicable?
Two points arise from the above. First, your methods section needs to be credible. This is demonstrated by the level of detail you provide (hint: start by answering the ‘why’ questions from the above list). Second, there is a fine balance between a well-articulated methods section and one that lumbers along, boring the reader. Because I tend to look for solid explanations and detail, I suggest that if your methods section is getting long, try to include a figure that effectively portrays what you did. This will help save space and also, provide some life to a paper that likely to be text-heavy. One example is seen in Figure 1 which depicts how data generated through case research was transformed into the chronological histories of each firm. These were then used to analyze the interactions that formed the firm’s network during start-up. Then, the data and chronologies were used to build matrices to help analyze the structural characteristics of each network.

Figure 1 about here

3. Data Analysis

A particularly important – and often weak - part of a qualitative article pertains to data analysis. It is important to discuss how to get organized for analysis and then, what to do with your analysis. In addition, it is important to consider whether or not your qualitative data can be meaningfully made quantitative.

a. Getting organized.
There are a number of paradoxes associated with analyzing qualitative data. For example, I have needed to be creative and open-minded, yet able to spot patterns and close holes. I have also had to allow for rich, messy data to emerge, yet be organized in how I track and report the data.

The first thing I do (pre-analysis) is get organized. I stock up with binders, file boxes, labels, colored sticky notes, colored pens and colored highlighters. Second, as the data comes in, I start reading, noting and highlighting. This helps me develop and refine two things: i) decision rules (i.e. for coding and classifying), and ii) insights (emerging patterns). Important here is that data analysis is not left until the end of data collection. Rather, it starts as the data is generated because induction requires ongoing reflection and learning. Over time, I have developed a ‘style’ that allows me to understand my color codes and summary notations. Critical to qualitative research, I can ‘track back’ from a paper to summary notes to transcripts to tapes/archives. This is because I have carefully noted who said/did what when, and where that data is in each source.

Third, I make use of white boards and/or large sheets of paper to build tables, figures and/or maps to visualize what I see as insights emerge. Note – I personally do not find a computer helpful in this activity. Instead, I find that if I can (e.g.) move sticky-notes around various steps in a process or to various boxes in a table – where the process or table is portrayed on a whiteboard – then I can see patterns more clearly AND I can easily ask others for their input.

This process also forces me to synthesize my thoughts, decisions rules and insights.

b. Getting into the data.
To help determine an appropriate analytical path for qualitative research, I rely on guidance from one of my favourite articles: Langley’s (1989) arguments on “Strategies for Theorizing from Process Data.” This is a ‘must-read-and-use’ for all process researchers. I also find the approach discussed in Jonsen and Jehn (2009) interesting, where they describe a triangulated approach to validate emerging themes. That is, triangulation in data analysis rather than data collection.

Bem (2008) argues that data should be examined from every angle. I concur. Achieving this with qualitative data requires patience and creativity. Happily, it’s almost always worth the extra effort and my experience suggests:

i. Having two sets of eyes is almost always better than one. Thus, if I don’t have a co-author, I train, mentor and leverage graduate students to assess my work. Alternatively, I draw on other colleagues who are likely to see patterns that I don’t or can’t.

ii. Be prepared to reorganize the data – from the beginning. This is why being careful and organized in your approach to managing data is critical.

iii. If you see a glimmer of a theme, note it. Don’t however, get stuck on it. Sometimes, patterns will reveal themselves if you let them simmer for a while.

iv. Anomalies are interesting in qualitative data because they tend to provide some of the richest insight, both empirical and theoretical. Thus, look hard at them – what patterns do they reflect? Why? Are they highlighting boundary conditions? Do challenge theory?

v. Again, analyze your data as you collect it. This way, you constantly iterate through the data, with your analysis informing ongoing data collection. This is the process of reaching theoretical saturation, a concept central to the notion of building theory.
vi. Track everything very carefully. The top journals (and increasingly, all journals) are implementing policies that will require you, if asked, to provide your data and evidence regarding your analysis.

c. Quantification.

Should you ‘quantify’ qualitative data? Many are reluctant to report numbers (e.g. 9 out of 12 firms or 75%) and sometimes, when the editor sends your work to a qualitative specialist, you get just that: someone who has no interest in any form of quantitative analysis.

Personally, I believe that the nature of the research question drives the method for both data collection and analysis. Thus, if I am trying to establish patterns over time, transforming qualitative data into comparable patterns can be sensible. Using Coviello (2006) as an example, three detailed cases were transformed into three ‘stories’ of how new ventures internationalized, focusing on the events, actions and relationships that were involved with internationalization. Those stories were re-constructed as chronologies, with each relationship analyzed and coded for specific characteristics. That then provided the basis for analyzing a frequency pattern over time. In addition, the base chronologies were transformed into asymmetric network matrices to analyze the changing structural characteristics. Thus, I relied on qualitative data as a basis for all my analysis; analysis that was ultimately, more quantitative in nature. In hindsight, that paper probably suffers from a lack of ‘life’ (in the form of quotes and stories) but on the other hand, the style suited the target journal.
A better example of balance can be seen in Coviello (2005), while a purely qualitative example is in Coviello and Joseph (2012). In both these studies, I worked with the premise that qualitative research “starts from and returns to words, talk and texts…” (Gephart, 2004, p. 455). However, I also believe that qualitative data allows for the bifocal analysis discussed in Coviello (2005).

4. The Results

The results section is where you have the best opportunity to draw the reader into your story. Thus, you need to consider the structure of this section and its content.

a. Structure

You can lead up to the findings, or alternatively, present them first and then provide the details underpinning them. I prefer the latter approach for the simple reason that by offering an interesting finding, you keep the reader engaged. This is particularly critical for qualitative research because you may need to present numerous levels of findings and a variety of themes. Expecting the reader to wade through all of that in order to get to your results is too much. Thus, quickly capture their attention with the core findings and then elaborate.

b. Content

I have never forgotten one pre-reader’s advice: “…this is so boring Nicole – where is the life in your story?” When I discussed this with my colleague, I learned that I needed to help him feel like he knew the informants. I also needed to try to communicate what it was like to be an informant as well as the investigator. This is very difficult in an article but can be aided by including figures that portray thought processes, messy decisions, etc. Does this mean you
should include photos, vignettes, etc? Not necessarily. If a photo tells a thousand words about your ethnographic experience, then it may be appropriate. If the vignette is an example of the narrative you analyzed, then this may be appropriate. I would however, be cautious in including such artifacts when space is at a premium.

The content of your results section is also aided by the use of quotes. Indeed, I have found that even if a reviewer isn’t a qualitative specialist, s/he will generally expect you to use quotes in your ‘story-telling’. As explained by Pratt (2008), quotes can have two purposes: power and proof. ‘Power’ quotes are where the informant is concise and insightful, or has captured the essence of what the data shows. This type of quote should appear in the body of your paper. In contrast, you might use ‘proof’ quotes to reinforce a point, using (e.g.) a number of short quotes from other informants to show similar patterns across your findings. Proof quotes are usually found in summary tables. A word of caution however – review your target journal to understand the norms of presenting power vs. proof quotes. My experience at the *Journal of Marketing* (a journal with very few qualitative articles) was that when I relied on tables of proof quotes (to minimize space), the reviewers were unhappy. I quickly rewrote the entire results section to integrate power quotes.

5. Your Discussion

Probably the most important advice I can give about the discussion section is that you should interpret and assess your findings relative to the extent literature. There are two general approaches that seem to be prevalent. One is to you separate the results from the discussion. Another way is to inter-weave the findings and theory by adapting Van Maanen’s (1979) advice
Regarding ethnographies. As seen in Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) study on strategic sense making and sense giving, you can report the informant’s perspective (aka first-order concept) and then second-order concepts, which are infused with theory. Another variant is offered by Narayandas and Rangan (2004) in their study of buyer-seller relationships.

Regardless of the approach you choose, it is important to remember that this part of a manuscript should be an ‘interpretive discussion’. For qualitative researchers, this provides the opportunity to show how the results extend and/or elaborate existing theory, provide new insight to earlier findings and/or offer a completely fresh perspective.

Here is where we also find propositions for future research. My experience is that even with qualitatively induced propositions, most reviewers like propositions to sound like hypotheses. That is, they like directional relationships (where x leads to y). I tend to start by presenting the propositions in a manner consistent with the target journal. Then, I revise them to suit the stylistic preferences of the reviewing team. Of note, the wording of propositions (or hypotheses) is rarely a fatal flaw in qualitative research. This is because they are often the outcome of a study and not used to frame it. Keep in mind however, that propositions can themselves be fatal if the reviewer sees little in the way of added knowledge.

6. Your Conclusions

I suggest there are three major things to focus on when writing your conclusions: your contributions, generalizability, and the implications of your study.
a. Contributions

The conclusions section is your opportunity to reinforce the contributions of your study. Your article should have highlighted these in the introduction and now, it’s time to remind the reader of what you have done. In writing up contributions, I have found the advice from Locke and Golden Biddle (1997) helpful. Their grounded theory of ‘contribution to knowledge’ offers insight to the rhetoric we use (and should use) to think about and articulate contributions.

Keep in mind too, that the ‘development of new theory’ is a rare occurrence. Instead, I urge you to carefully think about what your study truly contributes. Are you extending a theory into a new context? Are you elaborating an aspect of theory that has not been well-addressed in the extant literature? Are you challenging theory? Integrating it to identify new insights?

b. Generalizability

You may be challenged regarding the ‘generalizability’ of your findings. Remember however, there are different forms of generalizability and like Pratt (2008), I think there are least two ways of overcoming the generalizability problem. One way is to explain how your context is similar to others (thus implying that your findings might be applied in these similar contexts). For example, in Coviello and Joseph (2012), we provide a number of arguments to suggest that our findings from small technology-based firms might be expected in both larger and more established firms, as well as other science-based ventures. This is not empirical generalization. Rather, it is an example of transferability, aka analytic generalizability. Another way is to explain how your findings fit with extant theory and/or what insights your findings offer to extant theory. Some authors will find this difficult because they have chosen a qualitative
method because they believe their topic to be ‘new’. However, more often than not, the topic has emerged in some shape or form in other fields. Thus, it is your responsibility to know and use other relevant literature, often beyond entrepreneurship, to inform your research.

c. Implications

Even if you think that your work is very exploratory and managerial implications are premature, reviewers will want something! At the same time, remember that the managerial implications from most qualitative work are tentative or preliminary. Craft your arguments accordingly.

Your research implications should be given special attention. This is where you have the opportunity to develop a research agenda. By outlining avenues for investigation, you can guide future research and provide a basis for your own work. Think hard and deep about potential research questions and methods. It is insufficient to say: “these findings could benefit from a quantitative study.”

C. WRITING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: CRAFT AND RE-CRAFT AND…RE-CRAFT AGAIN

As discussed by Ragins (2012), writing is a craft. My first suggestion on how to write a qualitative paper is to read Ragins (2012) because I agree with everything she says. One of her key points is that good writing should be accurate and clear. I have found that clarity in writing requires clarity in thought, and this is helped by good organization. To this point, I emphasized earlier the need to be organized with data collection and analysis. This does not however, mean that your paper should be written in a standard format per se. Like Pratt (2009), I am uncomfortable with the notion of having a boilerplate (or template) for structuring the write-up
of a qualitative study. As one example, although I find the various studies of Eisenhardt (and colleagues) to be exemplars of how to conduct case research, her articles have become somewhat predictable. Yes, her work tackles complex issues with particularly rich and messy data. Yes, readers draw comfort from the familiarity of her template; a template that allows readers to quickly scan (long) articles or locate specific information by turning directly to the relevant section. Paradoxically however, there may be diminishing returns to this approach. As a reviewer, I can immediately recognize what seems to be an Eisenhardt study. Is this good or bad for you, the author? If you are mimicking her style, then you had better also mimic the rigor with which she and her colleagues conduct case research. Otherwise, those familiar with the template will quickly spot the flaws of your investigation.

We are all experienced readers of research. We know papers we like and those we don’t. Often, that ‘liking’ is our response to how well a paper is written. Thus, I spend time with doctoral students to deconstruct the structure and rhetoric of articles. This helps them understand their response to an article. Then, I encourage them to consider why they find a particular style and structure compelling and believable. This process has the benefit of forcing us, as writers, to think about what we are trying to communicate and how it is communicated. Although this is important in all research, I have found that because qualitative data is rich, deep and messy, extremely careful structure and articulation is required. What does this mean?

- *Tell a story.* That is, establish a clear story line. This is a real challenge with qualitative research when you are faced with masses of data and/or multiple theoretical lenses by which to interpret that data. Thus, write simply and directly. Later, when you think you
have a nearly perfect paper, force yourself to make the slides for a 20 minute presentation. This requires you to focus on the essence of your arguments (for the slides), and you will likely see a simpler way to structure the paper and tell your story.

- **Make sensible use of figures and tables.** Not only can these tools help make any article more digestible, they might help you save space. As noted earlier, it can be particularly helpful to use a figure to portray a complex process.

- **Be careful with the words you use to frame your qualitative study.** For example, you might be inclined to use the terms ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ but in qualitative research, these sound positively positivistic! Others words that are overly positivistic include: associated, correlated, tested, significant, independent and dependent. Avoid using these.

- **Write economically.** This is very relevant for qualitative manuscripts; papers that are likely to be too long to begin with. It is also very relevant if you are writing for a top North American journal because they encourage writing that is parsimonious and active. Every point should have a point. There should be no unnecessary words and no superfluous sentences. Thus, I regularly ask: So what? Have I used two words when I can use one? Would a figure or table tell the story better? Is that footnote really necessary? If you can’t do this yourself, then find a co-author or pre-reader who will. It is absolutely necessary. Any off-cuts can go into a separate file for ‘future use’.

- **Remember the importance of context to your work.** I make this point for two reasons. First, in a qualitative study, a carefully chosen context can help you isolate (e.g.) a process or group that is critical for theory development; it can help you observe extreme values. Pratt et al. (2006) is an example of this, as is Coviello and Joseph (2012). Second, good context can be intriguing to the reader. My favourite example here is Elsbach and
Kramer’s (2003) study of Hollywood pitches. I wanted to read the article, simply because it sounded like a fascinating context.

- **Manage the length of your paper.** If the manuscript length is not around 50 double-spaced pages (including figures, tables and references), you probably haven’t done justice to the method and data. However, it is likely that your editor will ask you to shorten the paper. This is where the ongoing process of crafting (and re-crafting) can be helpful.

**D. CONCLUSION**

My goal with this chapter was to share some of what I have learned about publishing qualitative research. Remember, a qualitative approach is appropriate when the investigation calls for research that is interpretive, inductive and holistic. If this isn’t what your research problem demands, re-think your method. Also, remember that qualitative data collection and analysis is flexible and fluid, emerging as insight emerges. This means two things. First, multiple methods are often used; methods that require human interaction and reflection. Second, the qualitative process needs time; time to conduct the research, interpret your findings, reflect on them and then craft a manuscript of high standard. The end result may however, be worth the commitment because a strong qualitative study can transform your career. It may even be award-worthy.
References


Coviello, Nicole (2005), “Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Techniques in Network Analysis,” Qualitative Market Research, 8 (1), 39-60.


### Table 1:

**Examples of Recent Qualitative Studies from JBV**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>General Goal</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khavul, Chavez and Bruton (2013)</td>
<td>To develop a grounded theory of the process of institutional change in micro-financing.</td>
<td>Fifty-seven depth interviews with representatives of multiple communities, combined with archival data. Guatemala used as a ‘case’ nation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope (2011)</td>
<td>To understand entrepreneurial learning from failure.</td>
<td>Interpretive phenomenological research (using phenomenological interviews) with 8 entrepreneurs in the UK and US, based on their lived experience of failure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fischer and Reuber (2011)</td>
<td>To explore how the effectual process is impacted by entrepreneur’s using Twitter for social interaction.</td>
<td>Depth interviews with 12 entrepreneurs having various levels of entrepreneurial expertise, combined with archival data related to their Twitter accounts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty and Gruber (2011)</td>
<td>To explore actual venture capital decision-making as it occurs over time in its natural decision environment.</td>
<td>Textual interpretation of 11 years of archival data of a single European venture capital firm.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1:

Depicting a Qualitative Process of Data Collection and Analysis
(adapted from Cox 2005 and Fehsenfeld 2004)