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ARTICLE

Qualitative Research

Sonia Ospina

*Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
New York University*

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Leadership scholars seeking to answer questions about culture and meaning have found experimental and quantitative methods to be insufficient on their own in explaining the phenomenon they wish to study. As a result, qualitative research has gained momentum as a mode of inquiry. This trend has roots in the development of the New Leadership School, (Conger, 1999; Hunt, 1999), on the recent emergence of an approach to leadership that views it as a relational phenomenon (Fletcher, 2002), and on the increased recognition of the strengths of qualitative inquiry generally.

Shank (2002) defines qualitative research as “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” (p. 5). By *systematic* he means “planned, ordered and public”, following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community. By *empirical*, he means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experience. *Inquiry into meaning* says researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) claim that qualitative research involves an *interpretive and naturalistic* approach: “This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3).

The advantages of doing qualitative research on leadership include (Conger, 1998; Bryman et al, 1988; Alvesson, 1996):

- flexibility to follow unexpected ideas during research and explore processes effectively;
- sensitivity to contextual factors;
- ability to study symbolic dimensions and social meaning;
- increased opportunities
 - to develop empirically supported new ideas and theories;
 - for in-depth and longitudinal explorations of leadership phenomena; and
 - for more relevance and interest for practitioners.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITATIVE DESIGNS

Transformational leadership scholars attend to the management of meaning as an important dimension of leadership (Calás and Smircich, 1991; Yukl, 1994, 1999; Meindl, et al 1986). Neo-charismatic scholars view charisma as a social phenomenon that requires in-depth examination of context and actors over time. Conger (1998) argues that quantitative research alone can not produce a good understanding of leadership, given “the extreme and enduring complexity of the leadership phenomenon itself” (p. 108). Leadership involves multiple levels of phenomena, possesses a dynamic character and has a symbolic component, elements better addressed with qualitative methodologies, he argues. Likewise, favoring grounded theory, Parry (1998) claims that quantitative methods are insufficient to theorize successfully about the nature of leadership, understood as a social influence process.

The high sensitivity of leadership to context is well established in the literature. Quantitative researchers incorporate contextual variables in their models but conceptualize them abstractly (i.e. ‘task structure’ or ‘position power’), obscuring the impact of context-specific forces. Qualitative researchers are well positioned to open this ‘black box’. Qualitative studies about circumstances associated with organizational types or occupational settings have provided new insights into the dynamics of leadership (Bryman et al, 1996). Some New Leadership scholars have also used a mixed approach to understand contextual variables such as culture. For example, in their international research program, House and his associates use both methods to study leadership in 170 countries (House et al, 1999). Others argue for process-focused studies to better understand the hows and whys of transformational and charismatic leadership (Bass, 1995; Lowe and Gardner, 2001).

Bryman (1986) identifies two forms of qualitative research in the New Leadership literature. One distills lessons from portraits of successful leaders to illustrate particular ideas. The other, more ‘academic’, explore several research designs: case studies using participant observation, semi-structured interviewing and document analysis; multiple case study design, adding comparative analysis; and interview studies asking leaders

about their practices and orientations, or inviting individuals to discuss other leaders or leadership practices (Bryman et al, 1996). Other qualitative designs found in the literature include ethnography, narrative inquiry, action research and grounded theory (Tierney, 1996; Schall et al, 2002; Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Parry, 1998).

Contemporary emergent approaches view leadership as a meaning making process in communities of practice (Drath, 2001) or as a set of functions and relationships distributed rather than concentrated around a single individual (Pearse and Conger, 2002). These new theoretical lenses call for qualitative designs. For example, Gronn's (1999) study of a famous mountain school campus in Australia explored the relational dynamics between two leaders credited for this school's success. Analyzing correspondence, school council records, alumni files, archival material and newspapers, he shifted the unit of analysis away from methodological individualism to consider collective forms of leadership.

THE NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

While quantitative and qualitative inquiry represent two legitimate ways to investigate leadership, researchers using one or the other tackle empirical research differently. Everet and Louis (1981) clarify the assumptions that ground each by distinguishing two research stances: "inquiry from the outside", often implemented via quantitative studies and "inquiry from the inside" via qualitative studies.

These approaches differ in the degree of the researcher's immersion in terms of experiential engagement, direct contact with the subjects, and physical involvement in the setting. In the "inside" or qualitative approach, the researcher aims for a holistic picture from historically unique situations, where idiosyncrasies are important for meaning. The researcher uses an inductive mode, letting the data speak. In contrast, traditional "outside" or quantitative researchers aim to isolate the phenomenon, to reduce the level of complexity in the analysis and to test hypotheses derived previously.

Shank uses two metaphors to differentiate these ways of 'seeing' in research. One metaphor is the 'window', to look through to get an accurate view of a subject. Microscopes are windows that help to do inquiry from the outside. The researcher tries to correct for smudges (to avoid bias) or to clarify in what ways the window is flawed (to identify error). This image corresponds to mainstream leadership research, and requires simplification and standardization of complex observations. In contrast to the window, the 'lantern' metaphor helps "shed light in dark corners" (Shank, p.11). This image characterizes qualitative researchers as "discoverers and reconcilers of meaning where no meaning has been clearly understood before" (Shank p. 11).

The approaches to inquiry described with the window, inquiry from the outside, and by extension, quantitative research, are best known as *logical positivism* and *post-positivism*. The lantern, inquiry from the inside and qualitative research, represent an approach known as *interpretivism* (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Historically, the strong hold of quantitative methodologies in leadership studies can be explained by the dominance of the fields of social psychology and organizational behavior which have been highly influenced by positivism (House and Adytay, 1996; Parry, 1998; Podsakoff, 1994).

A VARIETY OF INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

All qualitative researchers aspire to illuminate social meaning. However, some use qualitative methods exclusively, others to complement or better interpret numerical data, and others to generate hypotheses for future quantitative studies (See Box 1). Various choices and practices fall along a continuum, where some researchers are closer to positivism and others distance radically from it. Between the poles there is a spectrum of qualitative traditions that stand on their own. Different traditions represent different 'interpretive communities' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Close to positivism, post-positivists accept the limits of positivism, talk about probability rather than certainty and consider the limits of objectivity (Crotty, 1998). For them, qualitative research becomes an important complement to quantitative methods when

these fall short. In the opposite side of the continuum is post-modernism, seeking to replace positivism with inquiry stances that capture multiple voices and perspectives in local contexts. Post-modernists assume that theories only provide partial views of their objects, and that every representation of the world is filtered through history and language, so it can not be neutral (Best and Kellner, 1991). In contrast to the realism of post-positivists, post-modernists explore how language, power and history shape human views of reality, truth and knowledge, aiming to uncover multiple realities. Post-modernists favor critical methods that are intrinsically qualitative (Hollinger, 1994, p. 173).

New Leadership qualitative scholars tend to embrace post-positivism and use qualitative research to complement or extend quantitative findings. Scholars from emergent perspectives of leadership, often characterized by post-modernist sensibilities, view qualitative inquiry as the way to frame and address questions that cannot be answered by way of quantification.

Examples of qualitative studies anchored in post-positivism abound. Conger (1992) studied leadership development programs in the US by joining training programs as an actual participant, supplementing participant observation with extensive interviewing. He found four instructional paradigms and explored how each influenced participant and program outcomes as well as the implications for training. He argued that had he used a traditional survey, he would have missed these differences entirely.

Bryman and his colleagues (1996) studied transformational leadership in the British police service. They conducted semi-structured interviews with police officers and chief inspectors (middle managers), exploring the concept of transformational leadership. Highlighting context and the actors' perspective in research, they attributed the unexpected finding that charisma was less prominent than instrumental leadership to conditions of public service in the UK at the time of the study.

A post-modernist approach to leadership research is in its early stages. Rejecting the search for a "grand" theory of leadership, Alvesson (1996) invites researchers to take

seriously the ambiguity of “leadership” itself. Knowledge about leadership can not emerge through fixed procedures organized to arrive at abstract conclusions, he argues. Researchers must create more open forms of inquiry, focus on local patterns and acknowledge that meaning is jointly constructed with participants. Likewise, Tierney (1996) discusses five tenets of post-modernism (culture and difference; language and meaning; individual constraints and possibilities; power and politics; subjectivity and objectivity) and their implications for research on leadership.

Located in the middle of the qualitative spectrum, Huxham and Vangen (2000) used an action-research project about public and community-based partnerships in Scotland to explore the role leadership plays in collaboration. Drawing from work interventions with practitioners involved in partnerships, they used phenomenology and a derivation of grounded theory to develop themes about collaboration. They defined leadership as ‘making things happen’ in the collaboration, and found that the context of leadership – structures, processes and participants – is not entirely within the control of participants, highlighting the paradox that collaboration requires resource-intensive individual efforts.

If multiple stances toward inquiry along the continuum produce different forms of qualitative research, sometimes researchers combine assumptions from various approaches. For example, in their design, Ospina and her colleagues (2003) drew from three interpretive communities, critical theory, constructionism and participatory inquiry. Considering leadership as meaning-making in communities of practice, they invited a selected group of community leaders in the US to do participatory, action-oriented research. The team used narrative inquiry, cooperative inquiry and ethnography to explore how leadership happens in communities engaged in social change.

THE STATE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON LEADERSHIP

Mirroring the diversity within interpretive communities, the work of qualitative researchers studying leadership covers the spectrum from post-positivism to post-modernism. There is however, no consensus about whether qualitative research is yet sufficiently valued within the more academic leadership literature. Bass (2003) says that

more and more “there are efforts to ‘triangulate’ quantitative and qualitative research for increasing confidence in both” (personal communication). Parry (1998) agrees that there is a growing appreciation about the need for both methods in leadership research. But he also reports that so far, ‘pure’ qualitative research (See Box 2) has received very little attention in the field. Conger (1998) and Bryman (2003, personal communication) believe that qualitative research continues to be underutilized in the field.

So far, most work on leadership falls within the more traditional side of the qualitative spectrum. Lowe and Gardner’s (2001) content analysis of the 188 articles published in *Leadership Quarterly* until 1999 report what they call a ‘healthy mix’ (p. 484) of quantitative (71%) and qualitative (39%) methods, and a small subset of mixed studies. In terms of analytical methods, about one half of the studies used content analysis, a little less than half, case studies and about one fifth, grounded theory. These methodologies are favored within the post-positivist interpretive community. Nevertheless, interest in other forms of qualitative research to study leadership keeps growing and they are slowly gaining currency in the field.

BOX 1: REASONS TO USE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:

- To explore a phenomenon that has not been studied before (and that may be subsequently developed quantitatively)
- To add rich detail and nuance that illustrates or documents existing knowledge of a phenomenon, generated quantitatively
- To better understand a topic by studying it simultaneously (triangulation) or concurrently with both methods (mixing quantitative and qualitative methods at the same time or in cycles, depending on the problem)
- To advance a novel perspective of a phenomenon well studied quantitatively but not well understood because of the narrow perspectives used before
- To try to “understand” any social phenomenon from the perspective of the actors involved, rather than explaining it (unsuccessfully) from the outside
- To understand complex phenomena that are difficult or impossible to approach or to capture quantitatively
- To understand any phenomenon in its complexity, or one that has been dismissed by mainstream research because of the difficulties to study it, or that has been discarded as irrelevant, or that has been studied as if only one point of view about it was real

Scholars inclined toward the post-positivist side of the qualitative continuum favor the first four reasons. They see qualitative research as an inductive approach to develop theories that then must be tested deductively via quantitative models. Scholars inclined toward the post-modernist side favor the last four reasons. They see qualitative research as an approach to inquiry that stands on its own and best allows a researcher to attain ‘a glimpse of the world’.

BOX 2: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH PRACTICES IN LEADERSHIP RESEARCH:

Empirical research practices on leadership studies can be categorized by how researchers combine, at the methods level, qualitative and quantitative data with qualitative and quantitative analysis (Parry, 1998). Practices fall within the following categories:

- **Quantitative analysis of quantitative data:** this is the traditional practice in leadership research, with surveys and experiments as the most favored methods. Quantitative practices usually reflect a positivist stance to inquiry.
- **Quantitative analysis of qualitative data:** this is the preferred qualitative practice in leadership research, with content analysis of text as the most favored method. This practice may reflect a positivist or a post-positivist stance to inquiry.
- **Qualitative analysis of quantitative data:** this practice is not used in the leadership field but has potential (e.g. using ethno-statistics or discourse analysis to deconstruct quantitative leadership studies). This practice would reflect an interpretivist and post-modernist stance to inquiry.
- **Qualitative analysis of qualitative data:** in this practice qualitative research stands on its own. This “pure” type has taken many different forms in leadership research. This practice may include both a post-positivist stance (grounded theory, traditional ethnography and case studies) and an interpretivist stance (phenomenological life stories, narrative inquiry and action research) to inquiry.
- **Qualitative and quantitative data and analysis:** While not used consistently, some efforts to mix methods have developed in the leadership literature. Because the quantitative component drives the research, this practice reflects a post-positivist stance.

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