

The case against (the label) qualitative research

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Abstract

In this provocative essay, I critically explore if and how the label ‘qualitative research’ might contribute to a prevalence of objectivist and positivist research approaches using non-numerical data. Referring to seminal methodological and more contemporary articles in management and organisation studies, I argue that the use of the singular label ‘qualitative research’ to refer to paradigmatically diverse qualitative research approaches is problematic because it glosses over fundamental differences in how qualitative researchers ‘see’ the world and how they conduct their research as a result. I close the essay by calling for more differentiated and paradigmatically grounded labels denoting qualitative research and for better recognition in assessment and review processes that paradigms really matter.

Key words: paradigms, research methodology, research philosophy, research quality, rigour

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Why do methodological debates about qualitative research in management and organisation studies persist? After all, it is more than 45 years since Morgan & Smircich (1980) identified a typology of six qualitative research traditions that span a continuum of objectivist and subjectivist paradigms. At around the same time, Van Maanen (1979: 520) argued that the label ‘qualitative research’ “has no precise meaning in any of the social sciences. It is at best an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning [...] of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world”. In this context, I find it puzzling that management and organisation researchers seem to be wedded to the dichotomy between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research when the paradigmatic plurality underpinning the latter is (or at least should be) well known (see Morgan & Smircich, 1980) and its meaning is apparently so ambiguous (see Van Maanen, 1979).

The labels of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research are widely used in our field to denote a ‘methodological choice’ (Saunders et al., 2023:178) between methods using numerical data (quantitative research) and methods using textual, visual and symbolic data (qualitative research) (Bell et al., 2023). Methodological and technological advances are increasingly blurring the distinction between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research, as textual, visual and symbolic data may be translated into numerical data and analysed using statistical methods. Nevertheless, distinguishing between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research seems to have helped researchers design a coherent study, develop and apply relevant research skills (statistical versus interpretive approaches), communicate effectively with other researchers in their methodological community, and develop their researcher identity as a particular type of researcher depending on their use of data. And, of course, the label ‘qualitative research’ has also been used in the titles of well-respected methodological journals, such as *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* in our field and *Qualitative Research* and *Qualitative Inquiry* in the social sciences more widely. Although the label ‘qualitative research’ appears to have been meaningful for researchers engaged in this type of work, a more critical assessment of it seems long overdue.

The main issue with the label ‘qualitative research’, which I seek to explore in this somewhat provocative essay, is that it implies a certain philosophical homogeneity across different types of qualitative research. By that, I mean that all qualitative researchers are assumed to see the world in similar ways, just as all quantitative researchers tend to see the world in similar ways. Additionally, it might also be implied that both qualitative and quantitative researchers see the world in the same way and that only their use of data differs. Of course, this is not the case. Since Morgan and Smircich’s (1980) typology of six distinct approaches to qualitative research that span both objectivist and subjectivist paradigms, the paradigmatic plurality underpinning qualitative research has been known. Put differently, what is known as ‘qualitative research’ is informed by very different sets of assumptions, conducted using very different research practices, theorised in very different ways and meaningfully assessed using very different criteria.

Yet, despite this diversity, methodological commentators have observed a prevalence of objectivist approaches to qualitative research and the associated sidelining of non-objectivist approaches (Symon et al., 2018; Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar, 2021; Aguzzoli et al., 2024). In other words, there seems to be a drive towards a single ‘right’ and ‘rigorous’ way of conducting qualitative research, which is underpinned by an objectivist paradigm and which is assessed using the evaluation criteria of quantitative research (e.g. Symon et al., 2018). This trend is

further evidenced by critiques regarding the use of methodological templates (e.g. Harley & Cornelissen, 2022) and of research practices that objectify qualitative research (e.g. Hansen et al., 2023) as well as by calls for better recognition of the paradigmatic plurality underpinning qualitative scholarship and the associated diversity of methodological approaches (e.g. Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar, 2021).

My main concern in this essay is whether and how the *singular* label ‘qualitative research’ may contribute to these issues, which, arguably, should have been resolved decades ago. The underlying premise of the critical exploration offered here is that the way in which we (as management and organisation researchers) talk about a phenomenon (here: qualitative research) matters because it shapes our thinking about research and the research practices we adopt. Specifically, I will argue below that the widespread tendency to think of qualitative and quantitative research in this dichotomous – and therefore rather simplistic – manner may prevent the field from reaping the full benefits of the paradigmatic plurality and methodological diversity provided by qualitative, non-objectivist scholarship.

So what are paradigms? Thomas Kuhn (1970: 4) defined a paradigm (among others) as a “set of received beliefs” about the nature of the social world (ontology) and how robust knowledge about that world can be generated (epistemology) through collecting, analysing and theorising from data. Paradigms are thus fundamental to conducting research, shaping decisions about research design, such as “our topic, focus of study, what we see as ‘data’, how we collect and analyse that data, how we theorize, and how we write up our research accounts” (Cunliffe, 2011: 651). Management and organisation research can follow either the logic of the natural sciences underpinned by an objectivist paradigm or the (multiple) logics of the social sciences underpinned by subjectivist paradigms (Saunders et al., 2023), which Cunliffe (2011: 654) respectively calls “research as science” and “research as craft”.

Objectivist, positivist research is characterised, for example, by a detached researcher, standardised protocols for data collection and analysis, comparatively large sample sizes, a deductive approach to theorising and attempts to generalise often using statistical means in order to establish an external ‘truth’. It is this logic that underpins what is known as quantitative research (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) with a relatively homogenous set of research techniques, practices and evaluation criteria. Although at first glance counter-intuitive, the same logic has been applied to qualitative research in what has become known as ‘qualitative positivism’ (e.g. Su, 2018). Qualitative positivism refers to qualitative research that is underpinned by an objectivist paradigm and uses the logic of the natural sciences to examine social phenomena. Su (ibid.) characterises qualitative positivism as follows:

“Ontologically, positivist qualitative research assumes the existence of an objective, external reality that can be apprehended and summarized, although not readily quantified. Epistemologically, positivist qualitative research focuses on searching for, through non-statistical means, regularities and causal relationships between different elements of the reality, and summarizing identified patterns into generalized findings. Methodologically, positivist qualitative research tends to emphasize a nomothetic rather than idiographic approach; this approach utilizes systematic research protocols and techniques to develop and test theoretical models or propositions in accordance with the canons of scientific rigor.”

Qualitative positivism thus recognises that not all social phenomena can be quantified but seeks to apply the logic of the natural sciences in the design and conduct of the research nevertheless.

Terms such as “an objective, external reality”, “causal relationships between different elements of the reality”, “generalized findings” and “test[ing] ... models ...” would also be found in quantitative, numerical and statistical studies. Cunliffe (2011) adds to this characterisation that the researcher would typically take a detached position in the research. In other words, even though the type of data collected and analysed differs, paradigmatically there is very little difference between quantitative research and qualitative positivist research as both types are underpinned by an objectivist and positivist paradigm and as both use similar criteria for assessing research quality.

In contrast, research following the logics of the social sciences has been characterised in terms of subjective (Morgan & Smircich, 1980), subjective and intersubjective (Cunliffe, 2011), or subjectivist and social constructionist (Reissner & Whittle, 2022). Despite these differences in terminology, these ‘alternative’ paradigms (Aguzzoli et al., 2024) share, among others, researcher involvement, more flexible approaches to data collection and analysis, inductive or abductive approaches to theorising, comparatively small sample sizes to achieve in-depth study and context-sensitive analysis (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Van Manen, 1979). Not only does contextualised analysis lead to “inspired theorizing” (Hansen et al., 2025: 3) but it also enables researchers to provide important empirical insights of understudied contexts that would get distorted or lost through generalisation (Halme et al., 2024).

Two domains have benefitted from better recognition and explication of this paradigmatic plurality. Firstly, in qualitative interviewing, Alvesson (2003; 2011) was the first to identify three approaches to interview research, which he called ‘positivist’, ‘romanticist’ and ‘localist’. Positivist approaches are underpinned by an objectivist paradigm, which are characterised by structured interview protocols, detached interviewers and the use of ‘quality checks’ in the analysis (e.g. saturation, triangulation, interrater reliability) (Reissner & Whittle, 2022). Whittle & Reissner (2025) further argue that in such studies researchers seek to make generalisable knowledge claims about an objective ‘world out there’. What Alvesson (2003; 2011) calls ‘romanticist’ approaches are, according to Reissner & Whittle (2022), underpinned by a subjectivist paradigm. Such studies are characterised by an involved researcher who seeks to develop rapport with interviewees to gain deep insights into their authentic experiences and inner self. They have found that in such studies researchers use more open-ended interview protocols, have freedom to deviate from pre-prepared questions and check the quality of their analysis through practices such as member checking. Whittle & Reissner (2025) argue that in such studies researchers seek to claim to know something about some kind of cognitive process or state. What Alvesson (2003; 2011) calls ‘localist’ approaches are, according to Reissner & Whittle’s (2022) interpretation, underpinned by a social constructionist paradigm and characterised by a focus on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee in co-constructing the interview. Whittle & Reissner (2025) argue that in such studies researchers claim to know something about how language is used by the interviewee, either actively as a reflexive language user or passively in the sense that their accounts are influenced by wider discourses. These advancements highlight the diversity of qualitative research practices that is driven by multiple, co-existing paradigms.

Secondly, methodological research on approaches to theorising used in management and organisation studies also recognises different philosophical assumptions about what constitutes ‘good’ knowledge. Two inductively derived frameworks are noteworthy. Sandberg & Alvesson (2021) develop a typology of five approaches to theorising. What they call ‘explaining’ theories theorise a given external phenomenon through logically related variables to arrive at generalisable knowledge in accordance with the objectivist and positivist paradigm and using the logic of the natural sciences. What they call ‘comprehending’ theories theorise the meanings of socially defined phenomena through in-depth interpretation of meaning

systems and social actors' sense-making. Sandberg & Alvesson's (ibid.) conceptualisation of such theories appears to be similar to the assumptions underpinning what Alvesson (2003; 2011) calls 'romanticist' approaches to interviewing in that the focus is on trying to gain knowledge about cognitive processes. What they call 'ordering' (categorisation) and 'enacting' (process theorising) theories can arguably be used in both objectivist and non-objectivist paradigms, albeit in different ways, whereas 'provoking' (critical evaluation) theories take a critical stance that is widely used in social constructionist research (Burr, 1995).

Cornelissen et al. (2021) develop a typology of seven approaches to theorising, but the fact that some types can only be meaningfully employed in one paradigm whereas others can be used in multiple paradigms can also be observed here. What they call 'propositional' and 'configurational' theorising with an emphasis on cause-and-effect relationships and causal paths and structures respectively appear to be underpinned by the objectivist and positivist paradigm. What they call 'perspectival theorising', 'meta-theorising', 'theoretical provocation' and 'critical meta-theorising' respectively is characterised by interpretation and an involved researcher and therefore appear to be underpinned by non-objectivist paradigms. Like with Sandberg & Alvesson's (2021) typology, Cornelissen et al.'s (2021) 'process theorising' can arguably be applied in both objectivist and non-objectivist paradigms depending on the application.

A critical reader may now ask 'what is the problem?' After all, management and organisation researchers have known for over 45 years that qualitative research is characterised by paradigmatic plurality and methodological diversity (Van Maanen, 1979; Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Recent methodological advances (perhaps too recent to have penetrated research methods training and methodological debates) have also applied and explicated this paradigmatic plurality in relation to qualitative interviewing (Alvesson, 2003; 2011; Reissner & Whittle, 2022; Whittle & Reissner, 2025) and approaches to theorising (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021). Nevertheless, I contend that as a research community we ought to ask ourselves if we should really be continuing to use a singular label for a diverse range of research approaches, given the observed prevalence of objectivist and positivist approaches to qualitative research in management and organisation studies (e.g. Symon et al., 2018; Harley & Cornelissen, 2022; Hansen et al., 2025).

Let me explain in more detail where I am coming from. The definitions of quantitative and qualitative research are focused on methods (Bell et al., 2023) – numerical (quantitative) and textual, visual and symbolic (qualitative). This distinction, however, does not take into account the underpinning paradigms. While this is not a problem in quantitative research (which is typically underpinned by a single objectivist, positivist paradigm), the paradigmatic plurality of qualitative research (Van Maanen, 1979; Morgan & Smircich, 1980; Cunliffe, 2011) is not sufficiently recognised in the singular label 'qualitative research'. Researchers adopting qualitative positivism (Su, 2018) have, paradigmatically speaking, more in common with researchers that undertake quantitative survey- or experiment-based studies. Indeed, some researchers attempt to blur this distinction by translating textual data into numerical data for statistical analysis. An example is Ou et al.'s (2014) mixed methods study of CEO humility involving a survey and interviews with CEOs. The interview transcripts were coded at the level of paragraphs to reflect the coders' assessments for theoretically-defined dimensions of humility, using a rating of the CEO's reported humility as "1 = strong, 0 = neutral, and - 1 = weak" (p56). These now numerical data were then used to validate the theoretically derived humility measure.

In contrast, researchers undertaking qualitative research underpinned by a social constructionist paradigm subscribe to a very different set of assumptions about the nature of

the social world and how rigorous knowledge about this world can be generated. In particular, they regard social phenomena as socially constructed, which means that “what we take to be the truth about the world ... depends on the social relationships of which we are part” (Gergen, 2015:3). According to Burr (1995), social constructionism involves a critical attitude towards knowledge, which is regarded as historically and culturally specific, sustained by social processes and shaping social action. In other words, social constructionist researchers are typically critical of the assumptions underpinning qualitative positivism. Instead, they regard themselves as a part of the social world that they are studying and, therefore, their positionality and reflexivity are important indicators of research quality.

Yet, both sets of researchers might call themselves ‘qualitative’ researchers – even though that label does not say anything about how they approach their work, other than that they rely predominantly on non-numerical data. It is then easy to assume that the only difference between the two sets of researchers is the type of data that are being used (as highlighted in methodological textbooks, see for example Bell et al., 2023) but that the underpinning paradigm is the same. Yet, that which is not said – the difference between the paradigms underpinning their work – appears to be more important for judging the rigour of their work. For example, in the context of interview research in our field, Reissner & Whittle (2022) have shown that the ‘quality checks’ undertaken by researchers differs between paradigms. Interview researchers adopting an objectivist paradigm are likely to use things like saturation, triangulation, interrater reliability or a combination of them. Interview researchers adopting a subjectivist paradigm are likely to use things like saturation, triangulation, respondent validation or a combination of them. In contrast, interview researchers adopting a social constructionist paradigm are unlikely to use any of these things because they jar with the underlying assumptions of the social world and how it can be known. Instead, ‘quality checks’ for social constructionist interview researchers are likely to include reflexivity in relation to how different discourses or cultural scripts are used in different data sources or contexts and also in relation to their own positionality in the research.

It is then not difficult to imagine how – howsoever indirectly and inadvertently – the singular and aparadigmatic label ‘qualitative research’ might contribute to singular assumptions about qualitative research and what constitutes rigour. For example, Symon et al.’s (2018) review of the assessment criteria by which qualitative studies are judged in high-quality management and organisation journals identified a dominance of objectivist and positivist criteria that are not suitable for assessing research underpinned by more subjectivist and constructionist approaches to qualitative research. But how are researchers to know about the paradigmatic plurality underpinning qualitative research when the associated and widely used label implies the opposite? Not all researchers may have undergone comprehensive research methods training that introduced them to a variety of different paradigms and research practices, and not all researchers may have an interest in research methodology beyond their immediate portfolio of methods.

Indeed, there are suggestions that researchers who have been socialised into the dominant objectivist, positivist paradigm may not be very paradigmatically aware, at least in writing up their research. For example, a review of published management and organisation research by Mauthner & Saunders (2023) indicates that these “researchers rarely feel compelled to report or justify their use of a positivist stance”. In empirical articles published the top-tier journals in their sample, research philosophy is only mentioned in 4.11% (*Academy of Management Journal*), 11.63% (*Journal of Management Studies*) and 17.91% (*Human Relations*) of papers respectively. In none of the 566 papers in their sample (which also included empirical articles published in lower-tier outlets) was an objectivist and positivist paradigm reported. Similar conclusions can be drawn from Reissner & Whittle’s (2022) review

of 225 articles using interviews that were published in selected FT50 journals, which shows a prevalence of a mixed methods design (which is likely to be underpinned by an objectivist and positivist paradigm) in certain outlets (e.g. *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Strategic Management Journal*). If certain methodological communities and the scholarly journals they populate assume that there is only one ‘right’ and ‘rigorous’ way of conducting research – and that is objectivist and positivist research, irrespective of whether the methods are quantitative, qualitative or a combination of the two – it will be very difficult in our field to develop more widely what Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar (2021) call ‘paradigmatic awareness’, which they define as “in-depth philosophical understanding of criteria appropriate to the knowledge-constituting assumptions and design of a study, as well as when and how to employ them” (p5). Rather, there is a tendency towards prevalence of objectivist and positivist research to the detriment of non-objectivist approaches, to which the singular label ‘qualitative research’ contributes.

This lack of paradigmatic awareness has significant implications for management and organisation research. Methodological commentators agree that the current prevalence of objectivist and positivist qualitative research may limit not only the scope, diversity and depth of research (Aguzzoli et al., 2024) but also the value of (decontextualised and generalised) research findings (Halme et al., 2024; Hansen et al., 2025). In other words, the quest for rigour in qualitative research using the quality criteria of the objectivist, positivist paradigm may lower the quality of the knowledge generated. Yet, more paradigmatic “awareness can pave the way for rigour, diversity and creativity in qualitative manuscripts and contribute to paradigmatic and theorizing pluralism” (Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar, 2021: 5). Additionally, more paradigmatic diversity can help management and organisation researchers better address “managerial implications and grand challenges” (Aguzzoli et al., 2024: 9) to underpin research that matters.

So what can we as a research community do to better recognise, apply and celebrate the paradigmatic diversity underpinning qualitative research that has been called for? First of all, I recommend that we use the label ‘qualitative research’ in a more thoughtful way, for example by adding the paradigm that underpins our work. When asked about my research approach, I have started saying “I am a social constructionist researcher” rather than simply saying “I am a qualitative researcher”. By using more differentiated language in communicating with one another – and particularly those outside of our immediate methodological community – we can raise awareness of the different paradigmatic underpinnings of qualitative research. Perhaps I am overly optimistic when hoping that this might also be a conversation starter with more curious colleagues who have been socialised into the dominant objectivist and positivist paradigm, an opportunity to explain to them what social constructionist research is, how it can complement other approaches and how its rigour can be meaningfully assessed.

Secondly, and building on the first point, I recommend that as a research community we look beyond methods when appointing examiners for our postgraduate research students or when assigning reviewers for conference papers or journal articles, especially if non-numerical data are involved. As the recent work by Reissner & Whittle (2022) and Whittle & Reissner (2025) shows, researchers may use the ostensibly same method (in their case qualitative interviewing) but use very different research practices and draw very different conclusions from their work. It is therefore pertinent that we become more precise and paradigmatically aware in the language we use to describe our research. Rather than simply capturing whether a researcher has expertise in quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods, editorial systems could also capture the paradigm(s) that researchers are familiar with. Editors can then select reviewers who are not only topic experts but also methodological experts and thereby able to provide a fair assessment of a greater diversity of research approaches.

Thirdly, I recommend that all doctoral students in our field receive comprehensive research methods training that includes an introduction to different paradigms, the underpinning assumptions and differences in both research practices and quality criteria. A more paradigmatically aware next generation of researchers will help shift the focus away from objectivist and positivist research to co-existence of paradigms and a greater diversity of research approaches and the specific insights they provide. This is particularly important in an era where interdisciplinary research is encouraged or expected by research institutions and funding bodies to help address grand global challenges that exceed the remit of any single discipline. We can only work together effectively if we understand how we see the world and how different worldviews might be integrated in a single research project.

To sum up: in this critical essay, I have made a case against the label ‘qualitative research’ – a label that is ambiguous (Van Maanen, 1979) and does not recognise the underpinning paradigmatic plurality (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Much of the ground covered above is not new but has been subject to decade-long debates about what is known as qualitative research. It is these ongoing debates that were the starting point for my exploration because as management and organisation researchers we really should know better by now. Thinking about why as a research community we have failed to recognise and celebrate paradigmatic plurality has made me focus on the label ‘qualitative research’ – a singular label used to describe paradigmatically very different research approaches. Perhaps there is something about how we talk about and characterise our research that contributes to the prevalence of objectivist and positivist qualitative research in our field? It will therefore not come as a surprise that above I have called for a change in how we characterise our (qualitative) research that is more precise and paradigmatically aware to better celebrate the philosophical and methodological diversity of qualitative research in our field.

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