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Qualitative method for leadership research: Now there's a novel idea!

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Parry, K. W. (1998). Grounded theory and social process: A new direction for leadership research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 9(1), Spring, 85-105.

This is one of my earliest journal articles, and remains my most cited and probably most influential. As the title suggests, this article represents the proposition that the grounded theory method is a valid and profitable direction for leadership research to take. I should specify at this point that I am talking mainly about organisational leadership, rather than leadership research from the disciplines of history or political science or anthropology and the like. Such a proposition would not normally sound overly ambitious, except that organisational leadership research has been dominated by quantitative methods for many years. Quantitative methods have dominated to the extent that organisational leadership was almost invariably researched using questionnaires. That scenario is now changing.

Discovering qualitative research

I wrote this article as part of my PhD research in the mid-1990s. Let me go back a step to put this point into context. My introduction to academic research was to do my Master of Business degree by research. The topic was leadership. Within that degree I learned about research methodology. In that endeavour I was trained by a psychometrician and an econometrician. Consequently, to my mind research methodology was heavily quantitative, and almost exclusively based on questionnaire research.

Then when I had completed my Masters research, I discovered qualitative research. In looking for a PhD topic in leadership, I began to realise that leadership was a process that needed to be understood by talking with people and by observing how people interacted. I realised that not only was leadership better understood by interviewing and participant observation, but that questionnaire research really had the potential to trivialise the leadership phenomenon at best and misrepresent it at worst. Colleagues were using this methodology called grounded theory to research similar phenomena in other disciplines. As I delved further into it, I eventually concluded that grounded theory could provide a very fruitful avenue for leadership research. Not only that, but this realisation needed to be converted into a journal article. Therefore, the chapter of my PhD thesis that included the justification for my methodology became the basis of this article.

In essence, with my research I was breaking new ground, vis-à-vis doing the same old questionnaire research, which for a while looked to be the destiny of my PhD. Therefore,

this article was about breaking new ground, in terms of using a little-used method to research a well-worked phenomenon. Of course, grounded theory was well used in sociological circles, including education and nursing, but little-used in organisational or business research ... until now.

The review process was not without hitch, of course. I was not going to rattle the cage of the old guard tiger without encountering some resistance. The key to any article, and especially one like this, is often about the luck of the draw with regard to the reviewers who assess one's article. Luckily for me, this article was shepherded through by an associate editor who was sympathetic to the thesis that I was presenting. *The Leadership Quarterly* was and still is an American journal. Until recently, organisational leadership research has been mainly undertaken in North America, and North American management scholarship has always been dominated by quantitative methods. Hence, but for the wisdom of my shepherd editor, the life of this article could have been snuffed out very early.

One reviewer rejected my submission outright and rather scathingly, saying in effect that this topic has been discussed *ad infinitum* and is adding nothing new to organisational research. The other reviewer said that my proposition had merit and that I was making a potentially good point. The shepherd editor was sympathetic, so sent it out to a third reviewer. The article was eventually accepted with three or four redrafts.

The Leadership Quarterly is a so-called second tier journal, and always has been. It is just about accepted as 'top tier' now because the citation indices are at the highest levels. As I write, LQ has the 9th best impact factor for management journals, and 7th best for applied psychology journals, as cited in Thomson Scientific's Journal Citation Reports (<http://scientific.thomson.com>). But here is the thing. Had I submitted the article to a so-called 'top tier' journal, I am sure that the one negative review would have been sufficient cause for the editor to reject the article outright, and it would never have seen the light of day. Having a sympathetic shepherd editor will always be an advantage when trying to get published. However, in the brave new world of RQF (research quality framework) in Australia and PBRF (performance based research funding) in New Zealand, the top tier journals are being even more inundated than ever with submissions. All the incentives are about being published in top tier journals, and that is where people will submit. Therefore, the pressure in these so-called top tier journals will be to reject articles rather than to publish articles. They simply cannot publish all the good articles that are submitted. *The Leadership Quarterly* is now a top tier journal, unofficially if not officially. My conclusion is that the top tier journals will specialise in rejecting good quality research rather than publishing good quality research. I am the editor of the *Journal of Management & Organization* and I said as much in my first editorial. JMO is the newly-badged journal of the *Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management*. JMO is commencing its march up the rankings. Stay tuned.

What is quality?

So often, innovative or different articles get rejected by top tier journals, and eventually get published in so-called lower tier journals. Now, with the brave new world of quality rankings, and let's not forget that the Q in RQF stands for 'quality', these latter journals are called lower 'quality' journals. The irony is that they often produce the innovative work, whereas the top tier journals continue to produce work that follows a well-worn

recipe and are not very innovative. Therefore, we are seeing 'lower quality' research being published in 'high quality' journals, and high quality, innovative research being published in 'lower quality' journals. Because top tier journals tend not to be so innovative, the risk is that the body of knowledge and scholarship is not moving ahead as expeditiously as it should or could be.

The direction for method

Anyway, back to my article. In advocating grounded theory, I am promoting qualitative method. Specifically, I am promoting the qualitative analysis of triangulated data. In the 1998 article I was promoting the qualitative analysis of qualitative data. These days, we have moved forward, and I am recognising the need for greater variety and breadth in our data. We need to simultaneously gather interview and participant observation data as well as questionnaire based quantitative data, where relevant. In fact, we need as many sources of data as we can obtain. This data triangulation is a well-known methodological strength, as confirmed by Herman and Egri (2002). However, I am still advocating qualitative analysis of these triangulated data. This is one direction that must be taken by the grounded theory method in organisational research.

There is also a weight of opinion that too much research concentrates on the 'leader', and not enough researches the process of leadership. I was by no means the first person to identify this issue nor the first to propose a solution. However, the change in emphasis has been gathering momentum since the late 1990s. My 1998 article is definitely about researching the social processes that go on between people, and which have a leadership impact. Much leadership research until that time had investigated the behaviours of people in a leadership role. Much still does, in fact. This continuity is in spite of the realisation that irrespective of the behaviours that people employ in leadership roles, there are many other variables that influence the impact which these leadership behaviours have upon followers and upon the context of work. Ironically, much of the leadership scholarship that still comes from North America is based around the 'leader', and in reality is researching the person in the senior management position. There seems to be an implicit assumption that the person in the senior management position is the leader. On the other hand, I take the view that the person who has an impact upon followers is the leader, and that it is the nature of this leadership impact that we should investigate. Indeed, the formal position of the person having this leadership impact is just one of the variables that comes into play.

One positive outcome of this article is that it gets cited regularly. Another concomitant outcome is that I seem to get all the 'grounded theory' articles that are submitted under the heading of 'leadership'. The numbers seem to be increasing. I am not complaining about the workload, but rather I see it as an excellent opportunity to keep on top of this literature.

References

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Author

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