

Journal of Management Is Pushing the Frontiers of Qualitative Research

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Did you know that *Journal of Management* (*JOM*) invites qualitative research—and has been doing so for many years? Many qualitative researchers do not. This editorial not only seeks to reinforce *JOM*'s openness to qualitative research but also underscores this point by showing how the journal is pushing the frontiers of qualitative research.

JOM has editorial review measures that ensure that qualitative research is recognized for its unique qualities. First, *JOM* has appointed a qualitative methods consulting editor, Pratima (Tima) Bansal, who has considerable experience in editing and publishing qualitative work. She supports the editorial team on decisions and outreach. Second, *JOM* has five associate editors who are handling qualitative submissions. They have previously published high-quality qualitative research and reviewed extensively. Third, *JOM* has numerous Editorial Review Board members who are experienced qualitative researchers and reviewers.

JOM is not only ensuring that qualitative research receives a fair conventional review process but is also taking an important step forward by offering an alternative review process. Through a Special Call (<https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/PDF/Special%20Call%20Final%20Version-1713157578.pdf>), *JOM* is inviting *proposals* for qualitative research that permits editors to engage in more developmental feedback with authors. If it works well, we will make this an annual call, much like *JOM*'s annual call for review issue proposals.

Qualitative scholars can choose between the conventional review process or the Special Call, depending on their preferences and unique circumstances. Neither process will inherently provide an advantage or disadvantage in working toward an accepted article for *JOM*.

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We anticipate that some qualitative scholars will prefer the conventional review process, perhaps because there is more certainty and clarity around their methods and findings or perhaps because of the stage of their work or the timing of their submission. Other scholars might be excited about a different review process and be willing to join us in this experiment.

In the remainder of this article, we describe why we have chosen to experiment with the qualitative review process and the possible benefits that could arise from more engagement between authors and action editors.

The Strengths and Limitations of the Conventional Review Process for Qualitative Research

Corley, Bansal, and Yu (2021) argued that the review process that occurs in most high-quality journals was developed for quantitative research, which has strong methodological norms. Quantitative methods tend to build on widely accepted, carefully scrutinized methods. Novelty is relatively rare in quantitative methods. Data collected must be objective, measures must be valid and reliable, and researchers must deploy best practices in their data analysis. When quantitative research fails in the review process, it is often because of the methods rather than the research ambition. The up-or-out review process makes sense for quantitative research, given that editors and reviewers have a good sense of the weaknesses of the paper and can offer authors clear guidance on the paths forward. This review process is efficient and predictable (even if the outcomes are sometimes disputed). If executed well, the review process offers clear guidance to authors while permitting them time to independently reflect on how to address the issues raised.

However, this process can present unique challenges to qualitative researchers. First, it tends to produce conformity. Qualitative researchers, reviewers, and editors seek to apply previously published methods and writing templates to mitigate the chances of rejection. As more qualitative research is published, qualitative scholars, reviewers, and editors lean more heavily on systematic methods and analytical templates, such as the Gioia method for coding data, the Langley method for bracketing process data, or the Eisenhardt method for sample selection. Even though the scholars who have crafted these templates have explicitly indicated that their methods are designed to inspire, not to constrain (Gelman et al. 2018), many qualitative scholars feel hamstrung by these templates either because reviewers request these templates or scholars expect reviewers to request them.

Second, and for similar reasons, a typical review process can squash creativity, especially outside-the-box methods and writing structures and styles. Qualitative methods give voice to data, researchers, and contexts that are otherwise silenced and open up new ways of seeing (Bansal, Smith, & Vaara, 2018). In an editorial, Bansal and Corley (2012: 512) echoed the remark of an experienced qualitative reviewer: "I want to be wowed. I want to have the experience of a 'shazzam!'"—a spark of inspired recognition or deep insight that comes from an author providing me with an idea or a way of seeing that I had not previously entertained." By relying too heavily on templates, not only is the full potential of qualitative methods in generating deep, new knowledge stifled, but the people who seek to surface important new ideas or ideas in new ways can feel marginalized. Qualitative research is as much art as it is science, and artists and their work need a pathway that allows them to be recognized.

Third, most qualitative researchers gather a vast array of messy textual or visual data. From these data, researchers must tell a story that offers a fresh angle on current theory. However, qualitative data can be interpreted in numerous ways and seen through different theoretical frames. Qualitative researchers must make a large number of decisions, including the data analyzed, the analytical techniques, and the theoretical frame applied and extended. If the editor and reviewers do not like the decisions, the paper will be rejected. Yet, the research could still hold considerable promise had the researcher made different decisions.

Our Thinking Behind an Alternative Review Process

1. Editors and Authors Dialogue With Each Other

The current review process requires editors to make editorial decisions based only on what they see on the page. Editors are often unaware of the design decisions that authors have made and the full body of data available because authors need to write concisely and tightly to tell a coherent story and fit within the page constraints. They often do not disclose the data that they did not use.

There is a good reason to keep editors and authors at a distance in a conventional review process. It allows editors to clearly indicate the revisions needed for a successful publication without a potential process of negotiating with authors. Editors can make tough decisions without being lobbied by authors to reverse the decision. There is also the possibility that any dialogue between editors and authors can be misunderstood, which can lead to authors feeling that the paper was handled poorly or mistreated if the paper is ultimately rejected.

Yet, a review process that permits editor–author dialogue can also result in better decisions if editors understand the choices authors made. Further, authors could ask editors to clarify issues that are raised by the review team or even seek advice on the design decisions they make in response to the reviews. Through dialogue, authors can make informed choices and editors can offer informed guidance. The risks of engaging in dialogue can at least be partly mitigated by limiting the amount of dialogue and ensuring that all dialogue is documented and disclosed to reviewers.

2. Authors Submit Proposals, Not Full Papers

A typical review process requires authors to submit full papers, which has the benefit of showing to editors and reviewers the authors' ability to conduct high-quality research and a potential story in the data. It takes much of the guesswork of the authors' ability to write a full manuscript out of the review and decision process.

Yet, writing a full paper can take years of effort, as authors labor over the data collection and analysis, the narrative logic in both the theory and disclosing the findings, and even the clarity of each sentence. Qualitative researchers have come to expect reviews that ask them to collect more data, reanalyze the data, deepen the theorizing, and almost completely rewrite the paper. Not only does this present a hardship for the authors, but it also slows down the development of new knowledge.

A review process that invites proposals in which authors outline the data they have collected, the methods they used to analyze the data, and the theoretical story that is emerging from the data would give editors significant insight into the skills of the authors and the potential contribution of the theory. Authors would still need to do considerable work in order to make a proposal “sing,” as they need to know their data, the foundational theory to which they want to contribute, and the theory that they think they can develop. However, the effort in writing a proposal is still much more expedient than writing a full paper. Through a proposal, editors and reviewers can offer authors early advice in crafting the research, which can save authors considerable time and potentially produce a more impactful or creative paper.

3. Proposals Are “Selected,” Not “Screened”

The conventional review process invites papers to be resubmitted if they meet or exceed the “quality” bar—in the data collected and the potential to make a theoretical contribution. The focus is clearly on rigor or quality (rather than on creativity or even potential impact). This process ensures that research is published, even if it’s outside of the domain experience of the editor, which is important in advancing a broad range of knowledge. Yet, it can also mean that editors steward papers for which they feel little excitement or even commitment, resulting in numerous articles published that are of high quality but not necessarily impactful.

It is possible, however, to fashion the process in a way that motivates editors to really lean into a paper. This process would mean that editors choose the papers to steward based on their potential impact on knowledge, not solely on methodological quality. While quality is still required, the impact on management and organizations is easier to prioritize if the editorial team selects papers and does not simply screen them. A selection process gives action editors the opportunity to not simply steward work, but champion it.

Advancing Qualitative Research Through the Special Call

We adopted these processes in developing the Special Call for Qualitative Research: <https://journals.sagepub.com/pb-assets/PDF/Special%20Call%20Final%20Version-1713157578.pdf>. Believing that the full potential of qualitative research methods has not yet been met, we are seeking to innovate in the review process to shape how qualitative research is conducted and evaluated. Specifically, knowledge that can inform management theory and practice can be found almost anywhere and sometimes where others have failed to look. Qualitative researchers are often able to see what others cannot because they are so embedded in the context they are researching. Novel research can potentially benefit from a review process that not only is open to the novelty but can help to nurture it. This Special Call offers a focused opportunity to try a new review process with a limited set of submissions.

Arguably, there has been no more important time to invite impactful novel research than now. Management, organizations, and society are undergoing profound changes through shifts in technology, threats to the natural environment, rising inequality, and the erosion of institutions. Responding to these changes demands a willingness to explore new contexts and amass previously unexplored or unseen data. Editors need to be more than gatekeepers; they also need to champion new insights that can contribute to better organizations and societies.

We seek to normalize the diversity of approaches to qualitative research, and in doing so, we also believe we are recognizing the diversity of authors who engage in this research. We hope that this call will result in the publication of novel and important qualitative research that has been out of reach because of a conventional review process. Yet, we also recognize that the conventional review process has resulted in high-quality research. Thus, by running both review processes simultaneously at *JOM*, we hope to engage a wider set of qualitative scholars than is currently being reached.

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