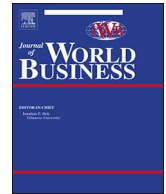




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of World Business

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jwb

Perspective article

How should we (not) judge the ‘quality’ of qualitative research? A re-assessment of current evaluative criteria in International Business

Catherine Welch^{a,*}, Rebecca Piekkari^b^a *The University of Sydney Business School, Discipline of International Business, NSW, 2006, Australia*^b *Aalto University, School of Business, Department of Management Studies, Runeberginkatu 14-16, FI-00100, Helsinki, Finland*

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Qualitative research
Evaluative criteria
Assessment
Quality
Validity
Reviewing
Publishing

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we initiate a debate about evaluative criteria (such as validity) which are – or should be – in use to assess the quality of qualitative manuscripts in International Business (IB). We identify three generations of evaluative criteria, each derived from different philosophical orientations. Based on an analysis of published articles in two IB journals, expert interviews and sample reviews, we show how these generations shape what the scholarly community considers to be “good” qualitative research. As an alternative to rigid application of a single set of quality procedures, we advocate a pluralist, contextual approach, reflecting the inherent characteristics of IB as a field.

1. Introduction

Journals such as *The Journal of World Business* state that they welcome papers based on qualitative as well as quantitative methodologies, so long as they are “rigorous” and appropriate. But how should IB researchers decide whether a qualitative manuscript is rigorous or not? While this is a fundamental question for our research community, there is by no means agreement on the answer. The perspective we take in this paper is that settling on a single set of criteria for judging qualitative research is neither possible nor desirable. Ultimately, the best assurance of quality is a lively, reflective and open debate about the standards by which we as a research community judge what is warrantable knowledge. Our aim is to provide the ingredients for such a debate in IB by legitimizing diverse approaches to evaluating quality, and offering a way forward for them to coexist fruitfully.

In addressing the standards we use to judge the quality of qualitative research in IB, we conceptualize them as social artefacts. Evaluative criteria are produced by the research community itself: its institutional structure and traditions, and dominant intellectual influences and practices. In this regard, quality standards are as much the product of socialization, habit and convention as they are of conscious reflection and debate (Vandenberg, 2006). They are accepted as given, rather than scrutinized. These standards represent often unexamined values and beliefs about what the research community “should” do and what proper knowledge “must” look like. As such, they are prone to distortion, misapplication and misunderstanding: in short, myth-making. As Lance and Vandenberg (2015) have catalogued, it is easy for

“methodological myths and urban legends” to gain ground in a scholarly community. The only assurance we have against myth-making is to encourage an active debate about, and critical assessment of, the standards we apply (see, Sinkovics, Penz, & Ghauri, 2008).

While Vandenberg and his colleagues examine quantitative myths, we would suggest that the potential for myth-making is even greater in qualitative research, for a variety of reasons. First, its minority status in the field of IB (Piekkari, Welch, & Paavilainen, 2009) means that many reviewers are not sufficiently familiar with qualitative research to provide well-informed assessments of its quality. Second, qualitative research practices – even popular methodologies such as the case study – are less “codified” (Yin, 2014) than statistical approaches. Third, qualitative research is itself a broad church, with no single set of research standards applying to all its traditions (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, & Locke, 2008). While qualitative methodologies have in common that – to use a popular definition – they “seek to ... come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of ... phenomena in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520), they differ on the nature of “meaning” and how it should be captured. The co-existence of multiple paradigms and philosophical traditions under the broad umbrella of “qualitative research” (Prasad, 2005) has not been well understood or appreciated in IB. Yet given this diversity, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes “good” qualitative research and how to assess it on its merits. Imposing a single set of evaluative criteria paradoxically militates against quality being achieved: high quality and innovative manuscripts may be rejected, or serious compromises and sacrifices made in the course of the review process as

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: catherine.welch@sydney.edu.au (C. Welch), rebecca.piekkari@aalto.fi (R. Piekkari).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2017.05.007>Received 1 June 2016; Received in revised form 26 May 2017; Accepted 30 May 2017
1090-9516/ © 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

authors attempt to squeeze their study into the dominant template despite the inconsistencies this may produce.

Since we will be advocating self-reflection and the surfacing of assumptions, beliefs and value judgements, it is therefore appropriate that we commence by being open about our own paradigmatic standpoint. We take a critical realist position, which combines a realist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology.¹ That is to say, it recognizes that our attempts at understanding the social reality external to us necessarily remain partial and imperfect. Knowledge is inherently fallibilistic: because we cannot observe the world free from our own or others' preconceptions, we can only improve the quality of our conclusions by constantly testing them against data, against rival explanations, and against the judgements of colleagues in our scientific community. Moreover, we need to acknowledge that the right practices and standards to follow are context dependent rather than universally applicable (Maxwell, 2012). This perspective helps to inform our conclusion that what constitutes best practice depends on the researcher's own paradigmatic stance, the aims of the research and the cultural practices of the research setting at that point in time.

The debate about the quality of qualitative research, to which we are contributing, is a longstanding one in the social sciences. In the remainder of the paper, we turn to this "methodological history",² outlining three generations of evaluative criteria dating back to the 1950s, and the extent to which they have influenced IB research. Our analysis of evaluative practices in IB draws on a variety of sources: methodological texts, reviews of qualitative work solicited from IB researchers, expert interviews with qualitative IB scholars, and a close qualitative textual analysis of "validity talk" in published articles in IB journals (see Appendix A for more detail on the data sources). We argue that not only does a "third-generation", pluralist approach to quality criteria have the potential to enrich IB, but the IB field can contribute methodological insights to this third generation. That is, context sensitivity, which IB researchers need to exercise when conducting cross-border fieldwork, is also required in validity debates; otherwise, the third generation risks perpetuating the myth of proceduralism: mistaking conformity to templates for research quality.

2. Three generations of evaluative criteria

Social scientists in the US have been seeking to formalize standards for evaluating research since at least 1950, when the American Psychological Association (APA) set up a committee to codify the proper validation of psychological tests (APA, 1954; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Since this first initiative, standards have been debated, disseminated to other social sciences (including management and IB), and transformed in the process. In this section, we trace this methodological history with specific reference to the evaluation of qualitative research. On the basis of our reading of the methodological literature in the social sciences, we differentiate three distinct generations of evaluative criteria. We term them "generations" rather than "stages" because while they emerged at different points in time, they can and do co-exist; although as we shall see, this often leads to inter-generational misunderstandings.

As Table 1 shows, the source of misunderstanding is paradigmatic in nature. The generations are derived from very different philosophical orientations towards comprehending the social world. Implicitly or explicitly, these orientations shape the criteria we use to judge the quality of a paper, as well as the methodological procedures that are regarded as necessary to meet these criteria. Paradigmatic commitments are also reflected in the value statements contained in a review: what a paper "should", "needs" or "must" do. However, given the

value-laden nature of quality criteria, we also show how each generation of criteria leads to distortions, over-simplifications, biases and unexamined assertions – that is, myths – which gain circulation. We will now consider each generation in more detail. We explain the features of each generation, as found in the methodological literature, as well as investigating how and to what extent they have been applied in the IB field. We pay particular attention to the third generation. Although we argue it has the most potential to accommodate the diverse traditions of qualitative research, we find that to date it has had little influence on IB journals.

2.1. First generation: scientism (same criteria, same procedures)

First-generation reviewers judge qualitative research against the same criteria and the same procedures as those for quantitative research (for a discussion, see Pratt, 2008). These evaluative criteria can be traced to the 1950s and the APA committee on validation, which operated during the height of the influence of logical positivism on the social sciences (Table 1; for a discussion, see Cronbach, 1989; Messick, 1987). While not amounting to adherence to the formal tenets of logical positivism (Whitley, 1984 describes it rather as "naïve" empiricism), positivistic thinking became entrenched in the social sciences, precisely the same time it was falling out of favour in philosophy (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Mainstream social scientists took for granted that the observer could accurately capture knowledge – defined as regularities of social behaviour – so long as he or she maintained objectivity and followed technical procedures that approximated those of the natural sciences (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). This view of knowledge production led to the belief that the same criteria and the same accompanying procedures should be applied to assess the quality of both quantitative and qualitative research. As qualitative research does not conform to the positivist ideal of the scientific method, nor the criteria and procedures seen to produce it, its worth came into question. The result was that qualitative research and the case study (the qualitative methodology favoured by IB) fell out of favour in this post-war period (see e.g., Platt, 1992).

The prevailing view of the case study was encapsulated by Donald T. Campbell, one of the foremost post-War psychologists to contribute to codifying the criteria and procedures for validity in experimental research. Given that the case study cannot conform to these procedures, Campbell initially judged it to be wholly lacking in scientific merit. He and a co-author branded the single case study as "of almost no scientific value" due to its "total absence of control" outside experimental settings (Campbell & Stanley, 1966, pp. 6–7). "Scientism" turns qualitative research into a poor cousin of quantitative research, because it cannot reproduce the procedures followed in the natural sciences. If not rejecting the legitimacy of qualitative research outright, first-generation beliefs can lead to the myth that qualitative research should (as far as possible) adopt quantitative procedures. The risks of scientism are, first, a higher than warranted rejection rate (i.e., papers which should be accepted, are rejected); and second, poor-quality research that mimics quantitative research may get published (i.e., papers which should be rejected, are accepted). As we shall see, Campbell (1975) was later critical of his own dismissive view.

2.1.1. First-generation evaluation in IB

First-generation beliefs surrounding the quality of qualitative research resonated in IB, which as a young discipline was striving to establish its "scientific" credentials. Yves Doz (2011, p. 585) has claimed that despite a few "pockets" such as the Nordic countries, "by and large, IB developed without much benefit from qualitative research". Qualitative research had a marginal presence even in the early period of *JIBS*, and the percentage of qualitative papers published in the journal actually fell from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s (Piekkari et al., 2009). In a doctoral consortium held in 2004, Lorraine Eden (2004) (later a *JIBS* editor-in-chief) provided an honest assessment of the state of play. One

¹ For a recent discussion of critical realism in management, see Edwards, O'Mahoney, and Vincent (2014).

² We would like to thank one of our reviewers for proposing this term to us.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5107104>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5107104>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)