



Qualitative and historiometric methods in leadership research: A review of the first 25 years of *The Leadership Quarterly*



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ABSTRACT

In the spirit of the 25th anniversary edition of *The Leadership Quarterly*, as the world's premier outlet for leadership research, we have reviewed qualitative and historiometric research across those 25 years. Qualitative research is a complex and cluttered area of scholarship. This is not because there is an inherent confusion about it. Rather, it is because 'qualitative' research is a cover-all term for a wide range of research strategies, paradigms, parent disciplines, sources of data, and methods of analysis for them. More so than in previous journal review articles, we explored variation in qualitative analysis as well as variety in qualitative data. In terms of methodologies, our efforts concentrated on case study, content analysis, grounded theory and historiometrics. We also examined trends toward post-positivism, post-modernity and liquid modernity, and their resultant benefits for researching leadership. Future directions for leadership research are posited.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review qualitative and historiometric methods used in research within *The Leadership Quarterly* over its 25-year history. Within the specific field of leadership, there are signs of a growing interest in the use of qualitative research. While quantitative research will almost certainly continue to enjoy methodological hegemony within the field for many years, there is little doubt that qualitative research is beginning to make inroads into the field. Indeed, it could be said that qualitative research generally, and into leadership in particular, is a large and rapidly expanding corpus of research, but not yet in *The Leadership Quarterly*. The aims of this article are to report and reflect upon the significance of qualitative research over the first 25 years in *The Leadership Quarterly*. This article covers in particular content analysis, case study research, grounded theory, and historiometric research. These are the methods usually cited in this journal under the general heading of 'qualitative research'.

Classifications like 'qualitative' and 'quantitative', while convenient, probably do a disservice to the richness of research that is possible. For example, historiometric research, like content analysis generally, uses qualitative data and sometimes engages in some necessary and rigorous quantitative analysis. The methodological issues discussed within historiometric studies emphasize this point clearly. Historiometric studies are presented as an effective way to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. The meta-analytic nature of historiometric research makes this point clear. Also, grounded theory is moving away from a 'purely' qualitative domain, toward a process that triangulates a complex range of data and then analyzes them objectively or critically. In effect, the research is richer for integrating a range of data and analyses, some of them quantitative, into qualitative research.

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Research strategies are changing. In years gone by, there was a prevailing orthodoxy within the readers of *The Leadership Quarterly* that qualitative research preceded quantitative research. Now, tried and true psychometrically-validated phenomena are being revisited with phenomenological research in order to triangulate the perspectives that we have about our understanding of leadership phenomena, and to generate more reliable explanations. More qualitative and quantitative data are being gathered concurrently, and these data are being analyzed with a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, sometimes concurrently. We will examine qualitative methods first and then examine historiometric methods that have been used throughout the life of *The Leadership Quarterly*.

2. Empirical research practices in leadership research

Empirical research practices on leadership studies can be categorized by how researchers combine, at the method 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. Historiometric studies come under this heading (Mumford, 2006; Mumford et al., 2008).
- Qualitative analysis of quantitative data: this practice is not used widely in the leadership field but has potential. One example of this analytical process is using ethno-statistics or discourse analysis to deconstruct quantitative leadership studies. This practice would reflect an interpretivist and post-modernist stance to inquiry. Whether under the heading of grounded theory (Kan & Parry, 2004; Rowland & Parry, 2009) or qualitative analysis of theory (Faris & Parry, 2011), this practice is growing at *The Leadership Quarterly*.
- 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. This practice has been published in *The Leadership Quarterly* (e.g. Hunt, 1991; Kan & Parry, 2004; Parry, 1998; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).
- 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 usually drives the research, this practice reflects a post-positivist stance.

3. Qualitative methodology

Smircich and Morgan (1982) recognized the ‘management of meaning’ as an axiom of leadership. More recently, leadership scholars seeking to answer questions about culture and meaning have found experimental and quantitative methods to be insufficient for 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; Uhl-Bien, 2006), and on the increased recognition of the strengths of qualitative inquiry generally. Jackson and Parry (2011) suggest that there is a need for a much broader range of methodologies with which to research leadership; not necessarily under the convenient headings of ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’.

The advantages of doing qualitative research on leadership include (Conger, 1998; Bryman, Bresnen, Beardsworth, & Keil, 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
 - for more relevance and interest for practitioners.

The conceptual, temporal, longitudinal and scientifically rigorous nature of historiometric research shares these advantages.

4. The contribution of qualitative designs

Conger (1998) argued that quantitative research alone cannot 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.

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