

Qualitative I-O Psychology: A View From Europe

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Pratt and Bonaccio's (2016) article is oriented to the position of qualitative research in U.S. industrial–organizational (I-O) psychology, although brief reference is made to innovations in the UK psychology field. As European work and organizational (W/O) psychologists who have championed the use of qualitative research in our field for the last 25 years, we share Pratt and Bonaccio's concerns about the lack of qualitative research in what are described as the “top” I-O psychology journals, and we agree that this situation is detrimental to the development of the discipline in many ways (see Cassell & Symon, 2006, for further discussion). Here we want to present a European perspective on this issue, which sheds some light on why qualitative research may be more accepted in European W/O psychology but also highlights the power relations that tend, even in Europe, to maintain it in a rather second rate position. Our intention is to engage in a process of mutual learning across the American and European situations. Our objectives are threefold:

- To present an overview of the use of qualitative research in W/O psychology in Europe, which shares some of the issues outlined here but also differs in some essential ways;
- To add to some of the points presented in the focal article, drawing on our own research and our experience of the struggle to bring credibility to qualitative research in the W/O psychology area;
- To emphasize the importance of a diverse view of qualitative research that is inclusive of an international community of qualitative I-O psychology researchers.

The road to acceptance of qualitative research in European W/O psychology has not been straightforward, and there is some way to go to reach the destination of a universal recognition of qualitative methods as credible, worthy, and providing key insights into important areas of academic exploration. However, from Pratt and Bonaccio's account, it appears that in Europe

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we may be somewhat further down that road than the current position of our U.S. colleagues. One of the reasons for this is an acceptance of qualitative research in the larger European management research community and, to a lesser extent, the general European psychology research community. We associate this largely with a diverse landscape of influential European philosophies. For example, the writings of Marx, Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Habermas have inspired much of the work undertaken in European critical management studies. The perspectives of European philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan underpin postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches to research in both management and psychology. Such philosophical commitments have influenced movements such as the linguistic turn within organizational studies and the rise of discursive approaches in the European social psychology community. These perspectives and movements have largely been empirically expressed through qualitative methods. This is not to say that all qualitative management or psychology research conducted in Europe follows these traditions, but they have certainly helped make alternatives to positivist quantitative approaches more visible and acceptable.

The important issue here is the epistemological orientation of the research. In our view, it is not just research questions that determine method but rather fundamental beliefs about research that shape those research questions in the first place. Pratt and Bonaccio refer to epistemological differences in their article but do not make them a central plank of their argument or interventions. We suggest that being prepared to accept alternative and diverse epistemologies and worldviews is important to the general acceptance of qualitative research. Without this, only qualitative research of certain kinds is assessed as appropriate, and this tends to be that which does not trouble positivist assumptions too much (as in the editorial from the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, referenced by Pratt & Bonaccio). This is then to silence a large section of the qualitative research conducted—certainly in Europe—because this aligns mostly with alternative epistemological positions.

Given some acceptance of and commitments to alternative philosophies, European psychology and management studies may be more accepting of a wider range of qualitative research than those in the United States. Pratt and Bonaccio rightly reference the sizable membership of the general Qualitative Psychology special interest group of the British Psychological Society. However, to say qualitative research is widely practiced in European psychology would be inaccurate, and a consideration of the current position reveals the power relations at play. Qualitative research largely thrives in the social and applied areas of psychology (like W/O psychology) rather than the more dominant areas of psychology, such as cognitive and behavioral

neuroscience (which attract a significantly higher proportion of the various research funding body awards). The opening quote of Pratt and Bonaccio's piece spoke volumes to us, as both applied and qualitative research may be positioned as almost "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) in European psychology, in comparison with these other more dominant experimental areas.

This peripheral positioning may mean W/O psychology can take the risk of publishing qualitative research, and as Pratt and Bonaccio observe, qualitative research can speak more easily to issues of concern to clients outside academia. Indeed, many of the interventions suggested by Pratt and Bonaccio have already been attempted within W/O psychology in Europe. Both the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology (JOOP)* and the *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology (EJWOP)* have published special issues on the topic of qualitative research (in 2006 and in 2000, respectively). Indeed, *JOOP* has appointed specialist qualitative research associate editors and encouraged qualitative submissions in their editorials. Qualitative articles have thus been published in the journal, including those tackling the thorny issue of quality criteria for qualitative W/O psychology research (Cassell & Symon, 2011).

However, paradoxically, this peripheral positioning also makes W/O psychology vulnerable. Our own research, drawing on interviews with journal editors, academics, and practitioners in the W/O field, has highlighted concerns that giving credence to qualitative research may undermine claims to scientific credibility for the whole W/O psychology community, which is seen to be already somewhat undermined because of its applied orientation, as noted earlier. Taking a positivist and quantitative approach may be perceived as what differentiates W/O psychology from general management research and practice, thus providing important professional identities for academics and practitioners alike. Thus we see that, despite *EJWOP's* special issue of 2000, very little qualitative research has been published in that journal since. We do not ascribe to this view of the potential risks of encouraging qualitative research—like Pratt and Bonaccio, we see many advantages—but we have heard the disciplinary interests that work against it.

The use of journal quality rankings in European academia also feeds into a network of power relations that tends to undermine qualitative research. Around the globe, authors have noted the increased performance pressures on academics brought about by the need to publish in what are defined by Pratt and Bonaccio as the "top" journals in the I-O psychology field. In the United Kingdom in particular, journal-ranking lists have been established to evaluate the quality of research (e.g., the Financial Times 45 and the Association of Business Schools' list). Topping these lists are the U.S. journals reviewed by Pratt and Bonaccio, the ones that do not publish

much qualitative research. Indeed we might particularly welcome Pratt and Bonaccio's article because, if it changes the position of qualitative research in U.S. I-O psychology, this will also, through the operations of such evaluation mechanisms, make qualitative research more acceptable in many areas of Europe. It troubles us that, whereas our academic colleagues in the United States can disregard what is happening in European W/O psychology, European W/O psychology cannot disregard what is happening in the United States. This is not at all to say that we want to disregard the United States; qualitative W/O or I-O psychologists are stronger if they share experiences and insights across the globe. However, it does mean that through the growing operation of such journal lists, the landscape of European research becomes closely tied to that of the United States, potentially encouraging a move away from European philosophical and methodological traditions.

Our presentation of the European W/O perspective suggests that when we consider the positioning of qualitative research and how to change this, we also need to take a wider view—and perhaps even utilize some of our management-related theories like institutional theory (see Symon, Buehring, Johnson, & Cassell, 2008)—to understand the interests involved in sustaining this positioning and how to challenge these. We tend to think in terms of specific practical steps we can take, and there is no doubt these are valuable and necessary. However, given our experience of the European situation, we also suggest to our U.S. colleagues that change will only come about if we also consider the more institutional, political, and epistemological aspects of the situation that help maintain the status quo.

As we said at the start of this commentary, we agree with the authors on many issues, and we want to stand alongside them in passionately advocating the case of qualitative I-O research. We hope that we can engage in a process of mutual learning that can help us to devise a range of effective strategies for change in our shared discipline.

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