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Introduction to the Special Issue: Qualitative Methods in Research on Human Resource Management

1. Developments and issues in qualitative research

Interest in qualitative research has increased in recent years regarding its relevance for developing the field of strategy and Human Resource Management further. Strategy and management research includes numerous examples of high quality studies using qualitative methods that have contributed to this field. Moreover, highly ranked management journals have published special issues on qualitative research. Especially in the realm of Human Resource Management, a strong discussion on the status of theory and research has evolved (see e.g. Deadrick/Stone 2008). The increasing amount of articles regarding this topic displays that there is a growing demand for discussing the purpose, methods and the contribution of qualitative research (Pratt 2008). The Academy of Management has institutionalized workshops at their annual meetings where researchers share ideas and discuss qualitative research methods with a close link to their current research projects. In 2008 the German Academic Association for Business Research invited scholars to a pre-conference workshop at their annual meeting to discuss and reflect upon qualitative methods. Given this increase in the relevance of qualitative research methods, the German Journal of Human Resource Research is pleased to present a special issue on “Qualitative Methods in Research on Human Resource Management”.

Qualitative research can be understood as a complex, changing and contested field that is a site of multiple methodologies and research practices. Qualitative research is what Punch (2005, 134) calls an “umbrella term” which encompasses not a single entity, but is multidimensional and pluralistic. Unsurprisingly, because of the range of paradigms that apply to virtually every part of the research process, qualitative research inevitably draws on a wide range of different tools, techniques and procedures (Creswell 1998). Especially with regards to the collection and analysis of qualitative data, textbooks propose a repertoire of techniques, with a set of different techniques being applied to the same body of data, illuminating different and even contradictory aspects (Denzin/Lincoln 1998; Punch 2005; Silverman 2006).

Qualitative research subsumes different research designs, including biographies, phenomenological and ethnomethodological studies (Hammersley 1992), grounded theory studies (Glaser/Strauss 1967; Strauss/Corbin 2008), biographical, historical, and action methods (Denzin/Lincoln 1998) and case studies (Dooley 2002; Eisen-

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hardt/Graebner 2007; Yin 2009). Within qualitative research on human resource management, two research designs receive greater attention, namely case studies and grounded theory studies. Both of them put a different focus on the strategy to be used for conducting and analyzing data (e.g. Creswell 1998; Flick 2007a; Mayring 2002). Within the last ten years, especially case study research has improved methodologically (Eisenhardt/Graebner, 2007; Ridder/Hoon/McCandless 2009), becoming a more and more pervasive, elaborate and well-established research strategy. Interest in case studies has increased regarding its potential theoretical yield and impact on developing the field of management further (Barr 2004; Bartunek/Rynes/Ireland 2006; Gephart 2004; Shah/Corley 2006). By providing thick descriptions of phenomena in their real-life contexts, case studies are seen as an appropriate strategy for generating and testing theory (Denzin/Lincoln 1998; Gibbert/Ruigrok/Wicki 2008). In addition, also the grounded theory approach has developed further with scholars having made several attempts to explicate, clarify and reconceptualise some of the basic tenets of this approach (e.g. Fendt/Sachs 2008; Kelle 2005). The grounded theory approach refers basically to the work by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as well as Strauss and Corbin (2008), putting a strong emphasis on the generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research. By constantly comparing conceptualized data on different levels of abstraction, categories are formed, which are the basis for the creation of a theory grounded in the data.

The claimed benefits of qualitative research for theorizing are also subject to critique that can be concentrated on two issues: In theory building, moving from description to theory often causes a “so what?” or “what else?” response (Stake 2005), when it is observed that the author verified a self developed “theory” with a very small data base. As long as the small data base is the proof of the existence of relationships according to the introduced framework there is concern how thick descriptions of a single case or how a few cases can be representative. The quality of the findings depends on the quality of methods, but even in similar qualitative studies variables are different or overlapping. Methods are rarely comparable and thick descriptions do not always reveal methods that overcome the distrust in the reliability and validity of the study.

The following section aims to shed light on these issues. First, the contribution of qualitative research to theory building will be unfolded. Second, the quality in collecting and analyzing qualitative data will be discussed, and finally, it will be revealed how the authors in this special issue improve the quality of qualitative research in Human Resource Management.

2. Theory contribution of qualitative research

There is a broad acceptance that scientists create theories with regard to poorly understood phenomena (Locke 2007; Weick 1989). Having identified a poorly understood phenomenon, the aim of scientific research is to create and test theories. Scientists consider that these theories might be wrong and test these theories empirically according to accepted procedures that are open to public inspection (Kerlinger 1992; Weick 1995). On the one hand, the purpose of creating theory is to understand why particular kinds of social events take place and how they are related (Dubin, 1978, 216). On

the other hand, researchers want to test a proposed relationship in order to predict outcomes of this relationship. If scientific research concentrates on relationships in order to understand and test these relationships, the units to be observed and analyzed need different research strategies (Chiles 2003; Edmondson/McManus 2007; Shah/Corley 2006).

Creating theories often includes understanding theory as a system of constructs and variables in which the constructs are related to each other by propositions (Bacharach 1989). Looking for causal explanation in a data set leads to the analysis of a sequence of events over time by investigating how and why a phenomenon evolved as a result of the temporal ordering and probabilistic interaction of events. Modeling such complex phenomena calls for process theories situated at a higher level of abstraction and oriented toward prediction of how general patterns of change unfold (Chiles 2003). Such theories are inherently less able to be falsified and more difficult to verify with statistical techniques.

Testing theories is mostly organized by variables that are related to each other by hypotheses and predict relationships among variables (Bacharach 1989). In variance oriented theory the variation in a dependent variable is explained as a result of a variation in the independent variable(s). A small set of well-developed variables are tested with statistical techniques, and suited to predicted outcomes that are unaffected by the temporal ordering of the independent variables (Shah/Corley 2006).

Theory and what is not theory

Either created or tested, a theory encompasses constitutive elements and relationships (Alvesson /Kaarreman 2007; Bacharach 1989; Weick 1989, 1995; Whetten 1989):

- Factors (variables, constructs, concepts) should logically be considered as part of the explanation of the phenomena of interest (what is relevant?).
- Having identified a set of factors, the next question concerns the relationship amongst the factors (how are they related?).
- Identified relationships require explanations (why are these factors related?).

Every theory has boundaries (Bacharach 1989; Whetten 1989). Spatial boundaries stem from the fact that investigations are often limited by the type of investigations. In addition, time is a serious boundary regarding the generalizability of theories. The higher the generalizability, the lower the boundaries have to be, which results in a paradox:

“This leads to the paradox that some of the most detailed theories and elaborate studies about organizations are not generalizable enough to build a cumulative body of research on. On the other hand, some of the most abstract and broad perspectives on organizations, while not necessarily rich in detail, have provided a critical basis for cumulative research” (Bacharach 1989, 500).

Many authors differentiate theory from what is not a theory (Bacharach 1989; Colquitt/Zapata-Phelan 2007; Dubin 1978; Kerlinger 1992): “The primary goal of a theory is to answer the question of how, when, and why, unlike the goal of description, which is to answer the question of what” (Bacharach 1989, 498). Although good descriptions are necessary in order to understand phenomena and predict relationships,

there is some confusion as to what theory is and what theory is not (Punch 2005, 15). Sutton and Staw (1995, 371), for example, argue that literature itself does not have the status of a theory but it has to be demonstrated how the quoted literature leads to new or unanswered theoretical questions: "Authors need to explicate which concepts and causal arguments are adopted from cited sources and how they are linked to the theory being developed or tested" (Sutton/Staw 1995, 373). The logic from prior work has to be concentrated on the central logic(s) so that the reader can follow and understand the author's arguments. One of the main misunderstandings stems from a confusion of data and theory when authors try to develop a theory by describing empirical findings from past research and then move to a discussion of the current findings. But even if the effects of variables have been identified, this is not theory as long as there is no answer to the plausible why: "A theory must explain why variables or constructs come about or why they are connected" (Sutton/Staw 1995, 375). Frameworks can add order to a conception by explicitly delineating patterns and causal connections but they do not explain why the proposed connections will be observed. Hypotheses are the crucial bridge between theory and data making explicit how the variables and relationships that follow from a logical argument will be operationalized, but hypotheses cannot substitute theories. Not realizing differences between theory and what is not theory leads to what Kirsch (1981) called "research episodes". These research episodes are not formulated in order to create or refine theories, but to verify self-constructed frameworks. The result of this type of research is a framework which is verified by empirical data. Unfortunately, the link back from these empirical tendencies to the refinement of the framework and the modification of theories is mostly missing. Therefore, as Kirsch claims, management science develops on the basis of frameworks with some empirical tendencies. Yet, according to Gilbert and Christensen (2005), researchers often fail to connect prior research with the definition of their own variables that build the framework. As a result, empirical findings are outlined in detail and are compared with the framework as if the framework were the theory (Kirsch 1981). It seems to be that there is no identity with the ideal scientific world of Popper (2002). Hypotheses are not always well-defined and developed from well-constructed theories that have to be confronted with the real world. The link back to theory is more complicated and cannot succeed if the frameworks do not even stem from homogenous theories or if research questions are gathered from previous studies with different theoretical backgrounds.

Weick (1995) makes the important comment that theories can only be differentiated from what is not theory only if theory is interpreted as a final result and not as a process of theorizing. Of course, frameworks alone compared to theory cannot be theory and hypotheses alone compared to theory cannot be theory. But all the elements are part of developing a theory. If it is agreed that strong theories are rare and that most of the scientists approximate theories, then theory is more a continuum than a product that contains all of the aforementioned ingredients. In this process, assumptions, accepted principles, and rules of procedures are used in order to analyze, predict or explain the specified phenomena. If these theories gain more and more empirical evidence by accepted rules, these theories become part of the accepted scientific knowledge (van Maanen/Soerenssen/Mitchell 2007).

In sum, discussions about theory in the management realm focus, on the one hand, on explanation, especially "...why acts, events, structure, and thoughts occur" (Sutton/Staw 1995, 378) and how they are related (Kerlinger 1992). On the other hand, there is an emphasis on the techniques of how to create theories by description, categorization, and identifying relationships, and test theories via hypotheses by mostly statistical procedures (Bacharach 1989). Theories may start with a careful description of the phenomena followed by a classification of the phenomena into categories followed by the identification of relationships amongst the categories. Early drafts of a theory may be vague in the number and adequateness of factors and their relationships. Established theories may contain precise variables and predicted relationships that are to be verified by hypotheses. These theories have to be extended by considering boundaries with regard to time and space. Thus, building theories can be seen as a continuum.

Theory as a continuum

Considering theories as a continuum the question is raised at what point of the continuum can qualitative research add a contribution? Following Snow (2004), one of the most important issues with qualitative research is a misunderstanding with regard to this contribution to theory. Critique on qualitative research points to thick descriptions, lacking accepted rules and failing theoretical development. Therefore, suggestions of how to succeed in theory development aim to analytically and empirically develop accepted rules for assessing the contribution of theory (Colquitt/Zapata-Phelan 2007; Edmondson/McManus 2007; Snow 2004). In the recent debate the development of theory is discussed with regards to the contribution of qualitative research to a nascent or intermediate field of knowledge.

Nascent Theory

It is mostly accepted that qualitative research investigates into phenomena that are poorly understood. Edmondson and McManus (2007) define the development of knowledge about such phenomena as nascent theory. Qualitative research concentrates on theory generation as an analytic understanding that is generated by detailed examination of data (Snow 2004). This understanding is constantly assessed and revised by looking for similar or different instances of the phenomena and systematically generating a more abstract theory. In their analysis of published articles Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) name this type of articles "builders", meaning articles to be relatively high in theory building but relatively low in theory testing. Builders include inductive studies that focus on new constructs, relationships, or processes. Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) distinguish these articles from articles that do not add to the ideas present in existing theory and do not introduce new relationships or constructs.

Nascent theory proposes tentative answers to novel questions of how and why, thereby identifying new connections among phenomena (Edmondson/McManus 2007). New factors and relationships can arise from unexpected findings, new assumptions or from a new perspective stemming from the existing literature. In particular, in grounded theory the research questions are broad and open-ended. Rich, detailed data stemming from interviews, observations, open-ended questions, and lon-

gitudinal investigations are foundations for identifying factors and relationships. The data collection and analysis reveals themes and issues that lead – in an iterative process – to new theoretical categories that shape further data collection (Glaser/Strauss 1967).

In recent years, the case study literature has advanced regarding the question of what constitutes a theoretical contribution in case study research (Eisenhardt/Graebner 2007). In theory building, the rich case data is seen as providing inspiration for new ideas (Siggelkow 2007) thereby revealing unusual phenomena, replicating or countering the replication of findings in other cases, eliminating alternative explanations and elaborating the emergent theory. Furthermore, case studies allow the researcher to get closer to theoretical constructs and illustrate the underlying causal mechanisms (Eisenhardt 1989); they also lead to the creation of new hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry (Flyvbjerg 2004; Vaughan 1992; Yin 2009). Case studies help to build theory by making significant theoretical breakthroughs that generalize a set of results to theory (Yin 2009). Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that researchers can ground the construct empirically in a new context by moving beyond the confines of one study to find broader constructs. Thus, case studies can establish the conditions under which the theory holds, i.e. when it does or does not offer potential for explanation (Vaughan 1992).

Intermediate theory

If there is preexisting theoretical work, qualitative researchers deal with knowledge that Edmondson and McManus (2007) define as intermediate theory. Intermediate theory research mostly draws from prior work or from separate bodies of literature. A theory may exist but explanations are provisional. The aim is to add new constructs and/or provisional theoretical relationships and new measures. Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) term these types of articles “qualifiers”. Such articles qualify previously established relationships or processes using conceptual arguments rooted in the extant literature. A single study may describe patterns or reveal processes. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, qualitative research identifies key process variables or introduces new constructs, modifies frameworks, and identifies new relationships among variables (Shah/Corley 2006). These “refinements” (Snow 2004) aim at modifying existing theoretical perspectives through extension or inspection of a particular proposition with new empirical material. In an intermediate stage, theories can be extended in order to broaden their strength of explanation (Snow 2004). When extending theory, the existing theory is applied to other groups or aggregations or other context, places or domains. Extension focuses on broadening the relevance of a particular concept or theoretical system to a range of empirical contexts other than those in which they were first developed. Take, for example, “anomaly seeking” research (Gilbert/ Christensen 2005). Researchers often observe matters that the theory did not predict. This discovery enables going back into the framework and revising it. Many anomalies will only surface if a design reveals the interaction amongst individuals in groups, between groups and between companies. There is some similarity between the arguments of Gilbert and Christensen (2005) and Burawoy (1991) regarding anomalies in theory extension. “Extended theory” (Burawoy 1991) moves from anomaly to “reconstruc-

tion". When expectations are violated - when something is discovered which was not anticipated- the existing body of theory is questioned: "But failure leads not to rejection but to rebuilding theory" (Burawoy 1991, 9). The focus is on what that theory fails to explain. The shortcomings of the theory become grounds for a reconstruction that locates the social situation in its historically specific context of determination.

In addition, different theoretical lenses may provide "complementary perspectives" (Peteraf 2005). A new lens takes the theory into new directions. By shining multiple lenses on the same phenomenon, new insights and new understandings may emerge (Lewis/Grimes 1999; Pentland 1999). Moreover, "breakdowns and mysteries" are the foundation of putting more emphasis on unexpected findings (Alvesson/Kaerreman 2007). Fieldwork should be reflexive in that it allows for the perception and exploration of breakdowns. A breakdown means that an empirical finding cannot be interpreted or explained by the prior theory. After identifying an unexpected finding, the researcher's next step is to develop a new understanding of the phenomenon. The phenomenon entails a "mystery" that has to be explained by using new concepts, a new theoretical framework, or a new metaphor.

In sum, the contribution of qualitative research to the management realm lies in its capability to create and develop theories. Theories can be seen as a continuum. The road to theory may start with careful descriptions, identifying categories, and investigating into relationships amongst the categories. These relationships are to be tested. There are plenty of research strategies to build theories in a nascent field of inquiry but the vast bulk of scientific research deals with theory contribution in an intermediate field. Although the theory contribution seeks to identify anomalies, breakdowns, complementarities or reconstructions, the standards of methods are crucial.

3. The challenge of quality: Collecting and analyzing qualitative data

Explicit discussions on quality in qualitative research began from concerns about standards, validity, reliability and rigor (Flick 2007a; Frankel 1999; Gibbert et al. 2008; Seale 1999). More recently, for improving the quality of qualitative research scholars discuss the need for putting more emphasis on the qualitative data itself and on how these data are collected and analyzed (Flick 2007a; Punch 2005). Therefore, the use, evolution and improvement of techniques and procedures for conducting and analyzing data play a central role for better theorizing with qualitative data (Amis/Silk 2008).

Quality in data collection

The attention to data collection has produced increasing interest into how to collect data as an early stage of the research process. Scholars give suggestions on data collection techniques such as focus groups (Lee 1999; Barbour 2007), audio, film and video recording (Denzin 2007), shadowing (Punch 2005), the multiplicity of uses of interview techniques (Opdenakker 2006) or narratives and conversations (Rapley 2007), all aiming at collecting sound and valid data. In addition, the focus on collecting data is strongly linked to the recent discussion on enhancing the quality of single data collection techniques and on using complementary data collection procedures (Flick 2007a, 66; Seale et al. 2007).

In management research, there is an emphasis on the quality of data collection techniques. The main ways of collecting qualitative data are interviews, observation techniques and documents, with interviews being extensively employed because they provide an efficient and well-developed way of understanding someone's perspective and getting expertise (Hopf 2007; Gläser/Laudel 2006; Punch 2005). Most recently, the discussion about observational techniques and their quality is mainly concerned with questions of how to get useful and valid data out of single observations (Angrosino 2007). More generally, participant observation techniques are claimed of being overlooked too often (Lee 1999) with several scholars re-emphasizing the potential of these techniques to produce substantial insight (Fendt/Sachs 2008; Hammersley/Atkinson 2007). To enhance the quality of observation techniques, Maxwell (2005), for example, promotes using long-term observation procedures with detailed, descriptive note taking. Being a central ethnographic technique, Angrosino (2007) provides insight into how to actually organize and use the techniques of observation. These observations are suggested to be recorded in field notes that may be written as theoretical memos (Balogun/Huff/Johnson 2003) or analyzed from a grounded theory perspective (Fendt/Sachs 2008; Strauss/Corbin 2008).

Moreover, the quality of documentary techniques is currently being discussed anew, for example in terms of generating a data archive. This data archive includes a vast array of documentary evidence such as websites, blogs, web-based diaries, biographies or personal notes of the day-to-day managerial activities (e.g. Bohnsack/Paff/Weller 2009; Punch 2005).

Instead of relying on the quality of a single method, however, scholars ask for enhancing the quality in data collection by using complementary techniques (Flick 2007a). The complementary use of techniques entails collecting data on the same construct from the application of techniques addressing different aspects of an issue. In this manner, empirical evidence might provide a more complete account, for example, if the interview data in a case study is complemented by (participant) observation techniques for checking the accuracy of the data. In addition, collecting data in focus group discussions can extend interview techniques by producing data and insights that would be less assessable without the interaction found in a group of individuals (Barbour 2007; Lee 1999). It is through these discussions that additional data can be gathered along the theoretical or conceptual themes delineated by the researcher. Therefore, complementary techniques help to draw inferences about a perspective that cannot be obtained by relying exclusively on a single data source. The complementary use of data collection techniques opens up different perspectives and starts from different levels so that the potential gain of knowledge is systematically extended as compared to the single method (Gephart 2004). This encompasses what Flick (2007a, 2007b) calls between-method triangulation that provides a more complete and accurate account and enhances the reflexive validation of empirical evidence (Flick 2007b). The use of complementary data collection techniques may foster gaining a more secure understanding of the issues under investigation and thereby contributes to enhancing the quality of qualitative research.

In sum, in qualitative research, the range of what can count as useful data and the single data collection techniques is very wide (Punch 2005). Therefore, quality in data

collection can be understood as enhancing and ensuring the quality of a single data collection technique. In addition, it also encompasses applying complementary techniques. Hence, the complementary use of different techniques is not a naïve-pragmatic combination (Flick 2007b) but a methods-critical decision in that the combination is related to the purpose of the study with its particular disciplinary, theoretical or substantive concerns (Gobo 2005).

Quality in data analysis

Mahoney (2004) has drawn attention to data analysis as a distinctive feature in coming from raw data to a theoretical contribution by transforming, interpreting or making sense of qualitative data. More specifically, Gephardt (2004) identified the inadequate development and use of techniques and procedures for analyzing data as a significant barrier in theorizing with qualitative data. Despite these critical concerns, several textbooks and articles provide a broad range of different techniques and procedures for data analysis (e.g. Miles/Huberman 1994; Punch 2005). In case study research, for example, researchers can base their data analysis on the seminal work by Yin (2009) or the roadmap by Eisenhardt (1989), which provide the steps that have to be considered in analyzing case study data. In addition, for studies aiming at doing grounded theory, the literature provides several guidelines on the key concepts of grounded theory analysis (e.g. Glaser 1998; Locke 2001; Strauss/Corbin 2008).

Beyond these foundational works, the discussion on the quality of data analysis has advanced rapidly. With regards to explicating, clarifying and developing data analysis, scholars make suggestions about methods and techniques such as metonymy and metaphors (Cornelissen 2008; Cornelissen/Oswick/Christensen/Phillips 2008), critical discourse analysis (Phillips/Sewell/Jaynes 2008; Wodak 2007), or content analysis (e.g. Sonpar/Golden-Biddle 2008). Going beyond specific methodological accounts of analysis, other scholars put a strong focus on data analysis and its contribution to theorizing with qualitative data (Gephart 2004; Locke/Golden-Biddle/Feldman 2004).

Although generating new insights can be seen as invisible work, including an “uncodifiable creative leap” (Langley 1999, 691), data analysis and interpretation is of increasing importance with authors proposing different strategies. To theorize in case study research, for example, the analysis of the data is discussed with regards to identifying generalizable and unique patterns (Creswell 2008, 134; Patton 2002; Strauss/Corbin 2008). To recognize patterns, techniques are needed that analyze the data with regards to the repeatedly observed behavior, norms, or relationships, by constantly moving the data to a more abstract and general level. To enable an imaginative theorizing, Locke et al. (2004) suggest the use of interpretive micro-processes by applying different techniques to the same body of data. Referring to a study by Feldman (1995), the authors demonstrate how an ethnomethodological analysis in combination with a semiotic cluster analysis and a semiotic chain analysis helped to generate different and even contradictory interpretations of the phenomenon under research (Locke et al. 2004; Locke/Golden-Biddle 1997). Hence, these analytical strategies do not provide a theoretical explanation but help in generating an excess of possible interpretations that have to be selected and shaped by returning to the data and explicating its relevance to

a body of literature. This crucial step of iteration refers to tying findings to broader literature and linking back to theoretical patterns, initial theoretical propositions or broader extant theory, as well as confirming and contradicting the empirical findings with extant theory. This comparison helps to raise the theoretical level of the empirical findings and thereby aids in making a theoretical contribution.

In sum, quality in data analysis is neither a discussion on standardization and formalism, nor on methodological particularism (Gobo 2005). Instead, going beyond current methodological accounts by putting a strong emphasize on the quality of data collection and analysis techniques can lead to better theorizing with qualitative data. Moreover, the quality of data collection is also concerned with using complementary techniques to provide better insights. With regards to combining different techniques, the researcher faces the need to review a set of possible techniques and to seek out what will be appropriate with regards to the purpose of the study (Steinke 2007). Moreover, the use of diverse techniques in qualitative research also entails the need to legitimize what techniques are the most compelling for theoretical reasons or on grounds of internal consistency and why they help to draw and verify conclusions.

Within the last years, the literature on qualitative research has expanded exponentially with an increasing number of publications on methodological reflections on the distinctive strands in qualitative research. These recent publications provide an impressive leap with regards to the clarification, evolution, and further refinement of a range of different data collection and analysis techniques.

4. Improvements of qualitative research in Human Research Management

Having discussed the contribution of qualitative research to theory building and the quality of methods in data collection and analysis, this special issue provides examples of theory building using qualitative research and applying advanced methods of qualitative research to the realm of Human Resource Management.

The paper by *Axel Haunschild* and *Doris Ruth Eikhof* displays an extensive empirical study of the German theatrical employment system. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate how Human Resource Management and organization theories can be advanced by exploring and explaining the relationship between data and theory. It is a role model of how - in a first step - codes are used to identify patterns and to analyze their relationships. In a second step it is a very impressive discussion of how the data analysis leads to redefinitions of the case, advancing the case levels and extending theoretical foundations. The authors demonstrate how qualitative research can stimulate the advancement of existing theories and the building of new theory and they show how new contexts can reveal new perspectives. The editors valued the paper for taking the opportunity to reconstruct a qualitative research journey with all its ambiguity and difficulties. The sound reflection on the restrictions of qualitative research is a plea for more openness in the use of qualitative research for theory building.

The paper by *Stephanie Kaudela-Baum* and *Nada Endrissat* is very a good example of confronting established findings regarding Strategic Human Resource Management with a different theoretical lens and the use of adequate methods to identify new relationships. As the main stream literature deals with the traditional “fit” or “match” metaphor, investigating into relationships between the strategy of a firm and their re-

lated Human Resource Management, the authors analyse from a constructionist point of view how Human Resource practitioners interpret HR strategy and strategic change and how and why they organize discourses in strategic change processes. An adequate method of investigation allows collecting and analyzing the rhetoric that the practitioners used in connection with strategies. In a narrative approach the narratives of the practitioners are coded, grouped and interpreted. As a result, the paper shows in depth what strategic HR practices are applied and how and why they are related. Consequently propositions are revealed as a basis for further research. This paper is very convincing as to how a different theoretical lens and an appropriate method enable a better understanding of the role of HR practitioners in times of strategic change.

The article by *Julia Hormuth* focuses on discourse analysis as a qualitative method of data collection and analysis that is concerned with communicative behavior in institutional and everyday contexts. As the transfer of experiences among manager's topics has not yet been investigated by discourse analysts, the article addresses the basic assumptions, tools and the research process in discourse analysis. A research project is presented on how discourse analysis is used to research into transferring experiences among managers, aiming at developing a model of the communicative processes of experience transfer among expatriate managers. As a result, the paper shows how discourse analysis enabled explaining communicative means and practices interlocutors actually use to transfer their experiences. This paper is a very good role model of how discourse analysis can be applied to research in Human Resource Management.

Finally, the editors would like to thank all the contributors to this special issue. This special issue benefited not only from the authors and their expertise in methodological issues in Human Resource Management, but also from the reviewers. All of the reviewers put a great deal of effort into providing constructive comments on the papers, being critical but at the same time highlighting the strengths and potentials of the submitted papers and providing precise advice on how to develop them further.

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