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Qualitative Studies in Management Research: An Emerging Epistemology of Meta-Analysis

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Abstract

We discuss qualitative inductive studies in organizational and management research, particularly case studies, action research inquiries and research based on the grounded theory method. We posit that such qualitative inquiries are insufficiently capitalized upon and that, if aggregated through meta-studies, could yield insight on emergent properties and permit the development of higher-order knowledge, and theory. We contribute in four ways: Firstly, we introduce the construct of emergence and evidence its properties to generate meta-knowledge. Secondly, we propose a pragmatic approach to conducting meta-analyses of qualitative studies and contextualize it in terms of a concrete application. Thirdly, we identify major methodological issues that occur in the review of qualitative studies in management and organizational research-especially when aggregating different types of evidence and in terms of methodological robustness. Fourthly, we conclude by proposing some pragmatic remedying ideas.

Qualitative Inquiry in Management Science

Management science is an eclectic field that lacks epistemological coherence and a common research agenda [1]. Unlike more mature fields of inquiry (medicine, engineering) there is no consensus in management science on a set of key phenomena, which then are researched over a long period of time to yield unified understanding. Instead, the field displays considerable fragmentation in terms of research questions, frameworks, methods and validation criteria [2]. More so, as knowledge-production accelerates and globalizes, this omnium-gatherum of hypotheses, methods, framings and theories, devoid of unified models, is increasing exponentially, and Salipante's regret that management literature remains "...somewhat disconnected, undeveloped, and under-utilized across different domains of research (1982, p. 322)" applies more than ever. To review and exploit these disparate literatures-particularly when they are of a qualitative nature-is a challenging task.

Qualitative inquiry is the rigorous attempt to identify knowledge by uncovering, analyzing, interpreting and explaining "...qualitative patterns in terms of words, numbers, matrices, pictures, sounds, or other forms of representation [3]". By qualitative inquiry we mean approaches that primarily rely on qualitative data and theorizing through induction. As opposed to quantitative data that can be manipulated arithmetically, qualitative data is hard to aggregate, is displayed in diaries, theatre, images etc. and needs some form of human interpretation for patterns and insights to emerge. Such inquiry is particularly adapted to naturalistic inquiries, discovery-oriented research, learning perspectives and for the inquiry on messy, complex phenomena [4]. Organizational realities are complex and management is inevitably also a social task. The understanding and interpretation of this social world is a worthwhile and necessary endeavor. But qualitative inquiry is also difficult to do: it is about investigating discrete human agency or experience across situations and contexts. It is therefore about listening, watching and asking, about observation and sense-making of situations, language, concepts, practices, beliefs and relationships of the target group. Scholars invariably find themselves gathering large amounts of exciting but unstructured data and the choice of how to analyze and synthesize it can be difficult. Ever since Glaser and Strauss' "Discovery of Grounded Theory [5], scholars have developed techniques and methods to do credit to the richness of such data and to inductively generate knowledge from them, applying scientific rigor in new ways, since quantitative, positivist quality criteria, such as validity and replicability, cannot be applied, or not in the same manner, to such approaches. More and more complex, challenging management problems are approached today in a qualitative way, by thousands of different researchers, from diverse academic fields, professional contexts and cultural origins, using such methods as ethnography, case study method, action research and diverse grounded theory techniques, and often a mix of these. And as the positivist dominance of management research slowly gives way to a more pluralist landscape of research, such qualitative studies do find their way to publication and are increasingly respected. Their inductive nature, and their ability to handle extreme complexity, makes them appreciated, and necessary, to generate integrated, often boundary-spanning understanding and framing of management phenomena, and help develop strategies and processes. Indeed, a different set of criteria for validity and reliability has long been defined, to allow, and validate, such research for academic rigor. Originally, Harding (1987) purports that there are only three ways to collect data in qualitative inquiry: listening to respondents, observing behavior, and studying documents and images. Meta-study, so we propose, is a fourth form: it permits us to draw from all qualitative methodological sources to "move beyond methods that investigate individual subjectivity to actively transform our understanding of human behavior and experience [6]" Qualitative inquiry offers critical novel tools and methods that foster 'new ways of seeing' ([4,7-9]). Qualitative methodological orientations to study human agency in management include many genres, such as, non-comprehensively,

- a) Descriptive qualitative research
- b) Phenomenology
- c) Process studies
- d) Engaged scholarship
- e) Ethnography
- f) Variance-based case studies, and
- g) Discourse studies, narrative inquiry
- h) Grounded Theory Method(s) and



i) Historical studies

It is worth experimenting with many of these, so as to understand relationships between onto-epistemological assumptions, and discover personal preferences:

- a) **Descriptive qualitative research** [10]: Generic methods, principally interviews but also open coding techniques and some iterative comparison between data and theory, are used according to a myriad of eclectic designs, to describe phenomena, and/or offer accounts of particular events. The interpretation and transformation of original data remains minimal and is often based on content analysis [11,12].
- b) **Phenomenology** [13]: this term regroups relational meaning-making methodologies that originate in the philosophies, for example, of Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Gadamer [14,15]. The essential research question is: What happened, and how did people make sense of this occurrence for themselves? Techniques include long interviews, reduction, imaginative variation, structural descriptions, textual descriptions, meaning development and varying, and horizontalization. Quality criteria include generous and critical member and peer checking [16].
- c) **Process studies**: These explore phenomena in time, for example change, adaptation, transformation and emergence. They are grounded in philosophical stances around dynamic, constant flux, pluralistic ontologies [17,18]. Contrary to variance studies which are essentially about static entities, process inquiry focuses on what how such entities evolve over time. Early approaches were simply about occasional pit stops over a period of time and comparison of the change in particular entities [19,20]. Current process studies are more radical in that they do not focus on entities at all but rather suggest that phenomena are constantly changing [21-27].
- d) **Engaged scholarship**: Engaged scholarship belongs to the genres of inquiry that go furthest in challenging the positivist belief that the researcher should separate him/herself from the phenomena at hand, so as to avoid bias. In this genre, the very fact that the researcher appears in the field, gets his/her 'hands dirty' [28] represents an influence upon the phenomena under study. This ontology therefore perceives the researcher and the research as intertwined, as mutually constituting [29,30]. This is seen as a strength, and scholars often assume active roles. The benefit to the research is seen in the rapprochement of theoretical and practical knowledge and in the 'creative abrasion' of this rapprochement ([7,31-33]). One reason why this powerful research genre is still rare is in the difficulty of writing up such a research journey, i.e. to be forthright about the active role of the self and the often experimental journey on the one hand, and yet conform to some kind of acceptable logic of the essentially positivist reviewers waiting to get their teeth into the manuscript on the other [34-36].
- e) **Ethnography** ([37-39]): Rooted in anthropology and in sociology, this "act of writing about people" [3] regroups a set of methods that focus on cultural description (orientation, knowledge, beliefs), commentary and critique. The idea is to enter the field and to live with the tribe to be observed, and to immerse into this reality so fully that one is no longer noticed as a foreign body and can thus observe the tribe fairly neutrally. The method is usually longitudinal, intensive and extensive; thick description, taxonomies and typologies are applied. Many distinct approaches are available, such as the classical, realist, confessional, impressionist, critical, ethnomethodological, and autoethnographic style, to name just some.
- f) **Variance-based case studies**: This is an early and fairly well-propagated genre, pioneered essentially by Eisenhardt [40,41] in the late nineties. Here, constructs are studied and then a relationship between them is sought so as to permit a higher-level knowledge to emerge, mostly to seek for causality [42,43]. Multiple case studies can be replicated and data sets compared for pattern [44]. One reason why this approach was accepted relatively early might be its hypothetico-deductive, positivist nature, because even though the research starts inductively, with the observation of a phenomenon and not with prior theory, its outcome can extend to prior work and thus become deductive in nature [45].

- g) **Discourse studies, narrative inquiry**: Discourse inquiry is eclectic, we might differentiate conversation, content, poststructuralist [46], critical discourse and Foucauldian analyses [47] and narrative studies ([48-50]). Narrative inquiry is of literary, linguistic, existentialist and psychological origin. A narrative is a "discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings" [51]. Narratives are "verbal acts consisting of someone telling someone else that something happened" [52]. Polkinghorne [53] focuses on the story form as he describes the process of creating a story, the internal logic of the story (its plot and theme), and also the product-the story, tale, or poem as a unit. Sarbin [54] also stresses the organizational aspect of narrative. The narrative is understood as a psychological root metaphor, the story teller is the expert. Contextual and relational perspectives, time, plot, identity and culture play a key role. The researcher applies thematic and structural analyses.
- h) **Grounded Theory** ([5,55]): Developed some 40 years ago, grounded theory claims to be a qualitative methodology to inductively generate theory. Glaser defines grounded theory as: "...a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area [56]." It was developed at a point in the history of science, when the prevalent opinion was that only quantitative or deductive studies could provide systematic scientific research. Streams of thought such as American Pragmatism ([17,57] and symbolic interactionism [58] and the rigorous use of ethnography and data collecting methods of later scholars from Chicago School of sociology founded by John Dewey were somehow out of fashion then and linear regression and structural functionalism [59] were going strong. Glaser and Strauss have revived these earlier important influences in their conception of grounded theory. In reality, the process is alternately inductive and deductive, and canonical forms of the method are so objectivized, that many hesitate to count them among qualitative methods. As the term indicates, theory is gathered and built from the ground up, in an iterative process. Coding (*in vivo*, focused, open, axial, selective) and memoing are characteristic techniques. To minimize bias, researchers are encouraged to enter the field without a previous literature analysis, on a "blank slate". This latter condition is relativized in more recent versions.
- i) **Historical studies**: While grounding in history is a common way to present process data, in the past decade, this approach has become more sophisticated and more noticed: Historical data is used more deeply to comprehend the social and institutional construction of the phenomena under study. Contrary to the positivist use of history as a source of universal laws, historical inquiry pays attention to the embeddedness of phenomena in space and time. This approach is still rare but gaining in visibility. It is intense and requires access to deep archival data. It also requires, as many genres described here, a strong commitment of the researcher to engage in thick interpretation and reflection, and package such engagement into a compelling narrative. Similar to Van Maanen in ethnography [38], scholars are identifying sub-genres in terms of the personal nature of the narratives proposed, e.g. realist, interpretative and poststructuralist [60].

A case-study approach [61], or an action research setting [62-65] are often used as an organizational framework to embed these eclectic methods and techniques. Such research is rich and clearly better suited to understand and explain the diverse and organic and functional relation between parts and a complex, fast-changing whole, than linear regression models. But the very complexity and rich diversity of such inquiries makes them difficult to aggregate - and this they are almost always excluded from quantitative meta-analyses. This seems a waste of important knowledge. Could such studies contain emergence? Could they - and how could they - be analyzed and synthesized into higher order concepts and theories? To speak with Glass' metaphor (1971), what if these "mines" of independent qualitative studies contained layers of accumulated, "unrefined ore (1971)", waiting to emerge? These are the questions that motivate this manuscript. We propose that such qualitative inquiries are today insufficiently capitalized upon and that, if aggregated, analyzed and synthesized through meta-studies, could enable the emergence of valuable higher-order insight and evidence. To make our case, we briefly discuss the construct of emergence. Then we propose a pragmatic approach to conducting systematic meta-reviews of

qualitative studies and contextualize these in terms of previous work. In the course of this methodological presentation we identify some critical issues in the review of qualitative studies in management research - especially how to select and juxtapose different types of evidence, and how to obtain methodological robustness - and we propose some pragmatic remedying ideas. This is work in progress and we look forward to feedback, and to some good discussions, to help advance our work.

The Construct of Emergence

Emergence is as yet rarely explicitly applied to management research. Yet, is implicit in such inductive, interpretive approaches as ethnography, process studies, discourse studies, action research, grounded theory [5] and many qualitative case studies. As stated, many - and often the most intriguing and fascinating - aspects of management can be understood as social constructions and their inquiry is often concerned with holistic understanding and with micro-scale social interaction as known from symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. In this sense, emergence seems a natural term applied to processes of building theory grounded in the real world, and is used quite fortuitously. But emergence, even though still a "slippery concept" to some [66] and found to vary considerably depending on which scholarly field informs it, has a first-degree meaning used to argue for collective phenomena that are collaboratively created by individuals yet are not reducible to explanation in terms of individuals. Emergence has also been adopted by methodology scholars, who invoke the existence of emergent social properties, yet claim that such properties can be reduced to explanations in terms of individuals and their relationships. Thus, contemporary uses of emergence are contradictory and unstable as several unresolved issues face its theories, in the field of sociology alone. The authors' interest for emergence focuses on the act of management, not on the manager, or rather not on the manager alone, but on relationships, on the system of learning including the act, actors, context, contingency and so on. Rather than the reductionist discourse of thesis and antithesis, or other hierarchical relationships privileging one side over another - as in action theory or structural functionalism - or reconciliation, in which structure is both the medium and the outcome of agency [67,68], we pursue a more pluralist approach.

Our observation of the field brings us to argue that attempts to achieve understanding and coherence, particularly in complex situations, fail if explanation is sought from simply adding contributions of the elements the system is composed of. There is often 'more', and even more that was aimed for, 'accidentally more', so to speak [66,69,70]. Also, actors' quest for convergence is flawed in application as soon as it is based on binary-oppositional thinking. Issues may be oversimplified when considered as good or bad, right or wrong, rational or intuitive, etc. Management practice that seeks to unify can in fact disunite and it seems that to cope with disunity is the very essence of management: to go beyond the preference for singularity or for false dichotomies and explore the ambiguities, the complexities and the paradoxes [71,72]. But what is emergence? Broadly speaking, emergence refers to the arising through self-organization, of new and coherent patterns, properties, and structures in complex systems [73]. A system exhibits emergent behavior if something 'additional' occurs - if in some sense more comes out of it than was put in [74]. This said, the concept of emergence has links to several disciplines, and it has no clear definition. It appears that there are several bodies of research living under the same name. Moreover, accounting for emergence has proven to be challenging, so much so that some scholars are still in doubt whether or not genuine emergence exists [75] and, if yes, how provisional it is. Depending on the degree of doubt, scholars alternately dub emergence a notion [76], a concept [66,77], a construct [73] or even a theory [78] or a paradigm. Others emphasize the emergent properties or features that permit "...better predictability on the system behavior, compared to the lower-level entities" (Boschetti Prokopenko, Macreadie, & Grisogono 2005). One eminent emergence scholar, the computer engineer and psychologist John H. Holland demurely speaks of a topic, and warns that it is unlikely that it will "...submit meekly to a concise definition [74]". To clarify our stance, we first situate emergence theoretically (Figure 1), and then we attempt to conceptualize its scientific foundations in Figure 2.

Still, whatever working definition of emergence one adopts, it seems to invite all types of meta-research, especially of qualitative nature. There might be more knowledge than meets the eye, more higher-order theory, understanding and discussions waiting to be discovered at a meta-level. The appearance of high-level properties of a system that appear simply not deducible from its low-level properties, no matter how sophisticated the deduction - has something magical to it. Emergence is therefore often either mystified or banalized. On the one hand, emergence viewed as something 'extra' rising from a system that is not a priori possessed by any of its parts, is quite ubiquitous a phenomenon that applies to almost anything, a deck of cards, for example [79]. But then, high-level patterns and structures emerging from simple low-

level rules, connectionist networks (e.g. high-level cognitive behavior emerging from simple interactions between non-intelligent threshold logic units) and evolutionary phenomena (e.g. intelligence and suchlike properties that emerge over the course of evolution by genetic recombination, mutation and natural selection) are fascinating grounds of inquiry. Since emergent properties are usually more easily understood in their own right than in terms of properties at a lower level, emergence is in a sense a constructed property, not a metaphysical absolute. Properties are classed as emergent based at least in part on i) the relevance to a given observer of the high-level property at hand; and ii) the difficulty of an observer's deducing the high-level property from low-level properties. This also brings in a relatedness to design, which leads to an interesting definition of emergence as a "...phenomenon wherein a system is designed according to certain principles, but interesting properties arise that are not included in the goals of the designer" [76]. Emergence is fathered by many schools that deal with dynamical, complex, autopoietic phenomena and that all somehow originated from General Systems Theory.

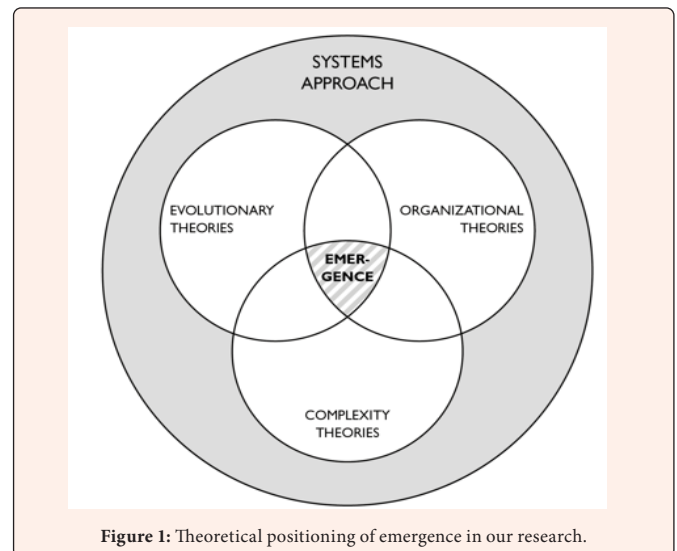


Figure 1: Theoretical positioning of emergence in our research.

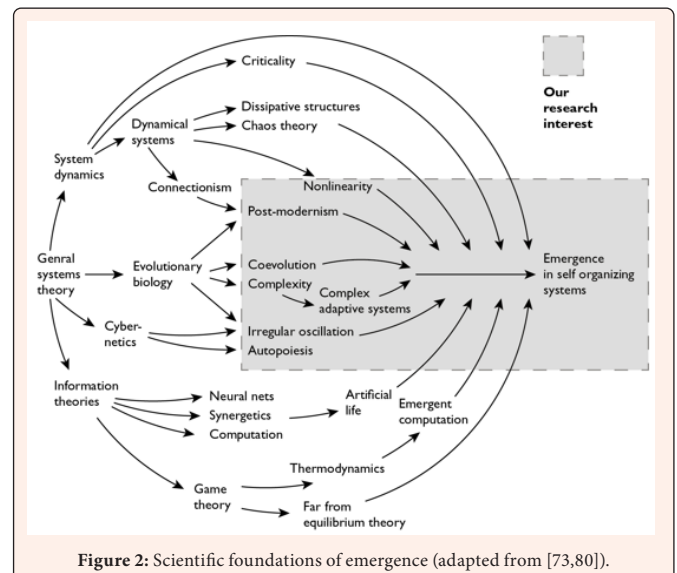


Figure 2: Scientific foundations of emergence (adapted from [73,80]).

What could be a role of emergence in meta-explanation? Emergence is useful for all multi-level phenomena. Often, it functions more as a description than an explanation as it visualizes patterns, structures and properties situated at the macro-level [81]. Many scholars consider it provisional and quite inadequate and wait for a better theory to come along that would be able to predict, deduce and reduce emergent phenomena to micro-level processes [82]. In organization science, emergence is a young but lively field with accents, for example, in such domains as:



- A. **Leadership:** Non-linear leadership behaviors in teams, movements between hierarchical and participative modes, sources of structure from imposed to self-organized models, communities-of-practice, open source networks, etc. ([73,80,83-90]).
- B. **Organizational dynamics:** Creativity in organizations, informal organizations, spontaneously occurring organizational events, adaptability of informal organizations, subversion, etc. ([91-96]).
- C. **Entrepreneurship:** Non-linear phenomena in opportunity-recognition, resource-organization, serendipity and accidental occurrences, engagement, etc. ([77,97-103]).

Our argument is that meta-studies could help identify emergent properties of organizations, and fields of action and of thought, which in turns could inform our reflection regarding these organizations, and fields of action and of thought, and help us to ask exciting and relevant research questions.

Meta-Studies–Research of Research

Qualitative meta-research is not well known in management and organizational science, diverse meta-approaches are used fairly regularly in health and nursing research. Meta-ethnography, one mode to use a term from Bondas & Hall [104], or one metafamily member to speak with Kearney [105], is even evidenced one of the most common methodological choices in nursing science [106]. Meta-inquiries help scholars to systematically review primary qualitative research, allowing concepts to be linked across studies, with the purpose of integrating findings and, from this, to generate meaning, make sense, detect higher-order organizational phenomena, and/or build further theory. The goals are to create inferences derived from findings as a whole, to encourage the emergence of new higher-order knowledge, i.e. to seek new theoretical or conceptual levels of understanding and to identify findings that go beyond the sum of parts of the individual primary studies. Many scholars mention disciplinary development as a principal aim ([6,104,107] Thorne et al. 2004). New, integrated and more complete (depth and breadth) understanding and interpretation is sought, through clarification of patterns and concepts in the data, to “push the level of theory” [108]. Contrary to literature reviews, the goal is not primarily to allow for organization in a comprehensive bibliography, but it is clearly a welcome collateral effect. Chenail evidences that researchers can focus on “...reviewing (a) effectiveness of interventions, programs, and policies; (b) observational associations between interventions and outcomes; (c) prevalence of problems or conditions; or (d) subjective experiences about meanings, processes, interventions, or methodological issues (2011:1179)”.

The origin of meta-study is twofold: Firstly, it is rooted in social sciences, where it is understood as a “sign of paradigmatic crisis [104]” and defined as the systematic study of the underlying structure of theory [109]. One such paradigmatic change was for example the succession by and large of grand theory approaches by postmodern and poststructural mid-range theories between the 1970s and the 1990s in nursing research (Hall 1997). The second main origin is anthropology, or rather ethnography [107], and indeed among the varieties of qualitative meta-studies, that include meta-ethnography, meta-analysis [110] meta-study [6,111], meta-interpretation [112], meta-summary (Sandelowski & Barroso 2003), meta-sociology [113,114] grounded formal theory [105], aggregation [115] and qualitative meta-synthesis ([116,117]), it is meta-ethnography that is most popular in nursing. Design elements of this “research of research” [6] include the determination of the focus, the formulation of the research question, the selection of the meta-methodology the selection and appraisal of the primary studies, the extraction of the key data, the data aggregation or synthesis, the quality control and the development of theory [118]. Many of these approaches are primarily interpretive, meaning that they focus on holistic portrayal and contextualized thick description and do not distill to shared concepts and theory, but some do pursue the exercise further to look for emergence and build and refine constructs, categories, concepts and theories that integrate similarities and differences across the selected inquiries into an explanatory framework. This difference could be explained by such differences in ontological stances as Denzin’s Jamesian categorization of the “tender-minded”, post-structuralist scholars who perceive the nature of research as an art and “hesitate to impose theory onto experience [105], and the “tough-minded” qualitative empiricists whose ontology is cognitive and rational and involves a shared canon. But this binary perspective does not hold as one looks closer and finds that most research displays both. What is, however, flagrant, is the limitation of the meta-studies approach – and even more so of the meta-study methodological discussion, to the health research field.

Meta-Study in Management Research

Our argument is that there appears to be potential in inquiring the relationship between emergence and meta-study approaches, in general and more specifically in management research. There is a role to play for methodologies that allows scholars to better take advantage of the multitude of rich qualitative studies that are out there and that are today insufficiently exploited. Moreover, many of the available qualitative studies seem to start from scratch, and scholars are studying the same phenomena over and over again ([119,120]) and the theoretical contribution is often scarce [104]. It is thus an opportunity, and a responsibility, to grapple with such approaches. In the face of an increasingly globalized world and immediacy through sophisticated information and communication technologies, many management realities have dramatically grown more complex, tension-loaded, and confusing – and this from an economical, technological, socio-cultural, ecological, legal and ethical perspective. With Norman Denzin, we claim that turbulent times require novel approaches of explanation: “... around the globe governments are enforcing evidence-based, bio-medical models of inquiry. These regulatory activities raise fundamental philosophical, epistemological, political and pedagogical issues for scholarship and freedom of speech in the academy. These issues cut across the fields of educational and policy research, the humanities, communications, health and social science, social welfare, business and law”. One approach could be to better capitalize on what we have. New knowledges can emergence, for example by aggregating, analyzing and synthesizing extant, often insufficiently exploited primary data, through meta-studies.

But despite the afore mentioned fairly active methodological discussion in the health research field, there is as yet no standard method for aggregating qualitative research. The term qualitative meta-analysis reaches from the re-analysis of primary data to the aggregation of published studies [108]. Objectively, Kearney [105] distinguishes between such epistemological and ontological stances as a theory-building ambition (grounded formal theory), a theory-explanation approach uncovering of essential aspects, similar and different, across studies (called thick description). In this paper we propose an approach that contributes to emergence and theory-development. It is essentially a meta-synthesis (sic!) of the principal approaches identified in the literature (essentially from health research), and put into relationship with insights from emergence. It is attempted to propose both a fairly pragmatic and clear procedure, and to leave sufficient leeway to creativity and imagination of the researcher. Our choices and suggestions are structured along five key steps of the proposed meta-study process, namely i) announcing your epistemology, ii) defining the research question, iii) sourcing and selecting primary research, iv) extracting and analyzing data, v) synthesis, emergence and theory-development and iv) assessment and valorization (dissemination):

Be confident in your epistemology

Each genre reflects a set of particular ontological reflections. These must be taken seriously, and the researcher must be meticulous to stick within a genre. There is no one method for combining qualitative research, but a decision is to be made about the ontological genre to apply and this choice must be announced and explained, and followed throughout the manuscript. If I choose to aggregate studies of discourse analysis, I must beware of sticking to the genre: it is difficult to combine conversation analyses with Foucauldian discourse analysis, for example. Also, do you want to re-dig into primary data collected in multiple studies, or analyze results reported in publications? For the latter there are numerous methodologies proposed, either in methodology publications or in very well documented applications in health care studies that can easily be applied to management contexts. Examples include frameworks by meta-ethnographers such as Noblit & Hare [107], Britten et al. [121] or Campbell et al. [122], Feder et al. (2006) or one can also go back to phenomenologists like Schutz [123], who developed a pertinent construct model. In sum, the definition of the research ontology and design is similar to primary research and includes such issues as: What process (in what order) will help me to best (effectively, efficiently, and creatively) address my research question? What studies can I include, how will I structure (homogenize) their transversal comparison? What methods, methodologies and techniques will I adopt, which versions, why, and in what relationship (hierarchy, co-construction) to each other [124]. How will I maintain internal coherence, rigor and objectivity, what possibilities do I have (reliability, trustworthiness, validity, traceability, etc.)? At this point it is also necessary to conduct an introspection and a self-assessment. What are your ontological preferences, your competencies and strengths, what resources do you dispose of (open-end interviewing, field note taking, statistics, writing, leading a team of researchers, coordinating different research styles,



but also time and budget available in relation to the task at hand etc.)? Especially in meta-studies of a certain size, there are issues that need early consideration, for example the number and quality of researchers to involve, the communication, the data management (back ups), technology and tools, approvals, ethical concerns, and so forth. What is especially critical in qualitative meta-studies is a flawless audit trail (including lab notebooks, diaries, journals, correspondence, and all types of intermediary reports). One danger is a lack of rigor. This has been amply documented and means of determining validity and trustworthiness do exist. Credibility, for example, asks for correspondence between the way the respondents socially construct reality and the way researchers portray their viewpoint. Similar to primary research, meta-study credibility is the result of documented persistent observation, peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, member checking, triangulation, transferability, dependability, authenticity and fairness, and confirmability (Patton 2002). The difference is that in meta-studies there is a possibility – and a duty – to interact in detail with the primary researchers on these issues. Another issue is just as critical as lack of rigor: lack of creativity. It is an illusion to believe that following a checklist of dos and don'ts will automatically yield "good research". In general, but more so in meta-studies, creativity and imagination play very important role. Meta-researchers can draw on Deleuze [125,126] Foucault [127], Probyn [128], Bogart [129], Richardson [130], and St Pierre [131,132], and their writings on pleat and fold, and on the space of the outside folded in to the inside; on time as concentric and circular; on repetition, on disruption, and on the pause. They can revisit the "crisis of representation" [131,132], and can – even must – attempt experimentations with deviations from traditional methodologies such as ethnography and grounded theory, toward other, more ephemeral forms of data analysis, why not drawn from different fields and expressions.

As long as the researcher shares his or her methodological reflection and social construction with the reader, such deviations are welcome, if not necessary. Crisis times require novel approaches of explanation and meta-study promises a priori such explanation. Often, such new knowledges can arise through the quality of emergence, for example in writing as an effective game plan throughout the research process [133]. Writing can be part of data collection, analysis, searching, revealing [134] and representation. Many scholars regret that some qualitative methods, for fear of not being accepted by the dominating positivist community, develop their methodologies to the point that they oversimplify complex meanings and interrelationships in data [135], or that they favor the immediately apparent at the cost of the tissue of structural features of social situations [136]. Layder goes on to regret that constraints are put on the analysis phase by too much focus on procedure and too little on interpretation, and suggests that it be guided by data rather than limited by it. This would be a regretful interpretation of rigor. As Atkinson recommends in relation with grounded theory, we purport to perceive available meta-study procedures as sets of "general principles and heuristic devices rather than formulaic rules" [137]. For Robrecht, too, many sampling procedures push researchers "to look for data, rather than look at data" (1995, p. 171, original emphasis), and deflect attention from the data toward tools and procedures. Many scholars, for example Schatzman (1991), propose alternative approaches recommending a natural analytic process. Locke [138] critically reflects on the usefulness or not of grounded theory procedures in modernist, interpretative and post-modernist research paradigms of management studies. It seems that the apparent comfort of applying "scientific method" and thereby hoping to achieve epistemic solidity is bought at the price of forsaking some of the finest assets a researcher has to offer: his or her unfiltered capacity of reflection. Many scholars describe the difficulty of grasping everyday understanding and emphasize the active and honest, albeit difficult interpretative role this requires the researcher to assume. So, yes, as Morse puts it, "soft research is harder [139]", but so much more rewarding.

Keep your research question internally consistent with data and analyses

Internal consistency between the data and analyses of your chosen studies and your meta-research question are essential. Positivist scholars often fit the research question to the data and analysis from the onset, whereas inductive researchers often play around with the research question as they move through the research journey. It is in the nature of the inductive process that things do not happen sequentially but that through iteration, data feeds analysis feeds the research question feeds the data and so forth. The same goes for qualitative meta-studies, but less. The research question tends to be more solidly pre-defined, for the simple reason that the iterative juggling between data, theory and the research question is rendered more complex through the sheer number of different studies. Meta-studies require a sufficient number of research publications that meet the selection criteria. Therefore, while for primary researcher the only limitation in the choice of subject is imagination, in meta-studies the research question is in a sense constrained by the available research [104]. The analysis and the synthesis of this primary data requires a solid knowledge of the field at hand. Often,

therefore, a meta-study question originates from a researcher's previous area with the purpose to extend it (e.g. [6,83]). To ask the question will even permit to better encircle the field, which is often ill-defined in qualitative research. Also, the relevance of the question is sometimes jeopardized by similar issues as in primary data, namely that the preoccupation with the data dominates the research activity and that too little time is consecrated to the interrogation of what is really important [140]. The question is also deeply linked with the methodology and the quality criteria that one defines (c.f. ii below). Typical queries are, as in all qualitative research, what, why, where, and how. How could these various types of findings be synthesized? How can they be historically, philosophically, sociologically, etc. understood, or deconstructed [115]. What aspects could be determining to understand a phenomenon and propose theory and/or strategies of agency: Is it leadership behavior, learning, decision-making; triggers of change, or process, design? And what is the role of context, of culture? A draft statement, identifying your area of interest and justify its theoretical and practical importance, could be next, and then the development of sub-questions or hypotheses.

To define measurable and traceable goals of the study will also help to obtain more precision in the research question. Finally, to conduct a first literature search, to identify potential sources of data, and to prepare a research proposal will again help to approach and formulate the core interest. What seems intellectually challenging and interesting, is to ask questions that permit to detect the knowledge from the inbetweens: inbetween studies, but also academic disciplines, cultures, organizations, ages, genders and so forth. Qualitative meta-study is not about producing sums, averages, means or identify some kind of first-degree dominant behaviors. Quantitative research can do this much better. Here, we are out to detect the undetectable, to help the liminal [141] emerge. Such constant border crossing is challenging, but also highly generative of insight, energy and other resources. Emerging properties are by definition liminal, since they cannot be explained through the independent parts that make up the construction. Good research questions try to understand such phenomena as they appear, in their relation to the system or parts of it. One fascination of meta-study is this perspective on the inbetween, the liminal, as it begins to emerge, this space between the various worlds that we had visited and revisited independently, and that present higher end properties as we relate them.

Be consistent when sourcing and selecting primary research

Sourcing depends strongly on the chosen methodology, but essentially it turns around such parameters as time, subject headings, key, abstract and text words, related terms, etc. It is quite difficult to locate qualitative studies, since most library databases do not index according to such criteria. Forward and backward citation is also necessary and, last but not least, contact with scholars from the field of research. Then a first selection is made regarding the condition of the qualitative research design. Further selection criteria usually include the state of publication. Most meta-studies are from peer-reviewed, published work, but this need not be so. Meta-study can also be done concurrently with studies en cours and therefore unpublished, "grey literature" [142]. Relevance to the research question, the possibility of verbal interaction with the primary researcher (and, perhaps, with the original respondents), the corresponding type of respondents (age, gender, demographic, geographic, language restrictions etc.) are other key criteria. All selection criteria must be made explicit. Selection is also done via exclusion along such criteria as randomized trials, cohort studies, surveys, linear regression, etc. As in primary studies, sample size is an issue. Large samples promise higher levels of formality, theory and transferability, but such large samples may impede deep, and especially liminal analysis, and cross-theme issues. Recommendations speak of 10-12 studies [6]. What seems important is the coherence with the objective and with the methodology so as to permit a meaningful and valid synthesis [106]. Some scholars recommend not combining studies with different qualitative methods [115,143], but practice shows that such studies are rarely separated and that the meta-methodology usually manages to cope and come up with enriched findings [6].

Issues with extracting and analyzing data

Again, the theoretical framing of phenomena under observation are as a rule intensely informed by schools of thought. It is therefore indispensable to decide on, announce and in a sense justify the paradigm – the stance – from which the scholar intends to work – and, to make matters more tricky – to mention the ontology in which the different primary studies have been developed. More often than not, problems arise due to problems in the primary studies, such as discrepant vocabulary, diverse philosophical underpinnings, reporting styles, mix up between analytical procedures and findings, misuses of quotes and of theory, or general lack of clarity [118]. More so, even the research questions, the choice of data, the approach to analysis are informed by paradigmatic origins and can, if not laid bare, act as bias [144]. At the same time,



at the meta-level, one's philosophical stance must be made transparent. One means of ensuring such transparency and avoiding bias is to perform essential research steps twice, by two independent researchers. Another problem is to define data: scholars seem to disagree about this point. Is there meaning in titles, abstracts and the entire text [107], or only in the results? Or does one best meta-analyze, in turns, data with data, theory with theory and methods with methods, as Paterson et al. [6] recommend? Many researchers have reserves regarding the analysis of discussion sections because of their speculative nature [106].

In any research there are also ethical considerations, such as issues of fidelity, non-maleficence, confidentiality and general rigor. In secondary research, the question of informed consent needs careful attention. It cannot be presumed and the researcher must not rely on the vagueness of the initial consent form. Ideally, such forms address the issue of secondary research, but they seldom do, as such research is often not on the radar at the time of the primary research. For a more thorough treatment of this theme, see Thorne [145]. The analysis phase requires particular consideration. As a first layer, similarities and differences need to be displayed and this is best done with tables and figures, that show the procedure, and the decisions made, along distinct criteria and enable the primary researchers and the novice reader to understand how this synthesis came about. Sandelowski [120] recommends the venn diagram, in which circles and spaces within hem display shared and unique ideas. More important, and more interesting for new insight, are the analysis of relationships. Many studies work with a wide variety of criss-crossing coding mechanisms (open, axial, selective, lateral coding and so forth, so as to develop first, second and third-order constructs, c.f. for example Feder et al. 2006 and Meadows and Hyle 2010), borrowed from grounded theory method. Others developed their own codes by means of metaphors, phrases, ideas, constructs, concepts, dimensions, themes, perspectives, actors, contexts and their relationships. This broad landscape-building method might cause problems of interpretation, unless it is rigorously performed by several independent researchers and then aggregated in discussion and negotiation. But if the classical criteria of clarity, structure, documentation, coherence, scope, (theoretical) generalizability and, last but not least pragmatic utility, are respected, such landscapes can be very rewarding. More systematically, and simpler, a threefold approach is proposed by Bondas and Hall (2006:119, drawing in parts from Noblit & Hare [107]), namely: Firstly, one study can be presented in terms of another and the accounts are thus analogous and directly comparable as reciprocal translations; secondly, studies can be set against each other so as to render visible the refutation of one through the other. They are thus oppositional and the synthesized refutations allow hypotheses to emerge in which the studies are grounded, and thirdly studies can be tied to another sequentially, by displaying how one study informs another and thus aligning them along a line of argumentation, which can be emic (in allegiance to the synthesized studies), sequential, comparative, causal or holistic (if constructs are interpretations of all of the studies, their relationships and their contexts). The latter approach appears to be most challenging but also most promising in terms of new knowledge about emergent properties and higher-order theory, but we still lack evidence on this point.

Identifying emergence and building higher-order theory

Meta-study should interpret and integrate, and not simply aggregate, research in the field of a particular phenomenon or, as we purport, across various fields. The findings of such a study have the theoretical potential to start a debate that will push the discipline – or the disciplines – forward in their theoretical and practical insight. Most researchers that perform meta-studies chose to build formal theory. Sandelowski (1993), Corbin & Strauss (1988), Morse & Johnson (1991) and Charmaz in her earlier works (1991) perform methods that could be defined as grounded formal theory. However, in order to fully account for emergence and capitalize on the rich diversity, we propose to draw from the unique landscapes of issues, actors, perspectives; cultural, temporal and historical contexts and samples of the original scholars' work, as das Kearney [105] proposes. Synthesis is achieved by maintaining central metaphors and/or concepts of each account and comparing them with other concepts and/or metaphors in that account [107]. Kearney (1998) speaks of a sewing together of analysis and synthesis. The language in synthesis can in turns contain new metaphors, that are superior in terms of parsimony, cogency, range, appearance and economic adequacy [106]. In the meta-synthesis, scholars can critically assess the strengths and limitations of each discrete contribution and propose alternatives. However, qualitative studies include by definition the researcher as part of the research, and the synthesist must account for, and even welcome such individual interpretation. Homogenization, objectivization, quantification, proportions and/or averaging should not be on the qualitative meta-scholar's agenda. Anyhow, this is the part where the researcher's creativity and intelligence can fully unfold: surface similarities can hide fundamental inconsistencies, and such analogies can ultimately fail, and inversely. However, the

researcher can, and should, seek holistic understanding, remapping possibilities of the field, or even across fields [6], and generally display a high vigilance and curiosity about all things liminal.

A good fit is reached, for example, when the meta-findings can be generalized theoretically into other contexts, and when they reflect typical and atypical elements of life experiences [117]. With Paterson and colleagues we recommend a non-linear approach to thinking, interpreting, creating, deconstructing, co-constructing (between meta-researchers, and with primary researchers, albeit with respondents), theorizing, and reflecting. Taken for granted world views are powerfully cemented in human thinking and acting and our interest must lie not in a stereotype, checklist-driven execution of an analysis and synthesis process, but rather in more radical, transgressive approaches that strive to open up and disrupt such consuetudinal agency, and work with tools – self-created, if necessary – that open the self and make it receptive to the detection of budding paradigmatic change, of transformations. For this, we must take a certain number of risks, and allow for uncertainty and doubt. One pitfall must be avoided: It is evidenced that in non-linear approaches, the theory-building part, the final synthesizing step that promises the highest insight, is often overlooked, or shied away from [119]. We propose a multi-disciplinary approach [106], grounded in the data and in the competence and the creativity of the research team.

Assessment and evaluation

An issue that meta-studies share with primary inquiry is its evaluation. And just like in all qualitative research, the value lies in the production and explanation of evidence that contributes in a novel way to the body of research: Has it increased understanding? a) the coherence between the research question and the methodology chosen, b) the inner and transversal coherence of and between each research step, such as the explicitness of the purpose, the logic of the theoretical framework directing the sampling and informing the interpretation of the findings, and so on, c) the capability of the research to provide credible and comprehensive answers to the research question through logically developed and perfectly traceable reasoning [146], and d) the rigor applied and documented throughout the entire process. The difference in meta-study is that the results will be scrutinized much more than with primary research, because scholars from sub-studies will carefully verify if and that their data has been respectfully treated and coherently aggregated. The overwhelming concern will be: has this work “illuminated the implications of the contexts, methods, and theories that have influenced the body of research in the field [6]”? Has it managed to evidence emerging properties? Has it generated and articulated an alternative, overarching perspective, across phenomena and perhaps even fields of science? Last but not least, as Cooper and Lindsay remind us, if we want to be read, our writings must be “consistent, parsimonious and elegant (1998:333)”.

Valorization (Dissemination)

Regarding the valorization there are essentially three issues that are particular to meta-studies. Firstly, there is the timing. Since many studies treat already published primary data, the research may be considered old. This is not a strong concern, because good meta-research can easily prove novel information at the meta-level. More problematic is the situation when the meta-study is performed concurrently with (not yet published) inquiries. Then the timing between these two levels of research must be closely monitored which is not always simple. The second concern is length. Many studies are large by the sheer fact that they treat a lot of cases and sometimes meandering research questions and procedures. Of course, any study can be synthesized to a certain length, but the dilemma is that in meta-research one must not only, as in most research, comprehensively present the question, the objective, the state of the art of the literature, the results, the discussion and the proposed theory, but also much of the process. This is one of the quality criteria that are most trust-inducing and therefore a fair degree of process information and reflections about processual choices of the researcher(s) are important. Also, it might be necessary for the credibility of the study to convey analysis and insights from the primary studies, and even, in some cases, it may be enriching to the reader to be able to dispose of occasional original (raw) data, in forms of quotes, or tables and so on.

Depending on the magnitude of the meta-study, this can result in large manuscripts, which can be difficult to find academic outlets for. Thirdly, such studies can be relevant for many audiences: academic, political, professional and so on. This is good and bad news because one can also try to please everybody and end up disappointing everybody. It is recommended to develop a portfolio of stakeholders that could be interested to obtain the developed insight. It might be worthwhile asking some of them quite directly. This may even help shape the study, and/or permit do



obtain funding and/or visibility. Who are they, and how are they likely to want to use the study? This will help to develop early a set of appropriate forms, contextualizations – and outlets – for optimal dissemination. Reports are to be designed and written in a language that can reach the diverse groups of stakeholders that might benefit from this knowledge, for example citizens, managers, teachers, professionals, students, policy-makers and scholars.

Discussion and Provisional Conclusion

In the early sixties Barney Glaser suggested that independent secondary analysis could “lend new strength to fundamental social knowledge (1963:11)”. By proposing a pragmatic and clear approach, it is hoped that qualitative meta-study, this meritorious transversal research approach, might find its way from health research into management inquiry and allow a better exploitation and dissemination of the explanatory power of the many interesting qualitative studies that are out there. As we evidence here, as a novel contribution, meta-study helps clarify contentious issues, resolve arguments and debates, and identifies unexplored emergent properties and dimensions of organizational forms. Moreover, meta-study allows for greater synthesis and integration within a particular field of study [109], and across fields of studies. Many of the colorful and rich case studies, action research experiments and other qualitative studies out there could, if aggregated, analyzed and synthesized through meta-studies, yield emergence of valuable and much-needed higher-order insight and evidence about the multi-layered, complex and fast-changing business reality. To make our case, we introduced quality research in the field of management, and then briefly discussed the construct of emergence. Then we proposed a pragmatic approach to conducting systematic meta-reviews of qualitative studies, identify some critical issues in the review of qualitative studies in management research and proposed some pragmatic remedying ideas. Meta-study is hard and strenuous work, “not for the faint-hearted” but the results are worth it.

It requires an uncompromising commitment, guts and an open mind, and if well-done is exciting, intellectually stimulating and constructive. The challenge is to manage one’s choices throughout this complex research process, in terms of objectives, resources, methods and so forth. Every choice opens up new options and chances are that they are related to other decision trees. Indispensable quality criteria are the gapless documentation of all actions and reflections of the entire research team and regular returns to the research question. Since creativity and non-linear, out-of-the-box thinking seems to be an asset to this research, it might be commendable to work with multi-disciplinary research teams. Conn et al. [147] recommend for example the inclusion of a librarian, which is said to facilitate the identification of references and of potential primary studies. The authors have some positive experience with teams that include non-academics from such fields as design, art and/or philosophy. Since mankind is often caught in all kinds of stereotypes, such diverse teams do not facilitate the work, but encourage debate, and certainly make the journey rich and lively. Meta-study allows to address new issues arising from previous inquiries, to understand emergent properties that intrigue us, and to challenge dominant research practice. It sometimes evidences what “has been ignored, misconstrued, or mistreated [148]”. Meta-study is also a means to lift micro-perspectives (individual-based inquiry) to an “upstream endeavor [149]”, i.e. to a macro level that permits a better understanding of complex economic, ecological, sociocultural and technological and ethical questions and thus help shape and provoke social change [6]. Zhao [114] argues that meta-study is a product of a time in which there is a crisis about what has been done and what needs to be done in a given discipline so as to advance it. We claim that management research has in many domains indeed reached such a point of crisis. On the one hand, dominant positivist research offers myriads of highly precise accounts on dramatically simplified models of reality. On the other, an array of qualitative studies share fascinating individual accounts of experience, from which it is hard to discern collective significance for the future of management practice, ethics, education or research. Meta-study offers an examination of alternatives – and even the radical option to revise one’s “travel plans, or even having second thoughts on the final destination [114]”. We hope that sharing these emerging thoughts of our own reflection and work in progress can encourage some scholars to join in and grapple with meta-study and to contribute to optimizing this worthwhile method for the advancement of the management sciences and, why not, society as a whole [150-155].

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