Article

Theorizing from Qualitative Research in Public Administration: Plurality through a Combination of Rigor and Richness

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Abstract

Scholars emphasize the need for additional rigor in qualitative research. This inadvertently encourages formulaic and standardized approaches that undermine the benefits of theorizing from rich data. Our study extends debate by emphasizing the importance of sound qualitative public administration research that blends rigor with richness and thereby facilitates effective theorization. Evidence from a narrative review of 31 qualitative studies published within six leading public administration journals demonstrates that effective theorizing is linked to transparency in research design, analytic approach, and theoretical contribution. In-depth interrogation of four studies that illustrate “inductive theorizing” and “abductive theorizing” identifies plurality in the balance struck between rigor and richness. We derive a broad set of principles that enable researchers to make a convincing “conceptual leap” between data, analysis, and contribution. We also emphasize the need to accommodate pluralistic approaches to theorizing by nuancing requirements for essential aspects of qualitative reporting, versus those amenable to variation.

Introduction

Qualitative research has made a significant contribution to theory in the field of public administration (Andrews and Esteve 2015; Riccucci 2010a), evidenced by landmark studies, such as Selznick’s research in the Tennessee Valley Authority (Selznick 1949) and recent contributions that include Watkins-Hayes’ study of race and representative bureaucracy (2011) and an analysis of institutional work from Cloutier et al. (2016). These contributions reflect the ability of qualitative research to push theoretical boundaries and generate theoretical insights (Bansal and Corley 2012). Theorizing involves making convincing inferences to explanations grounded in data, such that it is a process of abstraction by the researcher that maintains a capacity to frame understanding and interpretation for others (Cornelissen and Durand 2014; Welch et al. 2011). Historically, public administration scholars have
undertaken significant efforts to boost rigor in qualitative research (see Brower, Abolafia, and Carr 2000; Feldman et al. 2004; Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018, for examples), but have devoted much less attention to theorizing. This is a concern given evidence from management and organization studies that indicates addressing rigor in qualitative inquiry may privilege a focus on methods—fashioned in the image of quantitative research—that serves to undermine pluralism in qualitative theorizing (Cornelissen 2017; Delbridge and Fiss 2013; Langley 1999).

In light of these critiques, in this study, we contribute to the longstanding debate on qualitative research in public administration by emphasizing the importance of blending rigor with richness. In doing so, we illustrate plurality in the process of effective theorizing. Our analysis is premised on results from a two-stage investigation focused on the subfield of network and collaborative governance. The first stage entailed a systematic narrative review of 31 qualitative studies published within six leading public administration journals (Andrews and Esteve 2015). The second stage involved the development of a detailed narrative account of four case study articles—Bate (2000), Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013), Ferlie and McGivern (2014), Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011)—and illustrates depth and variety in the application of two common theorizing methods: “inductive theorizing” and “abductive theorizing.”

Our analysis suggests the need for transparency, consistency and connection in three component elements that underpin theorizing from qualitative research: research design, analytic approach, and theoretical contribution (Albert et al. 2008). In addition, we highlight and emphasize reporting elements that are essential for high quality theorizing, along with those that may vary. As such, the study facilitates rigorous theorizing by supporting qualitative researchers to make a convincing “conceptual leap” between data, analysis, and contribution—regardless of whether they are using a deductive, inductive, or abductive approach—while recognizing and accommodating plurality in terms of the balance between richness and rigor (Bansal and Corley 2012).

The article is structured as follows. First, we review studies of qualitative research in public administration and focus attention on the process and practice of theorizing through qualitative scholarship. Next, we present detail on our methodological approach and research design, before the review and analysis of our empirical evidence. The manuscript concludes by detailing an over-arching framework that comprises a broad set of principles designed to support better qualitative reporting, in a manner that blends rigorous research design with the richness of the qualitative approach, and underpins theorization.

Theorizing in Qualitative Research in Public Administration

In the field of public administration, most commentators have focused on the ways that qualitative scholars can enhance their research reporting (Jensen and Rodgers 2001; Perry and Kraemer 1986). Many criticize the derivation of qualitative accounts as opaque (Brower, Abolafia, and Carr 2000; Justice 2007; Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018) and cite the need to make “choices explicit, consistent, and transparent throughout the research process” (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005, 297). Calls for transparency relate to research design, to the transition from data collection to analysis, and to how the data underpin the claimed contribution (Brower, Abolafia, and Carr 2000; Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018). Yet agreement on standard assessment criteria has proved challenging, due to the plurality of qualitative approaches. Qualitative studies can span rich single case ethnography, through to comparative cases and large data sets premised on a range of data gathering techniques, such as interviews, direct and participant observations, and document collation and review. This results in multiple forms of qualitative data including direct quotes, textual notes, and documentary excerpts.

Although quantitative studies also display methodological diversity, the underpinning philosophical differences evident across qualitative methods make it difficult to apply a generic template to assess rigor (Haverland and Yanow 2012; Jensen and Rodgers 2001), especially when standard tests of validity and reliability do not easily apply to qualitative approaches (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005; Ospina 2011; White 1986). Thus authors raise the concern that judgements of qualitative research are often “based on a problematic definition of quality and misguided criteria” (Jensen and Rodgers 2001, 235), with scholars either embracing this version of rigor in ways that reduce the plurality of qualitative research (Delbridge and Fiss 2013), or rejecting the concept in ways that undermine its legitimacy (Harley 2016). This suggests there is a need to achieve a better balance between rigor and richness and develop broad principles to underpin theorizing in qualitative research that accommodate plurality in approach (McCurdy and Cleary 1984; Stout 2013; White 1986).

Theorizing involves making convincing inferences to explanations grounded in data, and is commonly premised on deduction, induction, or abduction. Deduction involves inference about a particular empirical instance, based on the general case (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013). Deductive approaches start with the generation of expectations from theory. These are interrogated (tested) in research data, with the theory potentially modified as a consequence of empirical findings (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).
However, despite their value in predicting, confirming, and disconfirming expectations, deductive approaches are poor at ruling out alternative explanations (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013). This reduces the likelihood of purely deductive qualitative studies. In contrast, induction involves inference to generalization based on the observation of specific instances (Glaser 1998; Eisenhardt 1989; Mantere and Ketokivi 2013). Researchers familiarize themselves with empirical observations and aggregate through comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). Thus, inductive approaches are grounded in data and initially premised on abstraction independent of theoretical preconceptions.

However, recent studies have flagged concern that purely inductive empirically derived insights serve to underplay the importance of pre-existing theory (Reichertz 2010). As a result, abduction is receiving increasing attention. Abduction stems from a puzzle, whereby there is an absence of an existing or sufficient theoretical explanation for data, causing the search for a new explanation. As a result, abduction implies a wider and more extended engagement with extant theories than induction (end-stage) and deduction (outset) and is increasingly associated with the development of “new” hypotheses (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013; Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Puzzles prompt exploratory inference, and subsequent development of the best-fitting explanations, thereby combining deduction and induction to produce theoretical and empirical insights (Klag and Langley 2013; Mantere and Ketokivi 2013; Reichertz 2010). This reflects potential for data and theory to augment each other, such that theory enables the researcher to see things in the data that might otherwise be taken for granted and shape new theoretical propositions that, in turn, empirical observations help to evaluate (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

To summarize, we note that deductive approaches start from extant theoretical understandings, inductive approaches start with an empirical orientation, and abductive approaches often utilize a combination of deductive and inductive aspects in grappling with puzzles. Despite these differences, deduction, induction, and abduction each can enable and support the generation of the conceptual leaps that underpin theorizing—although their trajectories will likely differ.

The process of theorizing can be employed to produce different types of theoretical contribution that include theory generation (also known as building), theory elaboration, or theory testing (Cornelissen and Durand 2014; Lee, Mitchell, and Sablynski 1999; Ricucci 2010b). Deduction is commonly used to test theory, while induction and abduction can be used to elaborate or generate theory. Regardless of approach, Peirce (1931–1935, vol. I, p. X) identifies “finding” and “checking” as distinct and essential components of the theorizing process. So processes of methodological decision making, and the way these are explained, reported, and supported are essential for effective theorizing. Indeed “method is not the enemy of creative theorization, but its closest ally” (Tavory and Timmermans 2014, 51). How authors convey their data is an important part of this process as “data never stand on their own” (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1997, 57), but both look back to the research situation, and forward to theoretical resolutions.

Theorizing, to occur when authors both show their data, and tell their significance (Golden-Biddle and Locke 1997). In qualitative scholarship and in a practical sense, “showing” tends to involve providing direct quotes or document extracts in the text or tables, while telling is heavier on author interpretation and often presented in the form of a narrative or description that highlights salient characteristics and theoretically significant aspects. Decisions on data analysis and presentation in the form of “showing” and “telling” are critical in underpinnig the “conceptual leap” between research data and theoretical contribution—a pivotal moment in theorizing that is not without challenge, in terms of making sense of the data and finding ways to articulate this in theoretical terms (Gehman et al. 2018; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013; Klag and Langley 2013).

Finally, in considering theorization in public administration, it is important to reflect on concerns that theorizing from qualitative data has been colonized by modes more typically the preserve of quantitative methods (Cornelissen 2017; Cornelissen and Durand 2014; Delbridge and Fiss 2013; Llewelyn 2003). This is argued to be evident both in how qualitative research is reported, and also in a trend toward translating qualitative data into transferable explanatory factors (Bluhm et al. 2011). Although this shift has enhanced methodological rigor, there are some inherent trade-offs including a loss of plurality in the field, and potential reduction in explanatory richness both empirically and theoretically (Cornelissen 2017). This prompts the question: “What, then, might allow us to develop more diverse but robust and persuasive theorizing in the future?” (Delbridge and Fiss 2013, 330).

In summary, commentaries on qualitative research highlight a variety of approaches to theorizing. However, they also note a dilemma in terms of strengthening rigor while maintaining the richness of qualitative data. This suggests a need to identify appropriate criteria to underpin theorizing in public administration (McCurdy and Cleary 1984; Stout 2013; White 1986). We consider next how scholars have addressed these challenges in a specific field of public administration—network and collaborative governance.
Research Design and Analytic Approach

A Focus on Network and Collaborative Governance

Previous studies of qualitative research in public administration have been designed to provide systematic and comprehensive overviews of research practices across the discipline (see Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018, for a recent example). In contrast, this manuscript aims to facilitate rigorous theorizing through qualitative research focused on a discrete area of public administration—network and collaborative governance. We select this subdiscipline because the relatively recent shift from hierarchy to collaborative forms of governance has posed a series of novel theoretical puzzles for public administration researchers (O’Toole 1997, 2015). Although qualitative and quantitative scholars have responded to this challenge in relatively even measure, it is argued that qualitative research is able to make a particularly significant contribution because it is especially able to advance the field in areas of new and limited research through addressing alternative questions (e.g., Watkins-Hayes 2011). These include shedding light on what works, where, and why and “generating new hypotheses by examining how complex causal pathways actually occur” (Moynihan 2012, 574; O’Toole 1997; Rhodes and William 1996).

Research in this subfield of public administration tends to focus on configurations, such as service-based networks, public–private partnerships and strategic alliances, predicated on the basis that hierarchies and markets insufficiently address persistent policy problems (Entwistle 2010; McGuire 2006). Exploration of a range of issues is evident, including: the internal dynamics of collaboration and the “unique” strategies and skills of collaborative management (Agranoff 2006; Campbell 2012; McGuire 2006; Meier and O’Toole 2001; O’Leary and Vij 2012); collaborative leadership (Waugh and Streib 2006); and the behavioral dimensions and experiences of collaboration (Purdy 2012; Reynaers 2014). However, our core interest is the theorizing process through qualitative research leading to the production of these insights, rather than network and collaborative governance per se. In the following section of this article, we elaborate on the selection criteria used to identify our study sample.

Selecting and Evaluating Qualitative Studies on Networks and Collaborative Governance

This section outlines further detail on our research design, reports on data collection decisions and explains the analytic approach underpinning our study. In essential terms, data collection entailed the identification of a set of qualitative journal articles relating to network and collaborative governance for further analysis and discussion. This involved a team of three researchers working through four key stages that are described below, and illustrated in figure 1.

![Figure 1. Research Design and Analytic Approach](https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article-lookup/29/2/318/5126547)
Stage 1: Review
Consistent with the argument that “a review of qualitative research is best served by reliance upon qualitative methods themselves” (Jones 2004, 95), the research team engaged in a systematic narrative review (Greenhalgh et al. 2004; Powell, Rushmer, and Davies 2009; Powell and Davies 2016). The narrative review approach is designed to provide an interpretive, holistic, and nuanced interpretation of qualitative research (Jones 2004, 96). The review focused on six leading international journals—Governance, International Public Management Journal, Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Public Administration, Public Administration Review, and Public Management Review—selected on the basis that they are the source of world-leading public management scholarship, as indicated in prior research (Andrews and Esteve 2015; Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018). Articles published within the period 2000–17 were considered, to capture research prompted by the development of “joined-up” organizations and collaborative structures, consistent with a shift toward the “new public service” (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000).

Studies were identified by using the search terms “network governance” and “collaborative governance.” Admittedly, these topics are relatively wide-ranging, so it is important to be specific about what types of studies were included under these headings. To provide a focus for the review, qualitative articles that shed light on the organization, management, and performance of public sector networks were selected for inclusion. However, studies such as those on the role of political actors (e.g., the EU) or the development of policy networks were not included (e.g., Damgaard 2006; Le Gales 2001). Nor were those focused on governance more broadly (e.g., Behagel and Arts 2014). Articles were also excluded on methodological grounds. For example, the study of a collaborative natural disaster system by Wang and Yin (2013) adopts a mixed-methods rather than a purely qualitative approach, and so was omitted. Studies were also excluded if they failed to present empirical qualitative research, or provided reflections on network governance derived from wider qualitative datasets or case studies but did not explicate detail about research design and primary data gathering (e.g., Leach 2006; Purdy 2012; Weber and Khademian 2008). This stage of the analysis resulted in the initial selection of a sample of 43 journal articles.

Stage 2: Refinement
The review team conducted a more detailed analysis of the 43 qualitative articles within the sample. Twelve further articles were excluded at this stage on the basis of their focus, for example, where networks or collaborations were a feature but not a central element of the article’s theoretical contribution. Or when under closer inspection the article did not address issues pertaining to the organization, management, and performance of networks. For example, Gains’ (2009) study of local governance networks in the United Kingdom highlights on the shifting context for local government elites, rather than the organization, management, and performance of the network itself. A sample of 31 articles remained after refinement.

Stage 3: Analysis
In stage 3, the review team began the process of analysis, that involved open and inclusive discussion of the 31 articles. This technique marked the first stage of a process that applied a series of thematic criteria to underpin analysis. Here, these included: theoretical perspective (fields covered within the literature review); qualitative method (case study, interview, observation, documentary analysis); analytic approach (detail of thematic analysis and/or coding procedures employed to support the shift from data to claims); presentation of evidence (whether data is “told” in the form of a research narrative, and/or “shown” in quotation or table format); and key contribution to theory. With respect to analytic approach, we anticipated that this would vary depending upon the type of theorizing in play. As previously noted, inductive approaches start with an empirical orientation, deductive approaches start from extant theoretical understandings, and abductive approaches utilize both. In some cases data may be coded, while in others they may be analyzed in broad thematic terms and even though these trajectories will differ, all three approaches should facilitate the generation of the conceptual leaps that underpin theorizing. The emphasis on analytic approach in this study is designed to capture how theory informed the analysis, whether the study was inductive, deductive, or abductive, and how data were analyzed by the researcher.

However, it should be noted it was not possible to discern this information for all cases due to a level of ambiguity within many studies. Consequently, we have sought to provide a summary interpretation of the analytic approach adopted in each case. Further, we note that our sample did not include any examples of purely deductive research. Iterating between the studies and the criteria set, the team then proceeded to agree a summary of each article.

Stage 4: Identifying Illustrative Cases
The 31 studies were then subject to a further stage of narrative review by the research team. This process involved the identification of a subset of four studies that were selected as they provide neat illustrations of the variation in approaches to theorizing through qualitative
research. The studies are Bate (2000), Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013), Ferlie and McGivern (2014), Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011) (for reference these are marked * in the first column of Supplementary Table 1). The first two studies each adopt an inductive approach but execute this in quite different ways. Bate (2000) provides an example of thick description based on ethnography, while the article by Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013) is indicative of interpretive or thematic analyses that have been identified as underrepresented in leading management journals (Cornelissen 2017). The latter two studies engage in different forms of abductive theorizing, combining deduction and induction. Ferlie and McGivern (2014) is noteworthy for its strong upfront utilization of theory and Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011) provide a particularly comprehensive overview of their analytic approach. Discussion of these cases facilitated the opportunity to develop a broad set of principles to support theorizing in qualitative public administration research. These are presented and reviewed in detail in the closing sections of this article.

Having discussed the research design and analytic approach, we employed in the context of this study, the following section of the article reports on the research findings that emerged from the narrative review. It begins by providing a summary characterization and analysis of the full set of qualitative studies.

Empirical Evidence

Summary of Qualitative Research on Network and Collaborative Governance

Detailed analysis of the full set of studies (which is reported in full in Supplementary Table 1) indicates that scholars are addressing significant and important theoretical questions on network and collaborative governance through qualitative research. However, the reporting of information on qualitative methods and data collection among these studies is variable and somewhat ad hoc. Some authors afford particular attention to the sampling rationale, when for other studies this could be more systematically addressed. Similarly, on occasions data gathering is extensively detailed, while elsewhere it is pithily described and, in a minority of articles, only briefly mentioned. Beyond an often broad characterization of analytic approach, there is sometimes a lack of specification of processes underpinning the review, incorporation, and presentation of data. Authors vary in their description of the derivation of themes and codes, and differ in the detail provided regarding the link between data and conceptual claims. Few studies discuss these in detail and those that do, tend to demonstrate abductive theorizing (seldom labeled as such) that combines elements of inductive and deductive approaches.

It is interesting to observe that few articles explicitly identify with, and conform to, a pure grounded theory approach, despite the common perception that most qualitative research adopts this perspective (Suddaby 2006; Tummers and Karsten 2012). In terms of the presentation of data and empirical findings, many of the articles rely more on “telling” rather than “showing” their data, but it is important to emphasize that qualitative scholars often face a pragmatic challenge in balancing “showing” data with providing a coherent narrative within a limited word count. Sometimes these “trade-offs” are discussed explicitly in concluding sections, along with reflections on the generalizability of the research—for example, Moynihan (2009) identifies that the loss of rich data is associated with his decision to analyze multiple cases. However, in most cases, these choices remain implicit, along with reflections on the wider applicability, implications, and generalizability of findings.

Our overview of the set of 31 qualitative studies on network and collaborative governance provides some support for claims that qualitative studies are developing greater theoretical ambition and sophistication in the specification of their contributions (e.g., Saz-Carranza, Iborra, and Albareda 2016; Walker et al. 2013). However, our findings resonate with others in identifying that all too often aspects of the qualitative research process remain opaque (Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018). This potentially undermines the value of qualitative research and places limitations on the quality of theorizing, especially when there is an inadequate account of the steps taken between data collection, analysis, argument and conclusions.

On the basis of this review, we propose that theorizing in qualitative public administration is likely to be most effective when authors provide transparent accounts for, and outline the connections between, their research design, analytic approach, and theoretical contribution. To further unpack these elements and elaborate examples of the theorizing process, we now move to discuss four illustrative studies derived from the wider set.

Case Studies of Theorizing in Qualitative Research on Network and Collaborative Governance

To demonstrate alternative approaches to theorizing from qualitative research in public administration, we select four contrasting studies to illustrate two common theorizing methods: “inductive theorizing” and “abductive theorizing.” These studies helpfully illuminate pluralist approaches to theorizing through qualitative research, although it should be noted from the outset that the studies highlight the practical challenges of reporting qualitative research and, as such,
they do not fully meet the guiding principles proposed in the concluding section of the article.

Inductive Theorizing
The first of the two studies that exhibit inductive theorizing is Bate (2000). Bate’s study is focused upon implementation problems associated with networked governance and is especially inductive in approach, even for qualitative studies. Eschewing a detailed literature review, the research problem is set out as one of cultural fragmentation that stymies attempts at networked governance. Bate reports on a method that blends action research with ethnography (“action ethnography”) and the reader is promised a dynamic account of change underpinned by an emergent interview schedule, consistent with an inductive approach. Indeed, very soon into the article, Bate launches into rich and contextualized description and manages to organize the data in a coherent manner to capture the chaotic nature of organizational life, without drawing upon themes derived from literature. In the process he avoids a common pitfall of qualitative research, where scholars represent the “messiness” of the “real world” but often render a complex research account that inhibits a strong storyline. A number of implicit analytic strategies are evident in Bate’s presentation of findings. The article temporally brackets the process of change, providing a clear sequencing that assists the reader, while also ordering data to demonstrate organizational problems, early impressions, subsequent diagnosis, and solution (Langley 1999; Langley et al. 2013). In this sense, he describes a networked governance process that is ongoing, rather than linear, and one with no end point yet visible. Further, he is careful to avoid a “glossy” story about managerial success, describing the subsequent change as “homegrown” and bottom up.

The persuasiveness of Bate’s account, and underlying theorizing, derives from the transparency he provides within his detailed explication of his research design (see the excerpt provided in figure 2 as an example). The author’s immersion in the empirical setting is evident. He reports that he carried out 150 visits (500 days) over a 2-year period, with myriad opportunities for observation, as well as a large number of interviews (approximately 100). Given his embeddedness within the organizational setting, there are a larger number of direct interview quotes and observations than would be usual, even within qualitative studies. The overall effect of this is one of vicarious engagement with the research site as the reader feels they are transported into the organization in a way that proves particularly engaging. The ethnographic approach prompts an account that incorporates pluralist emotions, interests, and politics that underpin complexity of organizational cultures, with a strong sense of respondents’ voices, as evident in the quote below (taken from Bate 2000, 492).

So you’ve got this incredible situation where the doctors won’t cooperate because they’re terrified of losing power; you’ve got managers who can’t make a decision because they’re afraid if they do, there will be a vote of no confidence and they lose their job. And you’ve got the nurses who are,

![Diagram of the 'Action Research' Approach](https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article/29/2/318/5126547)

**Figure 2.** Extract from “Implementing Change: The ‘Action Research’ Approach” (Bate 2000, 487)
as usual, trying to keep the thing going. (Senior Nurse)

Bate’s approach to analysis is discussed only in general terms and there is an absence of detail on data coding. However, the volume of primary data helps to convince the reader of a body of evidence supporting a “conceptual leap.” A wide range of voices are represented, mitigating the prospect that quotations have been “cherry-picked” to illuminate a predetermined storyline. Finally, given the inductive, emergent and co-created nature of the research process, it is refreshing to read Bate’s critical reflection on his own position within the research study and reassuring to be informed of the robust steps he has taken between research questions, data, analysis, and theory (Bate 2000, 488).

Neutrality and even-handedness were central to this process. We were positioned in the space between management and workforce, strenuously avoiding being seen as management-centric (the traditional bias of organization development) and worker-centric … mediating between the different interests and perspectives …

Our second example of inductive theorizing comes from Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013), a study that differs significantly from Bate as a theoretical gap and rationale is evident from the outset. Focused on neglected “downstream issues” that play out at the intra-organizational level, the authors aim to unpack the “black box” of network governance to develop a better understanding of management practice. The strength of theorizing observed within Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013) lies partly in an inductive approach applied to understand and explain the impact of partnership configuration on local implementation. This allows the authors to challenge dominant perceptions of network governance effects and, as a result, specify and present a theoretical model in figure form (figure 3; Waring, Currie, and Bishop 2013, 324). The figure emphasizes the explicit links between empirical findings and key conceptual relationships, thereby outlining the “conceptual leap” by underscoring both the rigor of the underpinning study and the theorizing processes at work.

Similar to Bate (2000), Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013) adopt an inductive approach to this research, that involves “an iterative process of close reading of the data, coding, constant comparison, elaboration of emerging themes and re-engagement with the wider literature” (317). However, Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013) boost explication of theorizing significantly by detailing the research process through eight paragraphs of text and a supporting figure summarizing

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**Figure 3.** Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013, 324) Model of Empirical Findings and Conceptual Relationships
coding and thematic analysis (see extract in figure 4). To deliver transparency in research design and facilitate theoretical generalization, they provide background on their comparative cases to situate their analysis and elaborate on their sampling strategy. To reduce ambiguity in their analysis, they demonstrate how they developed and tested three levels of codes, including first-order concepts, adhering to respondents’ terms; second-order themes, subsuming first-order codes; and third-order aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). These stages are especially significant as they inform the oppositional dimensions that subsequently capture differences between their cases and underpin the “conceptual leap” in providing the basis for theory elaboration.

Finally, Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013) reinforce theorizing through a transparent attempt to connect analysis, the presentation of their data and theoretical contribution—bringing both evidence of the research process, and credibility to the account. In so doing, supporting extracts from illustrative examples of coded data are provided in tables, while narrative reporting incorporates illustrative quotes. Note, Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013) are unusual in actively reporting on a full range of data, including that derived from policy documents and clinical operating procedures (see figure 5, for examples).

Abductive Theorizing

The theoretical contributions in our next pair of studies are underpinned by an abductive approach that combines deductive and inductive theorizing techniques. In the first study, provided by Ferlie and McGivern (2014), theoretical concerns are again apparent from the outset. Labeled as iterative, but displaying abductive characteristics, Ferlie and McGivern (2014) puzzle on the long-term shift to indirect governance. They identify extant accounts as incomplete, and aim to enrich theorization. In the light of this, they incorporate a theoretical perspective from the social sciences previously unapplied to a public service context—Foucault’s theory.
of governmentality\textsuperscript{1}—and in so doing they use the presumptive and conjectural premise of abduction (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013). Development of an interview proforma deductively informed by governmentality and competing theoretical perspectives enables empirical interrogation in pursuit of their theoretical objectives. On this basis, Ferlie and McGivern examine the role of the neo-liberal health care state in the United Kingdom and conclude that the introduction of “managed” networks prompted a degree of enthusiasm for evidence-based management amongst practitioners within case study organizations. They note that their conjecture is upheld, with their proffered approach providing the “best-fitting” set of explanations.

Theorizing is strengthened in this study by an unambiguous set of research questions and a highly transparent account of theoretical implications in the discussion section of the article. Here, a series of contributions is clearly articulated and given further emphasis through the provision of a helpful table (see excerpt provided in table 1) that elaborates five aspects of “added value” from an Anglo-governmentality perspective, vis-à-vis the network governance paradigm. The table summarizes the authors’ contention that Anglo-governmentality extends knowledge in public administration, while two additional novel contributions premised on their empirical analysis are also presented.


dt\textsuperscript{1} As cited in Ferlie and McGivern (2014), Foucault (2007, 108) defines governmentality as “the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics . . . that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge and apparatuses of security as its essential technical element.”

Although Ferlie and McGivern provide a helpful and clear account of their theoretical contribution, we argue that theorizing also requires a high degree of transparency in research design and analytic approach. In this regard, in the discussion of their methodology, the authors make an explicit and weighty case for the adoption of a qualitative case study approach to their analysis and spend some time considering how case study research can “move beyond surface level descriptions” (Ferlie and McGivern 2014, 67). Their ability to provide theoretical generalization is delivered through a comparative case approach, combined with explicit connection with theory to boost external validity. Ideally, the rationale for the research setting and sample could be better explained and connected to subsequent methodological choices. And while their theoretical framework and contribution is elaborated in some detail, little information is given on coding procedures and analytic steps for the two case studies. In particular, the inductive aspects of their analysis are not explicated.

So while Ferlie and McGivern (2014) provide a high degree of transparency in their application of a Foucauldian theoretical perspective to enrich traditional theoretical conceptualizations of governance, and deliver helpful clarity on their research design, some steps taken within their analysis remain opaque. This serves to marginally undermine clarity in their theorizing and somewhat obscures their conceptual leap. Nevertheless, a significant amount of primary data from both cases is reported which allows the reader to engage with the context and gain insight into the effects experienced by those working within the network. Last, the authors do recognize compromises in the presentation of qualitative research, noting, “there

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<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Network Governance Paradigm</th>
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<td>New sciences that claim to manage deviant subjectivities “rationally”; the learned professions and the State as ensemble</td>
<td>The “psy sciences” such as psychology; evidence-based medicine’s technical apparatus</td>
<td>Radically distinct: professions are just one of many legitimate stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invasion of the world of public services professionals by external, pervasive yet mundane control technologies: financially based “grey sciences”; “accountization”</td>
<td>Audit; financial and budgeting controls; performance measurement systems</td>
<td>Radically distinct: Evidence-based policy as a “postideological” shift in politics; Little interest in or critique of “techniques of inscription”</td>
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Note: Extract is two of seven rows from the full original table.
is a trade-off between thick description (internal validity) and conceptualization (external validity)” (Ferlie and McGivern 2014, 67).

Our second study characterized by an abductive theorizing approach comes from Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011). This article unpacks the behavioral dimensions of network governance by examining how network members govern and improve the performance of the “whole” network, while also exploiting collaborative benefits for their home organizations. The authors shed light on the “unity–diversity tension,” identified as a key disruptor of network performance in goal-directed networks and inherent within “whole” systems of network and collaborative governance (Milward and Provan 2006). However, beyond an empirical contribution focused on the behavioral dimensions of network governance, theorizing is explicit and convincing from the outset. In outlining their theoretical contribution, Saz-Carranza and Ospina explain that their research illuminates “the hows and whys of network governance” (Saz Carranza and Ospina 2011, 359) and present their claims in bold terms. This is striking considering that claims in qualitative articles tend to be more tentatively written, with caveats regarding the transferability of findings. This certainty stems from a transparent and convincing “conceptual leap,” explanation and evidence that is presented along the way. However, Saz-Carranza and Ospina are a little more circumspect when presenting their claims in bold terms. This shift from proposition to suggestion serves to further distinguish between the theory-building and theory-elaborating contributions and builds to their conclusion. Indeed, the article conveys a degree of specificity in the transparency of research design, analytic approach, and theoretical contribution—and the connection between the three—that is, rarely seen within qualitative research.

Theorizing in this study is especially convincing due to the clarity and consistency of detail offered in the documentation of research design and analytic approach. The authors present a rationale for the adoption of a qualitative approach, while also detailing their sampling frame, both in the text and in tabulated form. Running for almost seven pages, the qualitative methods section is one of the most transparent and informative published in public administration. However, we observe that the article runs to nearly 40 pages, emphasizing the trade-off between length and depth in qualitative research and demonstrating the importance of editorial discretion. Greater flexibility in this regard, as well as alternative strategies—such as enabling the placement of methodological material in online appendices—may help to facilitate the publication of qualitative research that provides rigor and richness.

Of particular note in this study is the established connection between the analytic approach underpinning the two phases of study and the subsequent theoretical contribution. Ospina et al. describe the open-ended, inductive, and exploratory first phase of the study, designed to “theory-build” through narrative inquiry, and distinguish this from the second phase of their study where an abductive approach provided “theory elaboration.” Coding processes applied to data in both phases of the research are explained through three paragraphs of text, but also in a tabulated form (see extract provided in table 2). Interview data is privileged, relative to the analysis of observation and documentary data, but the explicit and thorough analytic account facilitates a transparent and convincing basis for theorizing and stands in contrast to the fleeting references sometimes found within qualitative studies. Finally, evidence from each of the cases is “shown” using six tables of illustrative quotes (see extract in table 3), supplemented by a discussion that “tells” a nuanced account of the experience of managing network dilemmas, with selective quotations that lend credibility to theorizing.

Having summarized a set of qualitative studies on network and collaborative governance and illustrated alternative theorizing approaches, we next discuss

### Table 2. Extract Illustrating Links between Codes across Phases of the Research (Saz-Carranza and Ospina 2011, 337)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Route from Initial Codes to Reported Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Codes—Study 1</strong> (Emergent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Extract is 3 of 15 rows from the full original table.*
Table 3. Extract Illustrating Tensions Relative to Diversity and Unity in Networks from Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011, 347)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unity: Shared goal</th>
<th>Midwest Network</th>
<th>National Network</th>
<th>National Network</th>
<th>East Network</th>
<th>West Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’ve always [focused on] what are their most urgent needs that they have in common? So when I came on board I was really fortunate in the fact they had some really obvious common needs.</td>
<td>When [you] have the right issues because of the level of energy and the sort of realism that [the members] have … they’re all there … pushing for it … [people] from a lot of communities are coming together.</td>
<td>Ultimately there’s a really strong focus that unites us all in focusing on worker development.</td>
<td>We are united because we all advocate for immigrant rights … we all work with immigrants.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Extract is one of eight rows from the full original table.

the implications arising from our review and present a framework that facilitates rigorous theorizing from qualitative research in public administration.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study presents evidence derived from a two-stage investigation of theorizing in qualitative public administration research, focused on a subset of studies in the field of network and collaborative governance. In line with Tavory and Timmermans (2014, 7) who reflect, “whatever the theoretical resources the researchers draw upon, one of the seductions of qualitative research is the sense of intellectual adventure,” our analysis of 31 articles underlines the potential “value added” derived from qualitative research. The review indicates that distinctive sets of research questions had been addressed, including those with an exploratory and explanatory orientation drawn from a range of theoretical perspectives.

However, the systematic review also illustrates wide differences in the accounts of qualitative research provided across the set of studies. This suggests the need for a set of broad guiding principles to aid authors and reviewers in providing and prompting greater transparency in accounts of the qualitative research process. In response, in Table 4, we draw together and summarize these principles relative to three key component elements of the research process: research design, analytic approach, and contribution. Research design is fundamentally concerned with how authors report on how their research has been conducted. Analytic approach focuses on how authors move from an account of their data collection to offer interpretation and a series of claims. Finally, contribution involves the way authors articulate and highlight the impact of their theorizing, in terms of whether it enables them to test, elaborate, or generate theory. Our evidence indicates that theoretical claims are more convincing when studies demonstrate sufficient levels of transparency both in their approach to, and representation of, each of these three elements of the research process.

Nonetheless, we are mindful of previously noted concern regarding the unintended consequences of formulaic and standardized quality criteria. Reflecting this, our review of four illustrative studies also suggests the need for some further nuance. For example, while Bate (2000) and Saz Carranza and Ospina (2011) both provide transparent accounts of research design, they adopt highly differentiated approaches to describing their process of analysis. Specifically, Bate (2000) describes analysis of his action-ethnography in broad procedural terms, noting use of a temporal bracketing strategy, for example. He provides rich description and substantial supporting data without detailed elaboration of the derivation of inductive themes. In contrast, for their comparative case analysis, Saz Carranza and Ospina (2011) focus on explicating coding, detailing specific steps, and providing examples. Both, in different ways, provide convincing support for their theoretical claims.

Consequently, a “non-negotiable” element of qualitative research is a comprehensive account of research design, linked explicitly to a study’s research objectives, within the methods section of an article (Ospina, Esteve, and Lee 2018). Theorizing will be less effective in studies that are deficient in these terms. In contrast, it seems there is likely to be greater variation in the reporting of the analytic approach. Although authors should be transparent, we should expect and accommodate plurality in forms of data analysis, coding, and reporting. So, while we are clear that high levels of transparency in all elements of the research process boost theorizing, our guiding principles are reflective of the absence of a set template and standard for explicating analytic approach. As such, they signal that we should be open to diversity in approach to, and the format of, reporting.
Given the plurality of forms of qualitative data and approaches, as well as differentiation in the forms of theorizing undertaken, the guiding principles (and those relating to analysis, in particular) need to be viewed in the round. All of which is consistent with previous research that suggests there is no “one best way” of undertaking and publishing qualitative research (Haverland and Yanow 2012; Jensen and Rodgers 2001). However, we do suggest common tenets of good practice and in particular highlight that the link between research design, analytic approach, and theoretical contribution should be made transparent as this is the “golden thread” that supports effective theorizing. The conceptual leap underpinning a theoretical contribution is certainly more substantial and convincing when these elements are expertly and explicitly connected. Consequently, we emphasize and encourage a holistic approach to transparency, both in terms of the provision of detail on each element of the research process and in terms of the connection between research design, analytic approach, and theoretical contribution.

Extant literature highlights that theorizing can contribute in a variety of ways—by testing, elaborating, or generating theory, premised on deductive, inductive, or abductive analysis. In this study, we observe diversity in approaches to theorizing that are inductive and abductive. Our case study analysis portrays different ways that “conceptual leaps” can be made and articulated, with evidence that theorizing is being underpinned by different levels, dimensions, and combinations of rigor and richness. For example, Bate (2000) convinces through a synthesis of rich thick description of data, with rigor derived from a highly transparent account of the research design and underpinning rationale. In contrast, Waring, Currie, and Bishop (2013) provide a

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**Table 4. Procedural Assessment Criteria to Underpin Theorizing in Qualitative Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D: Design (Why the Authors Conducted the Research in the Way They Did)</th>
<th>A: Analysis (How Authors Move from Data to Claims)</th>
<th>C: Contribution (So What—the Substance of the Author Contribution)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why they adopted a qualitative approach?</td>
<td>How are theoretical and conceptual frameworks employed in the analysis of the data?</td>
<td>What is the empirical contribution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did they choose certain qualitative methods in particular for this topic?</td>
<td>How has theory informed the analysis?</td>
<td>Does the setting produce novel insights?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why this setting and sample (case studies and/or participants)?</td>
<td>How was the analysis/coding process operationalized?</td>
<td>What does the qualitative evidence add to prior findings (including quantitative)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the context speak to the research questions?</td>
<td>How are data presented relative to the analysis/coding framework outlined in the methods section?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why was this sample selected?</td>
<td>How is analysis/coding evidenced and illustrated?</td>
<td>What type of theoretical contribution do the authors convey?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the approach for identifying organizations, interviewees or focus group participants?</td>
<td>How was supporting data presented?</td>
<td>Do they claim to build theory?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the role of the researcher?</td>
<td>Is it clear how the full range of data are utilized?</td>
<td>Do they elaborate theory?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did they collect these data?</td>
<td>Why this setting and sample (case studies and/or participants)?</td>
<td>Do they test theory?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which topics are informing interview questions?</td>
<td>How are the data “told” in order to create a convincing narrative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the balance of data sources collected vs. those reported in the article?</td>
<td>Does the narrative rely on description or author interpretation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did they adopt a particular coding approach?</td>
<td>Do the authors use qualitative data to develop thick description or selective illustrative examples?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What informed this decision?</td>
<td>How are the data shown in order to demonstrate credibility of account?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is sufficient data provided to support claims?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How are data presented—quotations, tables?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is alignment or tension between data sources reported?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can the findings be generalized and on what basis?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do authors reflect on the wider relevance of their findings, e.g., given the focus on particular participants and organizations?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do they consider how their research might be applied to alternative contexts?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
rich range of data sources and are highly transparent regarding their analytic approach, delivering rigor in the derivation of their claims. Ferlie and McGivern (2014) demonstrate richness in a convincing application of a novel theoretical perspective to their data, and rigor in transparent mapping of the derivation of their theoretical contribution. However, of the four considered studies, Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011) satisfies the widest range of criteria as rigor and richness are evidenced in a detailed, persuasive, and reflexive research account that underpins a clear and convincing theoretical contribution. As such, this study best meets requirements specified by Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997, 65) who argue that theorizing occurs when authors both show their data, and tell their significance.

Our findings indicate that convincing qualitative studies provide different, but sufficient, combinations of rigor and richness. So, contrary to common assertions that there is an oppositional relationship between the two, and an inherent trade-off in their pursuit, we suggest that there is clear potential for both rigor and richness to be attained in qualitative research. Indeed, we would argue that effective theorizing in qualitative research should reflect a complementary synergy between the two. Further, our case studies illustrate that rigor, richness, and their combinations come in a variety of forms. In response, and in the face of concerns raised about the quantitative restyling of qualitative research, we highlight and indeed support and encourage the continuation of plural forms of theorizing through qualitative scholarship, while mindful of the need to fulfill the good practice transparency requirements highlighted earlier.

The study suffers from a series of limitations. For example, our narrative review is focused upon a specific topic within public administration—network governance—and analysis of a different field could potentially yield an alternative set of findings. The field is young relative to other comparators in public administration, and has been at the forefront of recent demands for policy and practice insight. These factors likely influence the kinds of research questions being addressed and types of theorizing in evidence in this subdiscipline. Future research that systematically reviews qualitative study in other subfields of public administration might reveal more or less plurality in theorizing. In addition, we note that our study is premised on review of published articles. These are unlikely to capture the full detail of qualitative studies, their research design or the richness of their data. The articles have also been subject to review processes, such that the preferences of editors and referees, together with journal conventions, may have constrained plurality.

To conclude, this study was designed to extend debate by emphasizing the importance of sound qualitative research in public administration that blends rigor with richness and thereby facilitates effective theorization. We contribute to long-running discussions of qualitative scholarship in public administration and we generate evidence that suggests the need for an overarching but nuanced set of principles that address the need for consistency and connection within the research process. The proposed guiding principles serve to emphasize essential elements for high quality theorizing, along with those that may vary, given the pluralism evident within, and characteristic of, qualitative research. So we look forward to the wider application, development, and refinement of our ideas in future analyses of qualitative research in other subfields of public administration. We also note that our findings are likely to have relevance beyond qualitative research, with clear potential to speak to debates on mixed methods research (Atkins and Wilkins 2013), where the need for a convincing conceptual leap between theory and data is equally imperative. Finally, we hope that greater attention to theorizing in qualitative research in public administration may result in an improved representation of qualitative scholarship in journals in the field, leaving the discipline better positioned to capitalize upon “its ability to expose theoretical boundaries and push theoretical insights” whether these are generated on an inductive, abductive, or deductive basis (Bansal and Corley 2012, 513).

Supplementary Material
Supplementary data are available at Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory online.

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References


