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Making Knowledge Claims from Qualitative Interviews: A Typology of Epistemological Modes

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Qualitative interviewing is the most common qualitative research method in management studies. However, researchers using this method tend to use a distinct 'packages' of practices, each of which is underpinned by a distinct onto-epistemological paradigm. In this paper, we contribute to the understanding of how paradigms influence research by examining how researchers make an 'epistemological leap' from their interview data to a claim to know something about a phenomenon outside of the interview situation. Using illustrative examples from published management research, we develop a typology of five epistemological modes that differ according to *how far* researchers 'leap' and *what* they 'leap' to when making knowledge claims from interview data. We conclude by outlining the implications of our typology for those involved in conducting, teaching and evaluating qualitative interview research.

Introduction

Scholarly research is always underpinned by a 'set of received beliefs' (Kuhn, 1970, p. 4) about the nature of social reality (ontology) and how knowledge about it can be gained (epistemology), referred to as a 'paradigm'. These paradigms shape how researchers decide 'what should be studied, how research should be done, how results should be interpreted' (Bryman, 2006, p. 4). In management scholarship, these paradigms shape decisions about 'our topic, focus of study, what we see as "data", how we collect and analyse that data, how we theorize, and how we write up our research accounts' (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 651).

Researchers ostensibly using the same research method, such as qualitative interviews, will therefore conduct and write up their research using a distinct 'package' of practices that are underpinned by their onto-epistemological paradigm (e.g. Alvesson, 2003; Reissner and Whittle, 2022). Qualitative research is especially complex because there is no 'one best way' of conducting it and theorizing from it because of this diversity of paradigms (Cunliffe, 2011; Reissner and Whittle, 2022; Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2018). However, not all scholars acknowledge or value this diversity. A personal motivation behind writing this paper is our concern as social constructionist scholars about the dominance of objectivism and positivism in qualitative research in our field (see also Aguzzoli *et al.*, 2024; Hansen *et al.*, 2023; Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021).

The focus of this paper is on the epistemic practices that management researchers use to make inferences from qualitative interview data. We focus on interviewing because it is the most prevalent qualitative method in our field (Bluhm *et al.*, 2011). To clarify, this paper is not about different ways of conducting or analysing interviews; rather, it is about the practice of making knowledge claims from interview data. This practice is not straightforward because there are different approaches to making knowledge claims and no single commonly agreed set of criteria for evaluating these claims (Cornelissen, 2017; Sandberg, 2005). Hence, the purpose of this paper is three-fold: (1) to help researchers learning about qualitative interviewing to understand how and

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A free Teaching and Learning Guide to accompany this article is available at: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1467-8551/homepage/teaching___learning_guides.htm

why these modes differ, (2) to help those teaching qualitative research methods to explain these differences and (3) to help assessors (journal editors, reviewers, etc.) to make their assessments in paradigm-appropriate ways.

Inspired by Harley and Cornelissen's (2022, p. 243) use of the term 'leap' to refer to the practices of inferential reasoning used by researchers, and inspired by Ketokivi and Mantere's (2021) call for greater reflection and transparency about the warrants that researchers use to underpin their move from empirical data to claims, we propose the concept of the 'epistemological leap' to describe the *inferential reasoning practices through which researchers move from their analysed interview data to a claim to know something about a phenomenon outside of the interview situation*. Despite this epistemological leap being an important step in the theorizing process – because an empirical piece of research cannot be used to develop a theory without an accompanying claim to 'know something' about the phenomenon under investigation – surprisingly little has been written about it in the methodological literature.

Notable exceptions where scholars have discussed related issues are worth highlighting at the outset. Klag and Langley (2013) have discussed the 'conceptual leap' (p. 149) that researchers use to develop theories from their data. Schaefer and Alvesson (2020) have discussed the epistemic attitudes that researchers have towards using interview data to make theoretical claims. Ketokivi and Mantere (2021) and Mantere and Ketokivi (2013) have discussed the process of reasoning through which researchers use warrants to move from their empirical data to their theoretical claims. Finally, Harley and Cornelissen (2022, p. 239) have discussed the process through which researchers 'derive inferences from data'. We build on this existing work by focusing on an important but elusive step within the theorizing process, namely when the researcher claims to *know* something about the world *beyond* the setting in which the data were collected (i.e. the interview conversation).

While many scholars have written about the different ways of conducting and analysing interviews (e.g. Cassell, 2015; Gubrium *et al.*, 2012), our focus here is distinct because we examine how researchers marshal their interview data to make knowledge claims. This step is conducted regardless of which type of interview the researcher used (e.g. semi-structured, unstructured, biographical life history, etc.) and which approach to data analysis is used (e.g. thematic analysis, narrative analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis, grounded theory). What all researchers share is the need to demonstrate to the reader how they moved from their analysed data to claim to *know something* about the topic in the service of theory development.

Klag and Langley (2013) use the term 'conceptual leap' to refer to the process through which researchers generate 'abstract theoretical ideas from empirical data' (p. 149). Crucially, they identify claiming to 'know' something as an integral part of this process. Klag and Langley (2013) emphasize the 'substantive and theoretical knowledge' of the researcher and discuss the tension between 'knowing' and 'not knowing' when embracing doubt and leveraging naiveté. Our focus here is different. Instead, we ask: *what* do researchers claim to know based on their interview data? We contribute by unpacking *how* and *why* researchers use interview data to make claims to know different kinds of 'things' depending on the paradigm underpinning their study.

Understanding these differences is important for two reasons. First, because theories are underdetermined by data and therefore researchers do not *derive* their conclusions from their data, they must *reason* them from their conclusions (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2021). Second, according to Harley and Cornelissen (2022, p. 239), 'rigor emanates from the way in which researchers engage in a deliberate reasoning process of inferring theoretical claims from their data'. Hence, researchers need to be able to identify and articulate the *inferential reasoning process* through which they move from their data to their conclusion about what they now 'know' in order to develop theory.

We address this need by developing a typology of five epistemological modes used by management scholars to make knowledge claims from interviews. We propose metaphors for each of these modes as follows: 'reliable witness', 'category representative', 'psychologist's client', 'performer' and 'power effect'. Identifying these modes will help researchers to identify and articulate the reasoning they used to make conclusions about *what* they leap to knowing and *how far* they leaped beyond the interview situation. In so doing, we also contribute to the wider debate about how paradigms shape research, with a view to enhancing 'paradigmatic awareness' (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021, p. 5) and encouraging paradigmatic plurality in management research (Christofi *et al.*, 2024; Cunliffe, 2022; Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2018; Willmott, 2024).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the existing debates about paradigms and theorizing in qualitative management research. Then, we introduce the typology of five epistemological modes, each illustrated with examples from published management research. Finally, we discuss the significance of the typology and outline the implications for researchers, educators and gatekeepers such as journal editors and reviewers.

Paradigms and qualitative research

There is a long history of debate about paradigms in management research, starting with Burrell and Morgan (1979). According to them, each paradigm has

different and incommensurable assumptions about the nature of the social world (ontology) and ways of knowing about it (epistemology). Morgan and Smircich (1980) proposed a typology of six paradigms, which they mapped along a continuum of subjectivist and objectivist approaches. Cunliffe (2011) later revised Morgan and Smircich (1980) by proposing three 'knowledge problematics' – objectivism, subjectivism and intersubjectivism – which shape how research is designed and what is deemed thinkable and knowable (Lather, 2006). She calls for 'crafting our research in consistent, careful, thoughtful, and informed ways' (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 666), specifically highlighting the need for 'consistency between ontology, epistemology, theorizing and writing' (Cunliffe, 2022, p. 8). Yet, despite this, Mauthner and Saunders' (2023) review of 421 articles published in 2019 in management journals found that few researchers actually report their philosophical position and only a small minority discuss it.

These philosophical assumptions matter because not only do they guide researchers towards particular methods, they also shape the package of practices used in the research process, including the practices of making knowledge claims. For instance, in the context of ethnographic research, van Maanen (1988, 2010) identified the different paradigms underpinning the various genres of ethnographic writing, and, more recently, Zilber and Zanoni (2022) noted the dominance of positivistic genres of ethnographic writing in organizational research. The importance of the paradigm underpinning the research has also been discussed by scholars writing about qualitative interviewing specifically (Alvesson, 2003, 2011; Cassell, 2015; Cassell and Bishop, 2019; Cassell and Symon, 2015; Reissner and Whittle, 2022).

In management studies, interviews are typically conducted to gather information or insights about something outside of the interview situation. However, little has been written about the different kinds of information or insights that researchers claim to know from their interviews. Schaefer and Alvesson (2020, p. 34) note the ongoing debate about 'how far and with what justification may I move from noting that this is what a person told in an interview to claims about behavior, episodes, cognitions, emotions or even narrative identity and experiences'. These are very different 'things' to claim to know about. Hence, the motivation for this paper is to explore *what* these differences are and *why* they occur.

In a recent contribution, Rockmann and Vough (2023) give some useful advice on how qualitative researchers could use quotes to make claims. What the authors do not address is: a claim to know *what*? When giving advice on using quotes to provide 'evidence' (p. 1) and 'proof' (p. 4) of a claim, however, they do not address the question: evidence or proof *of what*? We view this omission as problematic because, given the different paradigms and types of theorizing underpinning qualitative research (Cornelissen, 2017; Cornelissen, Höllerer and Seidl, 2021; Cunliffe, 2022; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021), scholars can use interview quotes to provide 'evidence' or 'proof' of very different 'things'.

As researchers engage in theorizing, the type of theory that they develop from their qualitative interview data will be grounded in the study's onto-epistemological paradigm (Gehman *et al.*, 2018). For instance, factor-analytic or variance-based positivistic theories would be founded on claims to have evidence of factors or forces that cause a particular outcome and that are transferable across contexts rather than being context-specific (Cornelissen, 2017; Cornelissen, Höllerer and Seidl, 2021). Alternatively, process-based theories would be founded on claims to have evidence of events linked over time (Langley, 1999), whereas social constructionist theories would be founded on claims to have evidence of how a phenomenon is intersubjectively constructed through language (Cunliffe, 2022) and where social context matters (Halme *et al.*, 2024; Hansen *et al.*, 2023; Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021). This paper seeks to help researchers to identify and explicate these epistemic practices and thereby address Mauthner and Saunders' (2023) call for management researchers to be more explicit about their research philosophy. In what follows, we will outline the five epistemological modes, using illustrative examples from published qualitative interview research.

A typology of epistemological modes

The typology we present here originates in an earlier research project in which we conducted a systematic review of over 200 journal articles published in selected FT50 'elite' journals that used qualitative interview research (Reissner and Whittle, 2022). In this project, we read each article carefully, looking at, among other things, how the authors used interview quotes (typically an illustrative quote that reflected a 'code' or 'theme' that they had applied in their analysis process) to make a claim to 'know' something about their research setting or their phenomenon more generally, which they in turn used as the foundation of their theoretical claims.

During this process, we noticed that researchers used different 'means of inference' (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021, p. 3) – that is, a conclusion reached through reasoning about evidence (see Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013) – when making knowledge claims from interview data. We started by grouping together those that used similar modes of inferential reasoning together. We grouped together articles that used interview data to claim to have *objective* knowledge about an event, factor, force or process occurring 'out there'. Within this

group, we separated those whose claims remained at the context-specific level (i.e. the people or organizations that they studied) and those that made generalized claims about a wider population. We grouped together those articles that claimed to have insights into *subjective* processes such as attitudes, beliefs, values and perceptions. We also noticed that some articles sought to reveal something about *intersubjective* processes of social construction. We grouped these according to whether the authors emphasized the active role of the person in socially constructing a version of reality or emphasized the power of particular discourses, ideologies or social structures in shaping what the interviewee said, while also noting the subtle but important differences within this category. These are the five groupings that we refer to in our typology as the five 'epistemological modes'. Finally, when reflecting on these five modes, we noticed that the knowledge claims were grounded in different paradigms, specifically positivism, interpretivism and social constructionism. Hence, we also sought to identify which mode(s) were grounded in which paradigm.

In this paper, we do not seek to make any claims about the frequency of each mode in general or by journal. We also recognize that other modes exist. For instance, approaches referred to as 'localist' (Alvesson, 2003, 2011) or 'constructionist' (Silverman, 2006, p. 127) treat the interview as a topic of analysis in its own right (see Rapley, 2007). We have not included these approaches in our typology because they are rarely used in management studies (a notable exception is Svensson, 2009). For each mode in our typology, researchers differ in *what* is 'leaped' to and *how far* they 'leap' from the interview situation in their knowledge claims. We propose a metaphor for each mode to help visualize these differences. Metaphors work by connecting elements from two or more different domains and are valuable tools in helping scholars to think differently about something, see new connections and offer novel perspectives (Morgan, 1980). We searched creatively for familiar domains from everyday life (e.g. witness testimony in courtrooms, seeing a play at a theatre, etc.) to highlight these differences. We recognize that while metaphors can be illuminating, they can also obscure and obfuscate.

'Reliable witness'

The first epistemological mode treats interview accounts as a reliable source of objective knowledge about the world 'out there'. Researchers make the 'leap' from their interview data to claim to know something about events, factors, mechanisms or forces that occur outside the interview situation. We use the metaphor of 'reliable witness' to depict the way in which researchers treat their interviewees as honest and unbiased reporters of what really happened, in a role similar to that of a witness in a courtroom. In Schaefer and Alvesson's (2020) words, interviewees are presumed to be engaging in '"truth" reporting' (p. 33), such that 'interview statements can be taken as reliable and robust evidence on objective phenomena "out there"' (p. 34).

For example, in their study of the implementation of new policies in four hospitals in the UK and Ireland, McDermott, Fitzgerald and Buchanan (2013, p. S106) provide the following two interview quotes:

> "I constantly went to [the consultant]. (Clinical nurse manager)"
> "I suppose it is still a very medical-led model, trying to sell that idea [to consultants] has been very tough. (Clinical psychologist)"

Based on these two illustrative quotes, the researchers conclude that 'consultant proactivity led to centralized responsibility for service improvement and the need for consultant approval became embedded in the organization' (p. 106). The researchers make an epistemological leap from these interview accounts to a claim to know what 'actually happened' in the organization when the new policy was implemented. The 'reliable witness' mode can also be used when interviewees report the experience of others. For example, Bourgoin and Harvey (2018, p. 1622) claim to know about what *clients* of management consultants want or expect based on the interview accounts of management consultants. To sum up, the epistemological leap used in this mode involves researchers using interview accounts to claim to know something about an objective reality.

'Category representative'

The second epistemological mode treats interview accounts not only as a reliable report on an objective external reality, as the 'reliable witness' mode does, but *also* as 'representative' of a category of people or organizations to which the knowledge claim is generalized. This mode responds to the widely held expectation of generalization in the management sciences, where authors are expected to 'make generalized theoretical claims based on empirical inquiry in a specific context' and therefore need to make claims that 'transcend the empirical context examined' (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2021, p. 756). In this mode, researchers make the 'leap' from their interview data to make the objectivist claim to know something not only about the various people or organizations they have studied but *also* about a wider population of people or organizations. In so doing, they take knowledge grounded in a particular context and 'decontextualize' it (Halme *et al.*, 2024) by 'silencing context' (Hansen *et al.*, 2023, p. 1) in order to propose universal law-like explanations (see Cornelissen, 2017).

We use the metaphor 'category representative' to depict the way researchers treat the interviewee as a spokesperson for a wider population, just as an

employee representative might be deemed to speak on behalf of all employees, for instance. A range of categories could be invoked in this logic of generalization, such as occupational, organizational, social or geographical categories, or a combination thereof. For example, Kannan-Narasimhan and Lawrence (2018) studied how firms categorized as 'innovative' gain adoption for their innovations by creating fit between their organization's internal resources and strategy. They quote Alan, a decision-maker at one case organization, who said:

> "The ones [innovations] that are successful are the ones that fit in much better and much closer to the existing product line of the company or are very adjacent to it. …" (p. 733)

The researchers make the epistemological leap from this interview account to conclude that 'innovators assess whether their innovation fits their decision makers' concept of the organization's strategy and resources' (p. 733). This kind of leap uses the inferential logic of generalization to claim that interview quotes can be used to conclude something about the wider population of 'innovators'. The researchers also generalize more specifically to the population they call 'successful innovators' (p. 739). In so doing, they make decontextualized claims to know something about all 'successful innovators', not just about the specific organizations or industries they studied.

Other studies use the inferential logic of generalizability in relation to population categories that are created by the analyst. For example, a study of 'callings' into animal shelter work by Schabram and Maitlis (2017) identifies three calling paths that they claim individuals experiencing a calling more generally follow. Other scholars generalize to populations of organizations. For instance, in a study of control in multinationals, Brenner and Ambos (2013) identify three social control types (with labels created by the researchers) which they implicitly claim exist in multinationals more generally. In some cases, researchers create a population category that is presented as universal. For instance, in their study of interpersonal influence behaviours such as ingratiation or flattery, Stern and Westphal (2010) generalize their findings to any 'focal actor' (p. 281), which could in theory be anyone from any organization from any country who uses interpersonal influence at work. To sum up, the epistemological leap is distinct in this mode in that researchers use interview accounts to claim to know something about an objective reality, which they also generalize to a wider population.

'Psychologist's client'

The third epistemological mode treats interview accounts as evidence of the inner workings of the interviewee's mind. Researchers make the 'leap' from their interview data to claim to know something about subjective mental states or processes, such as meanings, beliefs, perceptions or emotions. We have used the metaphor 'psychologist's client' to depict this mode because researchers treat interview accounts as 'evidence for authentic experiences, feelings, and beliefs' (Schaefer and Alvesson, 2020, p. 34), similar to how a psychologist would seek to gain insights into their client's mental processes.[1] Importantly, this mode is distinct from 'reliable witness' and 'category representative' because interview accounts are treated as *subjective* rather than objective phenomena (Schaefer and Alvesson, 2020).

Scholars working within this mode sometimes use the term 'lived experience' (Silverman, 2006, p. 123) to emphasize the way that people subjectively experience their lives. However, the focus in this mode is on the *subjective* experiences and interpretations of the individual, not on the *intersubjective* processes occurring when people relate with others (Cunliffe, 2011). This is an important distinction because claiming to know something about, say, the different *beliefs* held by individuals (a subjective state or process) is not the same as claiming to know something about the collective *belief system* of a social group or society (an intersubjective process), the latter being typical of ethnographic approaches (Kostera and Krzyworzeka, 2023) and social constructionist approaches more generally. We will consider the social constructionist onto-epistemological paradigm in the sections that follow on the 'performer' and 'power effect' modes.

To illustrate the use of the 'psychologist's client' mode, Hassard, Morris and McCann (2012) conducted a study of changes in managerial careers in Japan, the UK and the USA. They use the following quotes by managers of two case organizations:

> "Until this role was created I was pretty much thinking: 'Where am I going to go next?'. 'My boss works even longer hours than I work'. 'Do I really want his job?'" [p. 589]
> "Well I don't actually want to get the next tier up, because obviously it's even more stressful than what I've currently got. I don't want to do that." [p. 589]

The researchers conclude that some UK managers 'did not want career progression' (p. 589). The term 'want' indicates that the researchers make an epistemological leap from the interview account to claiming to know something about the interviewee's inner *feelings or states of mind*, but not what is *objectively* happening in their

[1]No metaphor is perfect, and the 'psychologist's client' metaphor has associations with health and illness that may or may not reflect the purpose of the researchers' study. Our aim in using this metaphor is to emphasize the way that researchers using this epistemological mode 'leap' from an interview account to making conclusions about an inner mental process.

organizations, which the reliable witness mode seeks to do. Specifically, the researchers claim to know about their interviewees' emotions (e.g. feeling resentful), desires (e.g. career aspirations) and perceptions (e.g. of different roles) (p. 591).

This subjectivist philosophical position, coupled with a 'correspondence' view of language which assumes that words reflect the inner workings of the mind, can be expressed by researchers in more implicit or explicit ways. In some cases, researchers use terminology such as 'perceive' or 'feel' to implicitly signal that they are adopting a subjectivist ontology (see e.g. Teerikangas, 2012, p. 619). In other cases, researchers are explicit about their assumptions that interviewees provide a subjective 'viewpoint' rather than an objective 'truth'. For example, in a study of managers accused of bullying, Jenkins *et al.* (2012) explicitly describe the interviewees' accounts as their 'perspective' (p. 496) on the events they report and as ways of justifying their behaviour. Importantly, the researchers also explicitly contrast the interviewees' subjective accounts with how the 'bullied' employees might think or feel (see e.g. p. 495). To sum up, the epistemological leap is distinct in this mode in that researchers use interview accounts to claim to know something about a subjective reality.

'Performer'

The fourth epistemological mode treats interview accounts as an interactional 'performance' in which the interviewee is attempting to do something with their account. Researchers make the 'leap' from their interview data to claim to know something about, for instance, how the interviewee is managing impressions, advancing arguments, making political moves, crafting stories or constructing their identity. We use the metaphor 'performer' to emphasize that interviewees are assumed to present a particular *version* of themselves or the world for a particular *audience* and for a particular *purpose*. In contrast to the 'psychologist's client' mode, in the 'performer' mode no correspondence between the interviewee's words and the interviewee's mind is assumed. Rather, interviewees are treated as *socially aware and reflexive* language users who craft accounts that construct a particular version of reality for particular audiences in particular social contexts.

In this mode, researchers adopt a social constructionist paradigm. The claim is not about the *subjectivity* of the individual, but rather about the *intersubjective* processes occurring when people relate with others (Cunliffe, 2011). The social constructionist paradigm is based on the notion that what people experience as a 'real' external and objective social world is the outcome of the social rules, norms, categories and customs created between people that have since been reified, institutionalized and taken-for-granted, making social reality *relative* to the particular society or social group (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).[2]

By way of illustrative example, Alvesson and Robertson (2016) conducted interviews with senior employees in UK investment banking. They quote one interviewee, Charlotte, who said the following:

> "I really don't want to have to go much higher in the political strata, it's just too foul and I don't find it interesting. I am in there to do the work that I enjoy and I have no interest in the political goings-on, so I do everything I can to stay out of it, although the more senior you are the more it is expected that you try and take part. I am a terrible politician: you have to be quite smarmy and two-faced to be up to doing that and it's just not something I want to spend my time doing. (Charlotte, April 2006)" [p. 19]

The researchers conclude that 'here identity emerges through a fairly distinct, strong narrative of disidentification, an exception in our material. Charlotte emphasizes who she is by referring to what she is not ("a terrible politician")' (p. 20). By describing the interview account as 'a narrative', which implies that this is but one version of the story Charlotte tells about herself, the researchers use the 'performer' mode.

Importantly, the researchers do *not* claim to know the 'truth' about the nature of the industry (as with the reliable witness mode), about other people like Charlotte (as with the category representative mode), or about Charlotte's inner mental desires or preferences (as with the psychologist's client mode). In addition, the researchers acknowledge that Charlotte could produce a different account in a different context, for instance not telling her bosses that she thinks they are 'smarmy and two-faced' (p. 19). Instead, the researchers emphasize how Charlotte's narrative creates a situated performance of an identity position through a contrast with who she is *not* like (a 'politician') and an account of what she does *not* want (to enter 'senior' roles in the organization). Another important distinction from the other epistemological modes is how the performer mode recognizes the persuasive, political and moral aspects of interview accounts. In this case, the researchers emphasize how Charlotte positions herself against the morally questionable characteristics she attributes to those 'higher in the political strata' (p. 19). To sum up, the epistemological leap is distinct in this mode in that researchers use interview accounts to claim to know something about how people socially construct reality, for example by trying to create a favourable impression, put forward a persuasive argument, advance a personal

[2]Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 15) use one illustrative example that is especially relevant for management research: 'What is "real" to a Tibetan monk may not be "real" to an American businessman'.

or political agenda, tell a narrative, or work on their identities.

'Power effect'

The fifth and final epistemological mode treats interview accounts as responses to a prevailing system of thought or social structure. Researchers make the 'leap' from their interview data to claim to know something about the social context, such as the prevailing discourse or ideology, in which the interview account is produced. We use the metaphor of 'power effect' to describe how prevailing systems of thought or social structures bring into being subjects and objects. Interview accounts are treated as a response to one or more wider discourses or ideologies. This links to Schaefer and Alvesson's (2020, p. 34) observation that some researchers 'claim that interviews allow the tracing of discourses and their constitutive effects'. In this mode, researchers also adopt a social constructionist paradigm, albeit from a distinct intellectual tradition grounded in poststructuralist or critical realist thinking.

Here, the language used in an interview account is understood differently from the 'performer' mode because the emphasis is on how a discourse (as a system of thought) 'speaks through' people or is available for people to 'draw on', rather than on how people actively use discourse (as practices of talking or writing) for particular purposes (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). This approach acknowledges 'the multitude of conflicting discourses' (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 2) in which people are enmeshed and recognizes that people can negotiate the subject positions made available in discourses.

For example, in their study of gay academics in UK business schools, Ozturk and Rumens (2014) present the following quote from an interviewee called Edgar:

> Being gay at work is almost as insignificant as the clothes I'm wearing because it's normal. I'm not saying I'd prefer to be straight but normal is being straight, and I'm normal like the straight people I work with … and being normal at work is not an issue … I work in a very corporate business school where there's no expectation on me to conform to some eccentric gay stereotype … if I did I'd stick out like a sore thumb … instead it [gay sexuality] just sits there as a part of me and I blend in with everyone else. [p. 509]

The researchers conclude that accounts like that of Edgar show how 'discursive constructions … reproduce a restrictive heterosexual/homosexual binary' (p. 509). In so doing, they make an epistemological leap from the interview account to claiming to know about the existence of a wider discourse that involves binary ways of thinking about sexual orientation. In contrast to the 'performer' mode, which emphasizes the way in which the account is actively constructed, here the researchers emphasize the 'discursive constructions' that have the effect of creating the 'binaries' that the interviewee refers to in their account.

We recognize that we are grouping different social constructionist perspectives together in this mode because they share a concern with how interview accounts are shaped by a broader social context. However, we also acknowledge the significant ontological and epistemological differences that exist, for instance, between critical realism and other social constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives (see Fleetwood, 2005). Importantly, these distinct ontological assumptions also shape the types of the knowledge claims that are made with interview data (see Smith and Elger, 2014), such as the critical realist focus on the wider social structures that are shaping interview accounts (see e.g. Turnbull, 2001). To sum up, the epistemological leap is distinct in this mode in that researchers use interview accounts to claim to know something about the existence of a wider discourse or social structure that is having power effects over (or through) the interviewee.

Discussion

The five epistemological modes introduced in this paper are grounded in distinct sets of onto-epistemological assumptions about what knowledge is claimed using interview data. Table 1 provides an overview of the five modes, the assumptions about what interview accounts tell researchers in each mode, what leap is made, and what onto-epistemological paradigm is used. In addition, the supplementary file accompanying this paper provides further illustrative examples of the five modes.

The nature of the epistemological leap used in each mode is visually represented in Figure 1. On the left-hand side, the interview situation is depicted with two people – the interviewer and interviewee – engaging in question-and-answer dialogue. In the right-hand side image, the claim to know something about a phenomenon outside the interview situation is depicted. The curved arrows connecting the two represent the epistemological leap that is made from the interview situation to something outside of the interview situation. For each mode, the right-hand image seeks to represent the different kinds of 'things' that researchers claim to know something about. Another way of articulating these relationships is using the terms 'grounds', 'warrants' and 'claims' (see Harley and Cornelissen, 2022, p. 243), where the grounds are the interview data depicted on the left-hand side, the warrants are the arrows depicting the epistemological leap, and the claims are the knowledge claims depicted on the right-hand side. On the far right, the brackets are used to indicate the different ontological paradigms underpinning the modes.

In the 'reliable witness' mode, the image of a landscape is intended to represent a claim to know

Table 1. A typology of five modes for making knowledge claims from qualitative interviews

Epistemological mode	Assumptions about interview accounts	Epistemological 'leap'	Onto-epistemological paradigm
Reliable witness	Interviewees' accounts are treated as a reliable source of knowledge about external phenomena, such as events, behaviours, factors or forces	From interview situation to the world 'out there'	Objectivism
Category representative	Interviewees' accounts are treated both as reliable witnesses and also as representatives of a category of people or organizations to which knowledge claims are generalized	From interview situation to a wider population	Objectivism
Psychologist's client	Interviewees' accounts are treated as evidence of cognitive processes, such as meanings, perceptions, or emotions	From interview situation to the mind of the interviewees	Subjectivism
Performer	Interviewees' accounts are treated as performances designed to have an interactional effect or construct a social reality, such as managing impressions, advancing arguments, furthering political agendas, crafting stories or constructing identities	From interview situation to the interviewees' practices of giving particular accounts for particular purposes to particular audiences	Social constructionism
Power effect	Interviewees' accounts are treated as imprints of, or responses to, a prevailing system of thought, regime of truth, power relations, ideologies or social structures	From interview situation to evidence of broader discourses, ideologies or structures	Social constructionism

something about an objective reality 'out there'. In the 'category representative mode', the image of a collection of people is intended to represent a claim to know something about a wider population of people or organizations. In the 'psychologist's client' mode, the image of a person with a thought cloud is intended to represent a claim to know something about the inner mind of the interviewee. In the 'performer' mode, the image of a person with a speech bubble and wearing business attire is intended to represent a claim to know something about how the interviewee manages impressions, constructs identities, advances agendas or tells a narrative. In the 'power effect' mode, the image is of a person being subjected to, hailed by or disciplined by the various discourses, social structures or ideologies indicated by the clouds above, but with a two-way arrows to indicate that these power effects are not deterministic because people can respond in different ways and can say or do otherwise.

There are distinct assumptions about ontology and epistemology involved in these five modes. Both the 'reliable witness' and the 'category representative' mode employ an objectivist ontology. The former treats interview accounts as a neutral medium through which knowledge can be gained of events and processes occurring in the 'real world'. The latter also does this, but in addition it employs the positivistic logic of generalizability by claiming that the interviewees are representative of a wider population. These two modes treat interview accounts as 'mirrors' (Alvesson, 2011, p. 1) of an objective reality 'out there'.

The 'psychologist's client' mode is paradigmatically distinct because it is grounded in a subjectivist ontology. As Sandberg (2005, pp. 43–44) observes, this paradigm 'reject[s] the existence of an objective knowable reality beyond the human mind'. Interview accounts are treated as a 'window' into the subjectivity of the mind rather than as a 'mirror' of an objective reality (Edwards, 1997, p. 280). Hence, this mode acknowledges that other people could perceive or interpret the phenomenon differently (see Alvesson, 2003, 2011; Silverman, 2006).

The 'performer' and 'power effect' modes are both underpinned by a social constructionist paradigm that follows the so-called 'linguistic turn' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 29) by rejecting the assumption that language reflects reality. Rather, this paradigm views interview accounts as types of discourse, where discourse 'constructs rather than mirrors phenomena' (Alvesson, 2011, p. 1). The term 'constructs' can refer either to the act of constructing talk or text, or to the historically and culturally specific systems of thought that construct objects and subjects (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). In our typology, the 'performer' mode aligns with the former and emphasizes what people *do with* discourse, whereas the 'power effect' mode aligns with the latter and emphasizes what discourse *does to* people. However, we also note the important differences between the many social constructionist, poststructuralist and critical realist approaches used in our field.

The role of theory in making epistemological leaps is complex. In more inductive approaches, theorizing is expected to take place after knowledge claims have

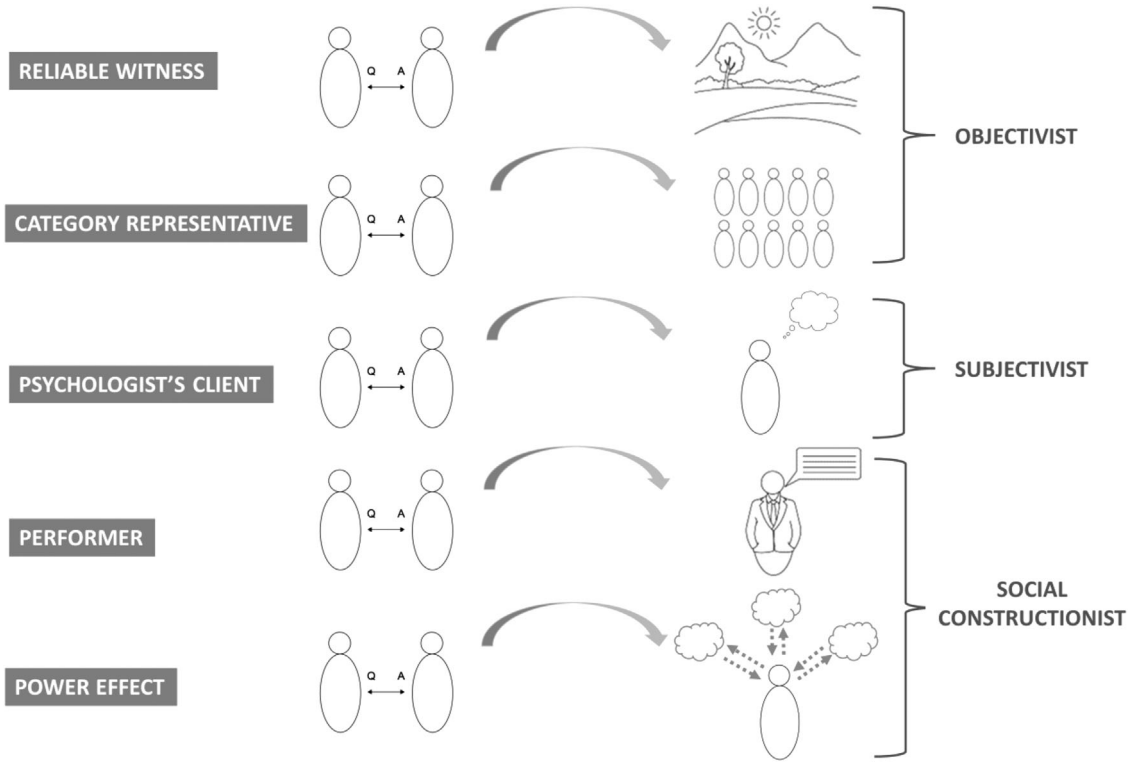

Figure 1. Visual representation of the epistemological leaps involved in the five modes for making knowledge claims from interviews

been made from the analysis of interview accounts (e.g. Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012). However, some scholars have argued that from the outset research is always informed by a particular set of assumptions about the nature of theorizing (Cornelissen, Höllerer and Seidl, 2021). For example, researchers seeking to develop a positivistic variance-based theory would use the 'reliable witness' and 'category representative' modes, whereas an interpretivist theory would be grounded in the 'psychologist's client' mode, and a post-structuralist theory would be grounded in the 'power effect' mode. Hence, the epistemological modes we have identified are not stand-alone inferential practices but come as part of an onto-epistemological 'package' that drives the whole research process.

Conclusion

This paper has developed a typology of five epistemological modes used by management researchers undertaking qualitative interviews. We have advanced the methodological literature by identifying what these modes are and explaining how they differ and how they originate from the onto-epistemological paradigm underpinning a piece of research. Understanding the five modes we have identified is important because each relies on distinct assumptions about what inferences can be made from interview data.

By illustrating each mode with examples from 'leading' management journals, we can conclude that these articles have been judged to meet editorial standards of quality and rigour. However, not all epistemological modes might be *equally* represented in each journal (or indeed in each sub-field or topic area). In light of Reissner and Whittle's (2022) findings, it would not be surprising if some journals favoured certain modes over others. That said, in the absence of 'one best way' (Cassell, 2015, p. 10) of conducting or writing up interview research, we can also conclude that there is no *single* agreed practice or quality standard for making knowledge claims from interview data in these journals. However, by focusing only on the restricted and exclusive 'leading' journals, we are in danger of reaching unwarranted conclusions about the state of the art of the interview method in our field. These kinds of journals are known for attempting to develop a 'gold standard' (Cassell, 2016, p. 455), which generates more standardized, less diverse and (arguably) less creative forms of scholarship (Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Cassell, 2016). Equally worrying, they also create a 'monoculture' in which the criteria for judging the quality of academic research that these journal editors favour are treated as universal (Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Following up this paper's focus on elite FT50 journals with a study of a wider range of journals would be helpful to ascertain the range of epistemological modes used across the whole field of management and organization research.

The diversity of epistemological modes identified in this paper has implications for scholars who seek to develop generic toolkits for using quotes to present claims. In particular, the assumption that writing up qualitative research involves ensuring 'alignment between the data and the claims being made' (Rockmann and Vough, 2023, p. 5) makes little sense if interview quotes can be used to 'evidence' (p. 10) starkly different claims. By adopting a different mode, a researcher could even take the *same quote* and 'leap' to radically *different claims*, *such as*: a claim about what really happened (the reliable witness mode), a claim about a whole population (the category representative mode), a claim about a mental state (the psychologist's client mode), a claim about a narrative identity position (the performer mode) or a claim about the effects of a prevailing discourse (the power effect mode).

Owing to these starkly different modes of inference, it should come as little surprise that researchers can analyse the same interview transcript and reach very different – even conflicting – theoretical conclusions (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010, 2021). This also makes methodological practices such as inter-rater (or inter-coder) reliability checks at best problematic and at worst meaningless, because another researcher could easily reach a different conclusion from the same transcript if they interpret the interview account from a different onto-epistemological paradigm. As a result, one coder has no reason to 'agree' with another 'coder' unless they switch paradigm.

In recent years, commentators have also noted 'the emergence of a number of methodological templates' (Köhler, Smith and Bhakoo, 2022, p. 184). Given the fact that each template is situated within a particular paradigm, this also invariably leads to different assumptions about research design, methodological techniques, and genres of writing (Van Maanen, 1988; Zilber and Zanoni, 2022). Heeding Köhler et al.'s (2022) warning against the 'blind' adoption of templates, we propose that one way to help researchers 'see' the paradigmatic assumptions made by the template is to identify the epistemological mode(s) associated with it.

In addition, as Harley and Cornelissen (2022) observe, templates can lead researchers to simply 'follow the recipe' and forget that the template uses specific methods of inferential reasoning to connect the empirical data to knowledge claims and to theory. Theory plays an important role here because 'claims based on empirical data are … "underdetermined" in the sense that several claims might be made based on a given empirical finding, and thus the claims one makes involve an inductive conceptual leap' (Harley and Cornelissen, 2022, p. 243). If we take their argument seriously that rigour is the result of 'processes of inferential reasoning' as opposed to the 'proper application of a template' (ibid, p. 240), then our typology can help researchers to *explain and justify the method of inferential reasoning they use to make knowledge claims*. Thus, this paper addresses Harley and Cornelissen's (2022) call for researchers to make 'considered and defensible choices in moving from data to their theoretical claims' (p. 240).

Finally, we note that commentators have observed the dominance of positivist assumptions in qualitative research (e.g. Christofi *et al.*, 2024; Cunliffe, 2011; Hansen *et al.*, 2023; Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2018). This can result in quality assessments being grounded in 'a single set of criteria mimicking deductive quantitative scholarship or drawing from qualitative positivist traditions' (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021, pp. 4–5). Against these commentaries, it is noteworthy that the five epistemological modes we have identified do not all adopt a positivist philosophy and that our illustrative examples all come from well-respected, influential management journals. This could well be reassuring news for those who call for paradigmatic plurality to be encouraged (Christofi *et al.*, 2024; Cunliffe, 2022; Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021; Reissner and Whittle, 2022; Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2018; Willmott, 2024).

We therefore hope that the typology of epistemological modes developed in this paper will help qualitative management researchers to appreciate that there is no 'one size fits all' (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021, p. 5) when it comes to making knowledge claims from interview data. As our typology shows, researchers differ significantly in *what* they 'leap' to and *how far* they 'leap' outside of the interview situation when making knowledge claims. We would also hope that those making judgements about the quality and rigour of qualitative interview research would find this typology helpful in making those judgements using paradigm-specific criteria (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021; Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2018). In what follows, we will outline the practical implications of our paper.

Implications

This paper has implications for individual researchers, educators and gatekeepers (Symon and Cassell, 1999). Questions to prompt reflection about these implications are provided in Table 2.

For individual researchers, paradigm choices can have career implications when institutions expect publications in certain journals and when those journals are dominated by one paradigm. As Cunliffe (2011, p. 666) observes, paradigms shape 'the political choices we face in getting published, promoted, and tenured'. The use of a paradigm is not an unconstrained 'choice' because it is influenced by a person's research methods training, doctoral supervisors and the research culture in their institution, discipline and country. Here, we echo the call by Mauthner and Saunders's (2023) for researchers to

Table 2. Implications for researchers, educators and gatekeepers

	Implications
Researchers	• Can I identify the epistemological mode I am adopting in my research? • Can I explain and justify the process of inferential reasoning I used in making epistemological leaps from my data? • Which epistemological modes are more prevalent or well accepted in my research community? • If I am using a less prevalent epistemological mode, how can I explain and justify my work to those using other paradigms? • If I am using a 'template' for qualitative data analysis and writing up, am I fully aware of the epistemological mode that template uses? Is it consistent with my overall research paradigm? Could I consider more innovative and creative practices that deviate from the accepted template? • How could I encourage greater paradigmatic diversity and plurality in my research community?
Educators	• Are the students I am teaching at a sufficiently advanced level of knowledge to be made aware of the diversity of epistemological modes used in interview research? • If teaching more advanced research students, how can I introduce the idea of qualitative interview research as multi-paradigmatic? • How can I explain the five epistemological modes to students, for example by using illustrative examples from the paper and/or the practical seminar activities provided in the accompanying Teaching & Learning Guide? • How can I help students to identify the epistemological modes used in publications they are reading for their literature review? • How can I help students to identify the epistemological mode that is best for their research project?
Gate-keepers	• As a journal editor, am I aware of (and tolerant towards) the paradigmatic diversity of qualitative research and the different epistemological modes that each paradigm uses? • As a journal editor, how can I ensure that reviewers are respectful towards the paradigm and associated epistemological mode used in a submission? • As a reviewer for a journal or a conference, am I judging the research using criteria that are appropriate to the paradigm and associated epistemological mode(s) used in the paper? • As a doctoral examiner, does the doctoral candidate show that they understand and can explain and justify the process of inferential reasoning they used to make knowledge claims from their interview data? • As a doctoral examiner, am I evaluating the thesis using criteria consistent with the paradigm and associated epistemological mode that the doctoral candidate has used?

explain or justify their philosophical stance, including those working in the dominant positivist tradition (see also Aguzzoli *et al.*, 2024). We also heed Harley and Cornelissen's (2022) warning that rigour comes not from 'blind' template application, which creates formulaic papers and assumes a single shared paradigm. Rather, rigour derives from how researchers explain their 'process of inferential reasoning' (ibid, p. 244) – something that this paper will help researchers to do.

We will now consider the implications for educators. In introductory research methods courses, the multi-paradigmatic diversity of approaches to qualitative interviewing might consciously not be covered because of the learning stage of the students. However, on more advanced research training programmes (such as doctoral training), students would benefit from learning about the different epistemological modes as part of being taught about the lack a single 'gold standard' in qualitative research. Educators could thereby ensure the 'socialization of graduate students toward a diverse repertoire of research paradigms and approaches' (Cilesiz and Greckhamer, 2022, p. 362). Students themselves would benefit from developing greater 'paradigmatic awareness' (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021, p. 5) in their own study and also in the literature they are reviewing. The Teaching and Learning Guide that accompanies this paper includes a range of practical seminar activities designed to help educators in this endeavour.

Finally, turning to gatekeepers, early commentators such as Pratt (2008) noted the absence of any agreed standard of criteria for evaluating qualitative research. However, this remains a hotly debated topic. While some scholars have proposed overarching criteria for evaluating qualitative research (Tracy, 2010), others argue that 'universal criteria' cannot be found because each criterion is grounded in a distinct paradigm (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 648, see also Harley and Cornelissen, 2022, p. 242). As such, we argue that no single epistemological mode in our typology should claim the status of 'gold standard' and that journal editors, reviewers and doctoral examiners should be aware of – *and* tolerant towards – the paradigmatic diversity underpinning qualitative research (Gephart, 2004; Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021; Symon, Cassell and Johnson, 2018).

We are also concerned about gatekeepers such as journal editors and reviewers who seek to impose their paradigm onto the work of others. This occurs when 'criteria used to evaluate quality from a positivistic stance' are imposed on 'a study that adheres to an interpretivist or social constructivist ontology' (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021, p. 5). Gatekeepers therefore need to create an environment in which research is 'assessed within the parameters of its own epistemologi-

cal commitments' (Cassell and Symon, 2006, p. 6). Use of our typology will, we hope, help to create an environment in which paradigmatic diversity in qualitative research can flourish. In particular, this means challenging the idea that qualitative research is only valuable if it produces decontextualized factor-analytic or variance-based theories (Cornelissen, 2017). Instead, qualitative research should be valued for its ability to generate context-sensitive, creative and insightful management research.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.