

Moving Beyond Linear Cause-and-Effect Logics: Reflections on Rigor and Relevance of Qualitative Research in OSCM

Katja Wölfl¹ , Kenyth Alves de Freitas² , Renata Andreoni Barboza³ 

¹ Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria

² Instituto de Ensino e Pesquisa Insper, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

³ Ibmec Business School, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

How to cite: Wölfl, K., Freitas, K. A., & Barboza, R. A. (2026). Moving beyond linear cause-and-effect logics: Reflections on rigor and relevance of qualitative research in OSCM. *BAR-Brazilian Administration Review*, 23(4), e260165.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-7692bar2026260165>

Keywords:

qualitative research; rigor; relevance; publishing; OSCM.

JEL Code:

M11, M19

Publication date:
October 23, 2026

Corresponding author:

Katja Wölfl
Vienna University of Economics and Business
Welthandelspl. 1, 1020 Wien, Austria
katja.woelfl@wu.ac.at

Editor-in-Chief:

Ricardo Limongi 
(Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil).

Editorial assistants:

Eduarda Anastacio and Simone Rafael
(ANPAD, Maringá, Brazil)

ABSTRACT

Qualitative research has become increasingly important to Operations and Supply Chain Management (OSCM) as scholars confront complex phenomena. In this interview, Assistant Professor Katja Wölfl reflects on the value of qualitative research and explains why these approaches are particularly useful for studying complex, context-dependent phenomena. She discusses how qualitative methods can support early-stage theorizing, process explanations, and configurational perspectives that move beyond linear cause-and-effect logics. Assistant Professor Wölfl provides concrete guidance on conducting and presenting qualitative research, including how to structure the analysis clearly, use tables and interview quotes effectively, strengthen data through triangulation, and make more deliberate choices about sampling and research design. She also explores the opportunities and challenges of qualitative research in emerging economies, emphasizing that context should not be treated merely as a setting but as a driver of theory. The interview concludes with advice for PhD students and early-career researchers aiming to publish qualitative work internationally, highlighting the importance of literature grounding, journal fit, and writing.

Data Availability: BAR – Brazilian Administration Review encourages data sharing but, in compliance with ethical principles, it does not demand the disclosure of any means of identifying research subjects.

Plagiarism Check: BAR maintains the practice of submitting all documents received to the plagiarism check, using specific tools, e.g.: iThenticate.

Peer review: is responsible for acknowledging an article's potential contribution to the frontiers of scholarly knowledge on business or public administration. The authors are the ultimate responsible for the consistency of the theoretical references, the accurate report of empirical data, the personal perspectives, and the use of copyrighted material. This content was evaluated using the double-blind peer review process. The disclosure of the reviewers' information on the first page is made only after concluding the evaluation process, and with the voluntary consent of the respective reviewers.

Copyright: The authors retain the copyright relating to their article and grant the journal BAR – Brazilian Administration Review, the right of first publication, with the work simultaneously licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0) The authors also retain their moral rights to the article, including the right to be identified as the authors whenever the article is used in any form.



Could you talk about your academic trajectory and how qualitative methods became part of your research agenda? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: When I started my PhD, I tried to work with a more experimental approach. The phenomenon I was investigating involved deceptive behavior and how people react when they are deceiving someone. However, it did not really work out the way I wanted. The phenomenon had a very high social desirability bias. In an experimental situation, people usually want to be seen as honest. So, they probably do not behave as they would in a real situation, and in the end, it did not work out for what I wanted to understand. So, I looked for new ways to explore my research question, which led me to move toward qualitative research. In [Woelfl et al. \(2023\)](#), I explore, by combining qualitative data with a configurational approach, under what circumstances buyers perceive their suppliers to be deceptive in negotiations.

At the beginning of my PhD, I knew little about qualitative methods. My supervisor and his experimental approach strongly influenced me. Nevertheless, after the PhD, with more opportunities to explore different things, I definitely moved more toward qualitative data. It is more interesting because you can explore so many more things and understand better how they relate to each other. You do not only look at a single construct; you can explore how things hang together in a complex world. I do not believe in linear relationships that much. It is more complex, and qualitative data make it easier to capture this messiness.

In your view, what is the value of qualitative research in advancing theory, especially from an OSCM perspective? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: The answer to this question relates to why I find it more interesting. Qualitative research gives you opportunities to explore phenomena in a more complex setting. It helps you understand more than linear cause-and-effect relationships. You can examine the phenomenon in its natural context and understand how it is situated within a specific environment. From a theoretical perspective, the opportunity is clear when we encounter novel phenomena that no one has examined before. In those cases, we do not yet know how to explain them, and qualitative research has significant power to guide initial theorizing and understanding. However, it is not only about linear relationships. We can move beyond propositional theorizing and develop richer process theorizing or configurational theorizing ([Cornelissen, 2025](#); [Welch et al., 2022](#)). We have more opportunities to understand processes and underlying mechanisms with qualitative research methods.

What types of OSCM phenomena or research questions are particularly well-suited for qualitative research? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: Partly it is about novel phenomena that have not been explored before. Nevertheless, that is not the only part. It is also suitable when you want to understand deeper mechanisms, and when the context is highly relevant to understanding the phenomenon. If you want to understand causal complexity, as relationships that are not straightforward, qualitative research can be more relevant than only quantitatively testing relationships.

We also see significant technology disruption right now, so there are many opportunities because new phenomena emerge. Moreover, context can be especially promising. For example, in sustainability research, there is often a Northern worldview. Some projects explore global perspectives, but if you look closely, there is not much on South America and how sustainability is perceived and enacted there. So, you can ask questions like: How do you translate sustainability regulations? How are they understood? How are they enacted? The context, in your case, Brazil, can be important for understanding these questions.

How can Brazilian researchers conduct research that is not only interesting from an American/European perspective but also meaningful for the broader OSCM community? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: There is a paper by [Welch et al. \(2022\)](#) from international business that discusses the power of contextualized theorizing. The key point is that contextual theorizing is not simply taking something well researched in the US and saying: "Now we study it in Brazil, so it is new." That is a bad translation of contextual theorizing. Reviewers often ask: "Why is it different just because it is Brazil, Finland, Germany, or Austria?" It is not automatically different just because the setting changes.

What makes contextualized theorizing interesting is carving out what is unique about your context, and explaining why that uniqueness changes how the research question should be explored. It takes effort to go deeper than just translating a US phenomenon into Brazil. For example, if you look at sustainability regulations, the underlying

mechanisms may differ. In parts of Europe, there is a strong assumption: “We have a regulation, and we implement it.” That may not translate the same way to Brazil. If you can articulate how it works differently and why, then the context becomes part of your theorizing. Brazil is the biggest economy in South America and an increasingly important business partner, especially for Europe. There is interest in understanding the Brazilian context. The keyword is understanding. This is where contextual richness needs to come into the research projects, and where time needs to be taken to compare and articulate differences, making them part of theorizing.

What do you think are common weaknesses or mistakes in qualitative submissions, and how can we address them? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: One frequent issue is that the richness of the data is not presented fully. Reviewers do not really know what data researchers collected, why they collected it, how they analyzed it, or how things connect. Often, the description of data collection and analysis is very brief and focuses on a mechanical process. For example, authors say: “We used Gioia et al. (2013),” then first-order codes, second-order codes, and that is basically it. However, that does not tell the reviewer much about your data. Reviewers need to assess rigor. In qualitative research, this means authors need to present the analytic story: how they conducted the analysis, where they changed course, what they discovered, how they started with an initial puzzle, and how the analysis developed.

There is always the critique: “But we have a page limit.” Yes, but you need to use the page limit wisely. To get into a revision round, you need to show interesting data and how you dealt with it. Otherwise, you might not pass the initial bar. Also, avoid using methodological terms as empty keywords, such as ‘Gioia,’ ‘Eisenhardt,’ and ‘case study.’ Do not just name them. Describe what you are doing.

Reviewers often ask for more data and more detail. How can we move beyond templates and show the richness of our data in practical steps? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: Tables are definitely great. About templates: there is a big debate. If you follow a template unthinkingly, it might not be the best thing. Nevertheless, if you are new to qualitative analysis, a template can be a helpful guide. The Gioia et al. (2013) approach is not a bad thing because it gives guidance on moving from what people say in interviews (first-order concepts) to more theoretical dimensions. The problem is when authors only state the steps without showing how they applied them. You need to say: “Here is a first-order code, and here is a quote that supports it.” That already tells reviewers much more. Furthermore, when you present higher-order concepts, do not just say you have them. Explain where they came from. Did existing literature inform them? Did you discover them? What literature informed the concepts? That type of detail tells much more than mechanical descriptions. The key is to be reflexive about how you approach data analysis and about your decisions on which data to collect – they need to fit your research aim. We discuss this in our recent paper in the *Journal of Operations Management* (Wilhelm et al., 2026).

One challenge in OSCM is that some reviewers are not well-trained in qualitative methods. Sometimes, if you present richer material, they may say you are foreshadowing findings. However, we want to change that. If you want to publish qualitative research, be transparent about your steps and present them as clearly as possible. Also, look beyond OSCM papers. Qualitative papers in journals like the *Academy of Management Journal* often provide much richer descriptions of how data were analyzed. They can offer guidance on what kind of information to include.

Sometimes, interview-only studies are seen as insufficient. How can researchers build a richer database to make a paper more competitive? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: It takes effort. Interview-only studies can be more difficult to publish, especially in top journals. One interview per case is usually not enough if you claim you are doing a case study. Reviewers will ask: How can that be a case study? If you have only one interview per case, you might consider methods such as fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis, which are better suited to such designs (see, for example, Woelfl et al., 2026). To build richer data, secondary sources are often feasible, such as company reports, newspapers, and documents. Observations can add richness, if possible. Moreover, it takes persistence to get more than one interview per case: asking again, seeking multiple perspectives, and engaging different hierarchical levels.

However, always ask: Why am I collecting additional data? What information can I get from it? You should not collect extra data just because ‘reviewers want it’. There should be an analytical purpose, something that brings you closer to your research question. Moreover, you should report that purpose, for example, in tables: what data you collected, and how you used it in the analysis.

Is there a magic number of interviews? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: No, there is no magic number. OSCM researchers often do not publish with fewer than 20 interviews, but do not quote me on 20. In other fields, there are papers with around 10 interviews because they are very deep, maybe three hours each. It depends on what you are interested in and what you need. It is not about the number.

How can we go from interviews and qualitative data to theoretical contributions? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: It is not easy. For me, the first step is descriptive understanding: what is actually going on in the data. Interviews become long transcripts, and it is hard to read everything again and again. So, I create case write-ups, maybe half a page, capturing the most important points. That makes comparison easier. Then I identify what is interesting. Do I see something puzzling that I do not understand? Are there contradictions? Are there deviant cases? Is there an outlier? These patterns suggest where theoretical richness might be.

Then, you need to know the literature. You need to identify the conversation you want to join. That conversation can evolve, but you need a main body of literature to which you aim to contribute. Understanding what the literature already knows, and also what it does not know, helps you interpret what is interesting or puzzling in your data and how you can link findings to theory.

In the design phase, what should researchers do? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: One aspect is preparation and planning. Many qualitative researchers are phenomenon-driven: we see something interesting and want to know more, so we start collecting data. However, it can be useful to add an intermediate step. Before collecting data, look at the literature: what is already known about the phenomenon, and what do you want to know in addition? That gives direction: what kind of data you might need, what questions to ask, and how to think purposefully about sampling.

Access is always an issue, and snowball sampling is common. Nevertheless, approach it strategically. Ask: Is this interview really helping my research? Does it support the theoretical direction? Also, remember: Reviewers will question why you did what you did. With qualitative research, you cannot easily redo the whole project later. I recommend broader questions in interviews to capture additional aspects that reviewers might later ask about.

Overall, do not just see a phenomenon and start collecting data immediately. Think strategically: What data do I need, and why?

What advice would you give to PhD students or early-career researchers who want to publish qualitative research internationally? What should they focus on? (Kenyth Alves de Freitas and Renata Andreoni Barboza)

Katja Wölfl: One key point: the Brazilian context is rich and interesting, but just saying “I research circular economy in Brazil” does not automatically make it interesting internationally. You need to explain why the circular economy in Brazil differs from those in the US, Germany, Austria, France, and so on. You need to make context part of your theorizing. Second, rigor matters. A key piece of advice is to be transparent and detailed about each step of data collection and analysis. Documenting your steps helps because you may need to explain them later. Third, for theorizing: do not only think about the likeliest explanation of your data. Also ask: are there alternative explanations? If I look at the data from a different literature perspective, would I interpret it the same way? This mental exercise helps carve out what is truly interesting (Wilhelm et al., 2026).

I also serve on scientific committees, and we see many submissions from Brazil, including qualitative ones, which is great. Nevertheless, many submissions are not well grounded in the literature. If you want to publish internationally, you need to ground your research in existing literature. Even if the phenomenon is new, there is always some literature you can connect to; e.g., for AI, you can still draw on earlier work on technology disruptions. If you want to publish internationally, you must identify the conversation you are joining, ideally within the target journal, and explicitly state what you add to that conversation.

Another piece of advice: read the journal you want to publish in. Journals have different writing styles and expectations. Identify qualitative papers in that journal and examine the information authors include, where they emphasize theory, methods, findings, and contributions. Also, look at the journal's aims and scope.

Moreover, finally, do not be sloppy. Formatting, spelling, and following author guidelines matter. Small mistakes can bias reviewers. Reviewers often look at the reference list; if they do not see papers from the target journal, they may say it does not fit. So, make the fit visible, including through citations that show you are engaging that journal's conversation.

REFERENCES

- Cornelissen, J. P. (2025). The problem with propositions: Theoretical triangulation to better explain phenomena in management research. *Academy of Management Review*, 50(2), 342-365. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2022.0297>
- Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational research methods*, 16(1), 15-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151>
- Welch, C., Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, E., Piekkari, R., & Plakoyiannaki, E. (2022). Reconciling theory and context: How the case study can set a new agenda for international business research. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 53(1), 4-26. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-021-00484-5>
- Wilhelm, M., Wölfl, K., Rosca, E., & Scholten, K. (2026). Advancing rigor in operations management qualitative research: From proceduralism to reflexive reasoning. *Journal of Operations Management*, 72(5), 753-769. <https://doi.org/10.1002/joom.70051>
- Woelfl, K., Kaufmann, L., & Carter, C. R. (2023). In the eye of the beholder: A configurational exploration of perceived deceptive supplier behavior in negotiations. *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 59(2), 33-61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jscm.12298>
- Woelfl, K., Ketchen, D. J., & Kaufmann, L. (2026). A configurational perspective on the quality of managers' counterfactual reflections. *Journal of Management*, 52(2), 518-551. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063241271244>

Authors



Interviewee

Katja Wölfl

Vienna University of Economics and Business
Welthandelspl. 1, 1020 Wien, Austria
katja.woelfl@wu.ac.at



Interviewer

Kenyth Alves de Freitas

Instituto de Ensino e Pesquisa Insper
Rua Quatã, n. 300, Vila Olímpia, CEP 04546-042, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
kenythaf@insper.edu.br



Interviewer

Renata Andreoni Barboza

Ibmec Business School
Rua Guilhermina Guinle, n. 272, Botafogo, CEP 22270-060, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
renata.barboza@professores.ibmec.edu.br