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# **Theorizing from qualitative research in public administration: Plurality through a combination of rigor and richness**

## **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 (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). Underpinning this, 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 (see Ospina, Esteve and Lee 2018, Feldman et al. 2004; and Brower et al. 2000 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 sub-field of network and collaborative governance. The first stage entailed a systematic narrative review of 31 qualitative studies published within six leading public administration journals (see Andrews and Esteve 2015). The second stage involved the development of a detailed narrative account of four case study articles - Bate (2000), Waring et al. (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 (Albert et al. 2008) that underpin theorizing from qualitative research: research design, analytic approach and theoretical contribution. 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 manuscript 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, prior to 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 (Perry and Kraemer 1986; Jensen and Rodgers 2001). Many criticize the derivation of qualitative accounts as opaque (Brower et al. 2000; Justice 2007; Tummers and Karsten 2012; Ospina et al. 2018) and cite the need to make ‘*choices explicit, consistent, and transparent throughout the research process*’ (Dodge

et al. 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 (Ospina et al. 2018; Brower et al. 2000). 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. While 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 et al. 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 (Stout 2013; McCurdy and Cleary 1984; 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; Mantere and Ketokivi 2013). Researchers familiarize themselves with empirical observations and aggregate through comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Gioia et al. 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 (see 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 ongoing engagement with extant theories and is increasingly associated with the development of 'new' hypotheses (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013; Tavory and Timmermans 2014) than induction (end-stage) and deduction (outset). Puzzles prompt exploratory inference, and subsequent development of the best-fitting explanations, thereby combining deduction and induction to produce theoretical and empirical insights ((Reichertz 2010; Klag and Langley 2013; Mantere and Ketokivi 2013). 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 (see Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

In summary, we note that deductive approaches start from extant theoretical understandings, inductive approaches start with an empirical orientation, and abductive approaches utilize

both in grappling with puzzles. Despite these differences, deduction, induction and abduction can each enable and support the generation of the conceptual leaps that underpin theorizing - although their trajectories 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 et al. 1999; Riccucci 2010b). Deduction is commonly used to test theory, whilst 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 tends to occur when authors both show their data, and tell their significance. 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 underpinning 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 (Klag and Langley 2013; Gioia et al. 2013; Gehman et al. 2018).

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 (Llewelyn 2003; Cornelissen and Durand 2014; Cornelissen 2017; Delbridge and Fiss 2013). This is argued to be evident both in how qualitative research is reported, and also in a trend towards translating qualitative data into transferable explanatory factors (Bluhm et al. 2011). Whilst 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 (Stout 2013; McCurdy and Cleary 1984; 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 et al. 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 sub-discipline 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 2015; 1997). Whilst 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; Rhodes and William 1996; O'Toole 1997).

Research in this sub-field 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 (McGuire 2006; Entwistle 2010). Exploration of a range of issues is evident, including: the internal dynamics of collaboration and the 'unique' strategies and skills of collaborative management (Meier and O'Toole 2001; Agranoff, 2006; McGuire 2006; Campbell 2012; O'Leary and Vij 2012); collaborative leadership (Waugh and Streib 2006); and the behavioural dimensions and experiences of collaboration (Purdy 2012; Reynaers 2014). It is, however, the theorizing process through qualitative research leading to the production of these insights, rather than network and collaborative governance per se, that is our core interest. 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 one.

- *Insert Figure One about here* –

*Stage one: 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 et al. 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 (Ospina et al. 2018, Andrews and Esteve 2015). Articles published within the period 2000 to 2017 were considered, in order to capture research prompted by the development of ‘joined-up’ organizations and collaborative structures, consistent with a shift towards 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 (for example, 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 those that 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. Purdy 2012; Weber and Khademian 2008; Leach 2006). This stage of the analysis resulted in the initial selection of a sample of 43 journal articles.

#### *Stage two: 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 UK focuses 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 three: analysis*

In stage 3, the review team began the process of analysis, that involved open and inclusive discussion of the 31 articles. This technique marks the first stage of a process that applies a series of thematic criteria to underpin analysis. Here these include: *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 analysed 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 analysed 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. 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 sub-set 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 et al. (2013), Ferlie and McGivern (2014), Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011) (for reference these are marked \* in the first column of table one in Online Appendix One). 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 et al. (2013) is indicative of interpretive or thematic

analyses that have been identified as underrepresented in leading management journals (see 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 table one in Online Appendix One) 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 highly 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, given only a fleeting mention. Beyond an often broad characterization of analytic approach, there is a concerning 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. Indeed, a substantial number make little mention of these at all. Those that do, tend to demonstrate abductive theorizing (seldom labelled 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 (Tummers and Karsten 2012; Suddaby, 2006). 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 – e.g. Moynihan (2009) identifies that the loss of rich data is associated with his decision to analyse 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. Walker et al. 2013; Saz-Carranza et al. 2016). However, our findings resonate with others in identifying that all too often aspects of the qualitative research process remain opaque (Ospina et al. 2018). This not only undermines the value of qualitative research but places serious limitations on the quality of theorizing on the grounds that studies fail to provide an adequate 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. In order to further unpack these elements and elaborate examples of the theorizing process, we now move to discuss four illustrative studies from the wider set.

### *Case studies of theorizing in qualitative research on network and collaborative governance*

In order 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 ‘home-grown’ 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 two 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 two-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, as usual, trying to keep the thing going" (Senior Nurse).*

*- Insert Figure Two about here -*

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 pre-determined 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 et al. (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 et al. (2013) lies partly in an inductive approach applied in order to understand and explain the impact of partnership configuration on local implementation. This allowed the authors to challenge dominant perceptions of network governance effects and, as a result, specify and present a theoretical model in figure form (see figure three, Waring et al. 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.

*-- Insert Figure Three about here --*

Similar to Bate (2000), Waring et al. (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 et al. (2013) boost explication of theorizing significantly by detailing the research process through eight paragraphs of text and a supporting figure (see extract in figure four). 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 (see Gioia et al. 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 et al. (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, whilst narrative reporting incorporates illustrative quotes. Note, Waring et al. (2013) are unusual in actively reporting on a full range of data, including that derived from policy documents and clinical operating procedures (see figure five for examples).

- *Insert Figures Four and Five about here* -

### **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. Labelled 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<sup>1</sup> - and in so doing they use the the presumptive and conjectural premise of abduction (see 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 healthcare state in the UK 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 one) that elaborates five aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> 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"

‘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.

*- Insert Table One about here -*

While 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 obscure 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 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, whilst 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 presented along the way. However, San-Carranza and Ospina are a little more circumspect when presenting a framework for governing whole networks, using words such as ‘tentative’, ‘emergent’ and ‘preliminary’. 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 paper runs to nearly 40 pages, emphasizing the trade-off between length and depth in qualitative research. This demonstrates the importance of editorial discretion in the publication of qualitative research. 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 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 two below). 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 three below), supplemented by a discussion that ‘tells’ a nuanced account of the experience of managing network dilemmas, with selective quotations that lend credibility to theorizing.

*- Insert Tables Two and Three about here -*

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

*- insert Table Four about here -*

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, we suggest 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 (see also Ospina et al. 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. Whilst authors should be transparent, we should expect and accommodate a plurality of forms of data analysis, coding and reporting. So, while we are clear that high levels of transparency in all elements of the research process boosts theorizing, our procedural assessment criteria are reflective of the absence of a set template and standard for explicating analytic approach and thereby signals 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 procedural assessment criteria – 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 were inductive and abductive. Our case study analysis portrayed 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 et al. (2013) provide a 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 the procedural assessment criteria. 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 fulfil 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 in 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 sub-discipline. Future research that systematically reviews qualitative study in other sub-fields 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 discussion of qualitative scholarship in public administration. We generate evidence that suggests the need for an over-arching but nuanced set of principles that address the need for consistency and connection within the research process. These 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 sub-fields of public administration. We note also that our findings are likely to have relevance beyond qualitative research, with clear potential to speak to debates on mixed methods research (Atkins & 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).

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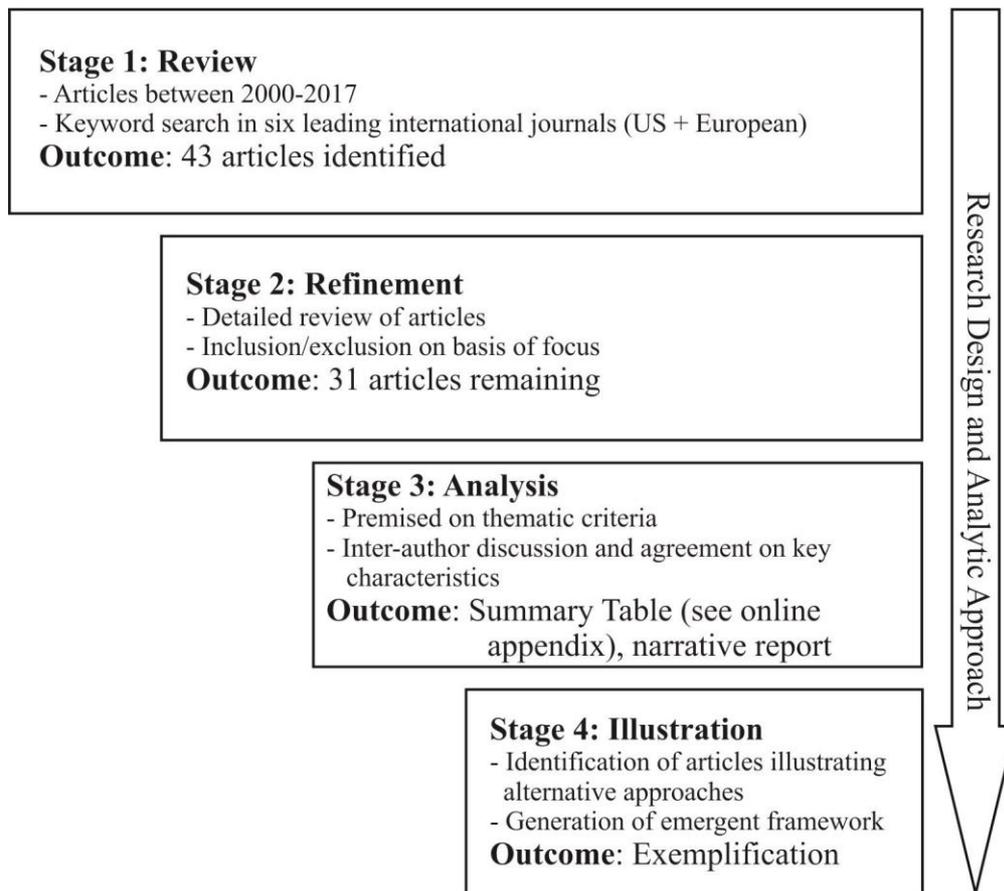
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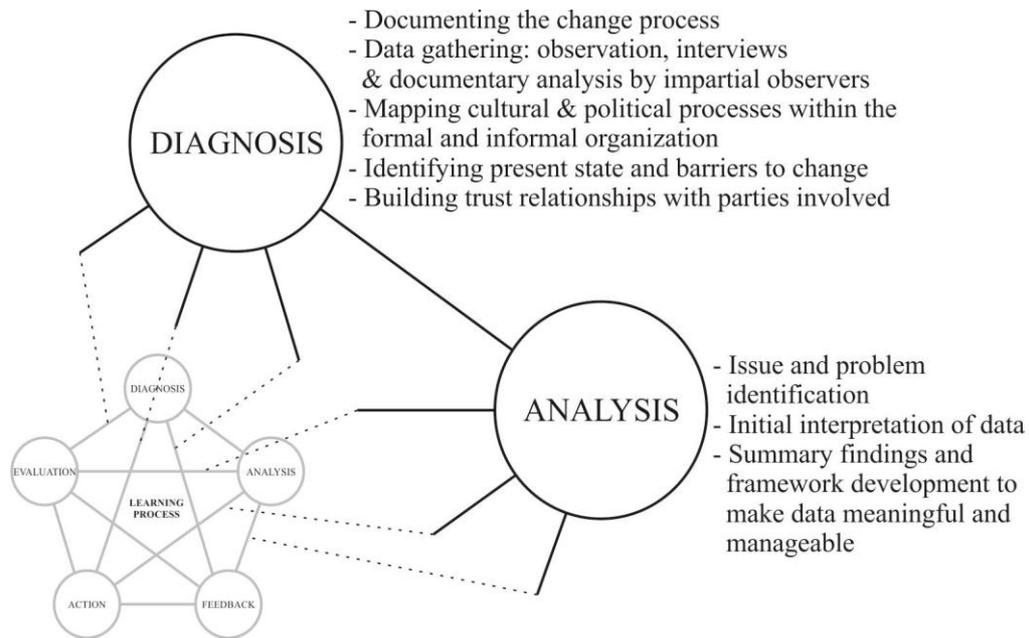
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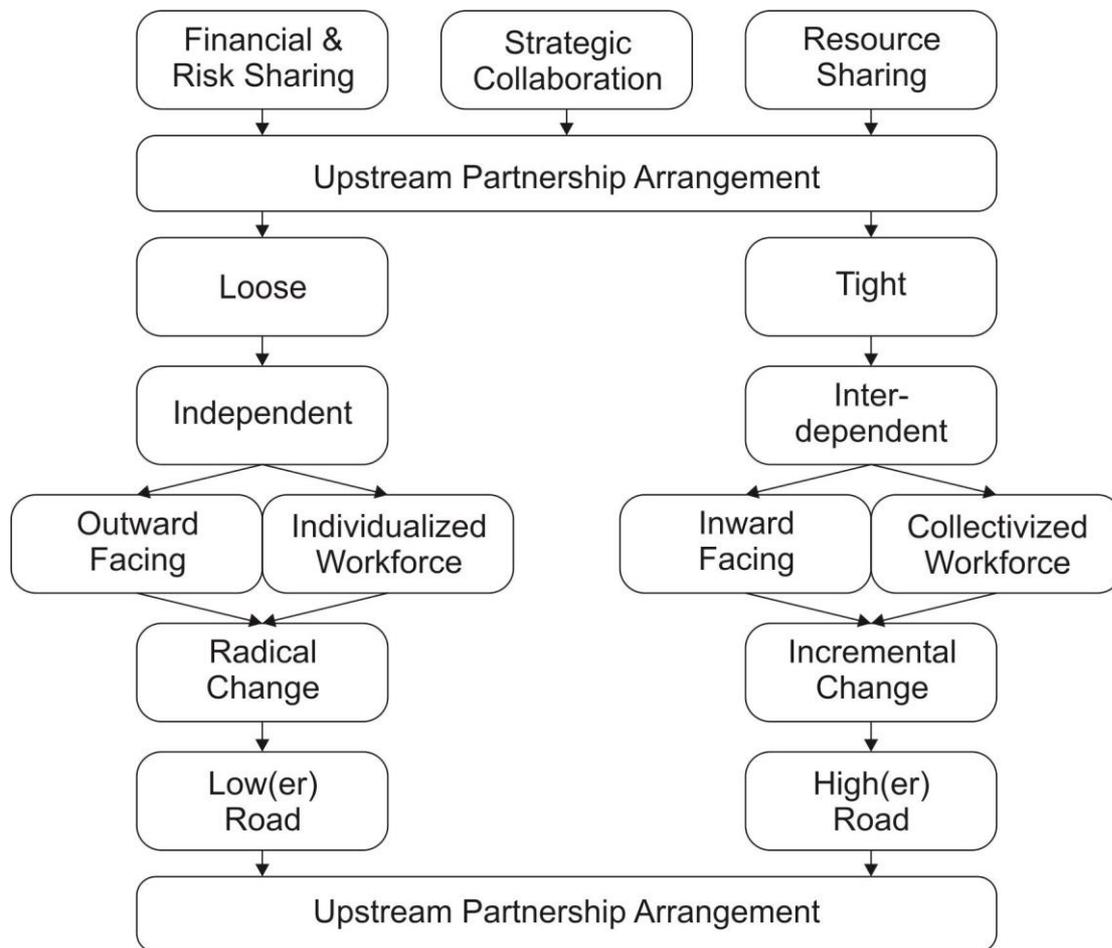
**Figure 1: Research Design and Analytic Approach**



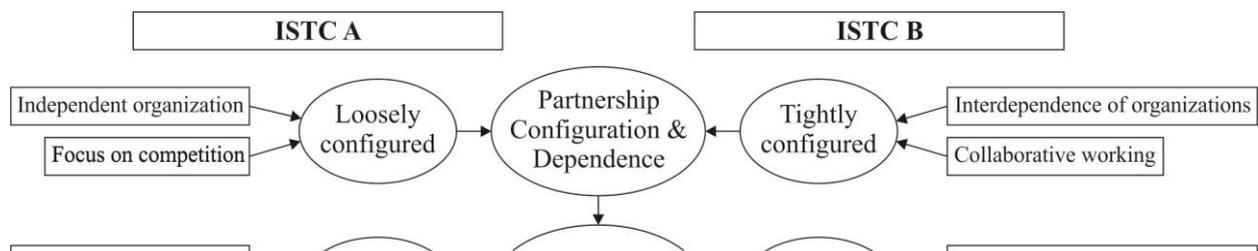
**Figure 2: Extract from ‘Implementing change: the ‘action research’ approach (Bate, 2000, 487)**



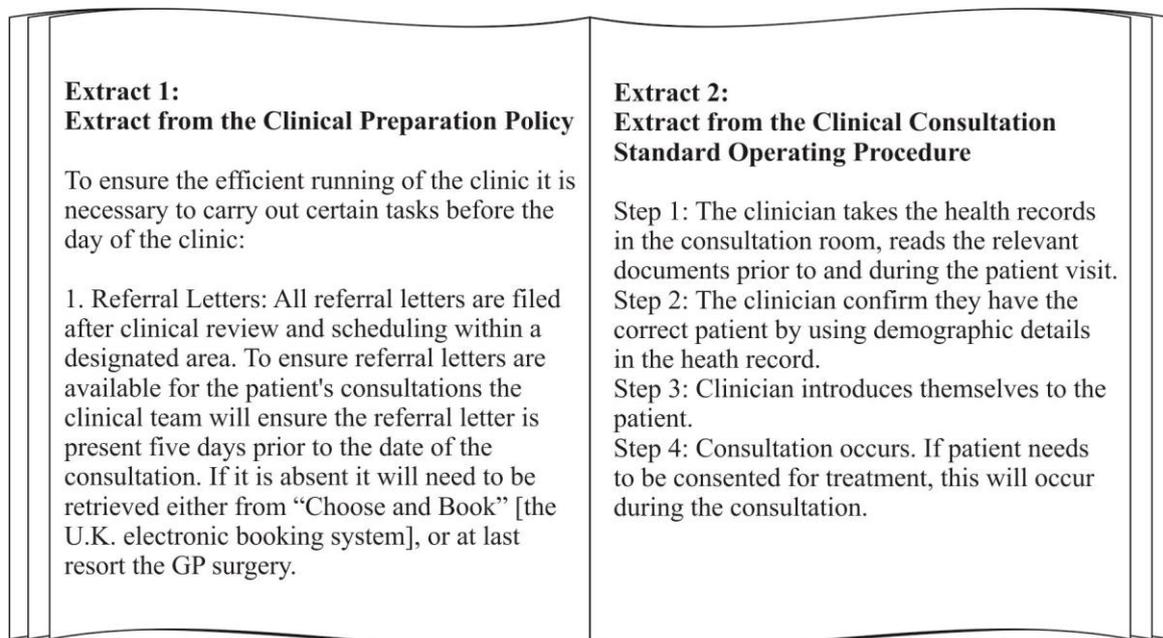
**Figure 3. Waring et al. (2013, 324) model of empirical findings and conceptual relationships**



**Figure 4: Partial Extract from Summary of Coding and Analysis (Waring et al., 2013, 318)**



**Figure 5: Document excerpts from Waring et al. (2013, 320)**



**Table 1: Extract from ‘The Key arguments of anglo-governmentality and network governance contrasted together with our contribution’ (Ferlie and McGivern, 2014, 77)**

The Key Arguments of Anglo-Governmentality and Network Governance Contrasted Together with Our Contribution			
	Characteristics	Examples	Network Governance Paradigm
Existing Anglo-governmentality theory (Miller and Rose 2008)			
1. Power-knowledge nexus (Miller and Rose 2008, 9)	New sciences that claim to manage deviant subjectivities “rationally”; the learned professions and the State as ensemble	The “psy sciences” such as psychology; evidence-based medicine’s technical apparatus	Radically distinct: professions are just one of many legitimate stakeholders
2. New relation between politics and expertise (Miller and Rose 2008, 212)	Invasion of the world of public services professionals by external, pervasive yet mundane control technologies: financially based “grey sciences”; “accountization”	Audit; financial and budgeting controls; performance measurement systems	Radically distinct: Evidence-based Policy as a “postideological” shift in politics; Little interest in or critique of “techniques of inscription”;

**Table 2: Extract illustrating links between codes across phases of the research (Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011, 337)**

The Route from Initial Codes to Reported Findings			
Final Codes—Study One (Emergent)	Comment on Code Evolution	Final Codes—Study Two (Theory and Emergent)	Thematic Findings
Objectives	No change in code	Objectives	Included in framing
Trust	No change in code	Trust	Included in generating unity
Open structure	Two structure-related codes were introduced: structure and NAO.	Open structure	Included in framing and bridging

**Table 3: Extract illustrating tensions relative to diversity and unity in networks from Saz-Carranza and Ospina (2011, 347)**

Quotes Exemplifying Diversity and Unity Poles in Networks and the Tension Experienced by NAO Staff				
	National Network	Midwest Network	East Network	West Network
Unity: Shared goal	Ultimately there’s a really strong focus that unites us all in focusing on worker development	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.	When [you] have the right issues because of the level of energy and the sort of realness that [the members] have . . . they’re all there . . . pushing for it . . . [people] from a lot of communities are coming together.	We are united because we all advocate for immigrant rights . . . we all work with immigrants.

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

<b>Design</b> <b>(Why the authors conducted the research in the way they did)</b>	<b>A: Analysis</b> <b>(How authors move from data to claims)</b>	<b>C: Contribution</b> <b>(So What - the substance of the author contribution)</b>
<p><i>Why they adopted a qualitative approach?</i></p> <p>Why did they choose certain qualitative methods in particular for this topic?</p>	<p><i>How are theoretical and conceptual frameworks employed in the analysis of the data?</i></p> <p>How has theory informed the analysis?</p> <p>How was the analysis/coding process operationalized?</p>	<p><i>What is the empirical contribution?</i></p> <p>Does the setting produce novel insights?</p> <p>What does the qualitative evidence add to prior findings (including quantitative)?</p>
<p><i>Why this setting and sample (case studies and/or participants)</i></p> <p>How does the context speak to the research questions?</p> <p>Why was this sample selected?</p> <p>What was the approach for identifying organizations, interviewees or focus group participants?</p> <p>What was the role of the researcher?</p>	<p><i>How are data presented relative to the analysis/coding framework outlined in the methods section?</i></p> <p>How is analysis/coding evidenced and illustrated?</p> <p>How is supporting data presented?</p> <p>Is it clear how the full range of data utilized?</p>	<p><i>What type of theoretical contribution do the authors convey?</i></p> <p>Do they claim to build theory?</p> <p>Do they elaborate theory?</p>
<p><i>Why did they collect these data?</i></p> <p>Which topics are interview questions and resulting data oriented around?</p> <p>What is the balance of data sources collected vs. those reported in the article?</p>	<p><i>How are the data employed in order to create a convincing narrative?</i></p> <p>Does the narrative rely on description or author interpretation?</p> <p>Do the authors use qualitative data (e.g. quotations) to develop thick description or selective illustrative examples?</p>	<p><i>What future implications are reported?</i></p> <p>To what extent do authors contextualize their findings relative to the trajectory of contemporary debates?</p> <p>Do they make suggestions for further theoretical development and refinement?</p>
<p><i>Why did they adopt a particular coding approach?</i></p> <p>What informed this?</p>	<p><i>How are the data shown in order to demonstrate credibility of account?</i></p> <p>Is alignment or tension between data sources reported?</p> <p>Is sufficient data provided to support claims?</p>	<p><i>Can the findings be generalized and on what basis?</i></p> <p>Do authors reflect on the wider relevance of their findings, e.g. given the focus on particular participants and organizations?</p> <p>Do they consider how their research might be applied to alternative contexts?</p>