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Introduction to the Special Issue: Qualitative Methods in Research on Human Resource Management

1. Developments and issues in qualitative research

Interest in qualitative research has increased in recent years regarding its relevance for developing the field of strategy and Human Resource Management further. Strategy and management research includes numerous examples of high quality studies using qualitative methods that have contributed to this field. Moreover, highly ranked management journals have published special issues on qualitative research. Especially in the realm of Human Resource Management, a strong discussion on the status of theory and research has evolved (see e.g. Deadrick/Stone 2008). The increasing amount of articles regarding this topic displays that there is a growing demand for discussing the purpose, methods and the contribution of qualitative research (Pratt 2008). The Academy of Management has institutionalized workshops at their annual meetings where researchers share ideas and discuss qualitative research methods with a close link to their current research projects. In 2008 the German Academic Association for Business Research invited scholars to a pre-conference workshop at their annual meeting to discuss and reflect upon qualitative methods. Given this increase in the relevance of qualitative research methods, the German Journal of Human Resource Research is pleased to present a special issue on “Qualitative Methods in Research on Human Resource Management”.

Qualitative research can be understood as a complex, changing and contested field that is a site of multiple methodologies and research practices. Qualitative research is what Punch (2005, 134) calls an “umbrella term” which encompasses not a single entity, but is multidimensional and pluralistic. Unsurprisingly, because of the range of paradigms that apply to virtually every part of the research process, qualitative research inevitably draws on a wide range of different tools, techniques and procedures (Creswell 1998). Especially with regards to the collection and analysis of qualitative data, textbooks propose a repertoire of techniques, with a set of different techniques being applied to the same body of data, illuminating different and even contradictory aspects (Denzin/Lincoln 1998; Punch 2005; Silverman 2006).

Qualitative research subsumes different research designs, including biographies, phenomenological and ethnomethodological studies (Hammersley 1992), grounded theory studies (Glaser/Strauss 1967; Strauss/Corbin 2008), biographical, historical, and action methods (Denzin/Lincoln 1998) and case studies (Dooley 2002; Eisen-

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