

# Enhancing qualitative research in international business: challenges and best practices from fieldwork to publication

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Received 30 April 2025  
Revised 16 June 2025  
Accepted 27 June 2025

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to address key challenges in conducting qualitative research within international business (IB), focusing on the role of theory, authenticity, theorizing and quality criteria.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper acknowledges the pluralism inherent in qualitative research and its relevance to IB, identifying four key challenges: (1) positioning theory within qualitative research, (2) maintaining authenticity in research practices, (3) theorizing from qualitative research, and (4) evaluating trustworthiness. The authors offer suggestions based on their experiences to help researchers navigate these challenges.

**Findings** – The paper suggests that qualitative IB researchers often struggle due to the lack of standardized methodologies and the complexity introduced by pluralism. However, it emphasizes the potential of qualitative research in IB, particularly for understanding complex, evolving IB phenomena.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper provides suggestions on how to improve the research contributions to IB scholarship by embracing the special characteristics of qualitative research.

**Practical implications** – The paper offers operationalizations and examples of how qualitative IB researchers can address the outlined challenges related to the role of theory, authenticity, theorizing, and quality criteria in practice.

**Social implications** – The paper brings forth ways of improving qualitative IB research quality, and therefore also increasing its research impact.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes to the growing discourse on pluralism in IB research, offering a comprehensive overview of challenges faced by qualitative researchers. It provides practical advice for overcoming these challenges and advocates for a more inclusive, contextually grounded approach to IB theorizing.

**Keywords** Critical thinking, Authenticity, International business, Qualitative research, Theorizing

**Paper type** Viewpoint



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Critical Perspectives on  
International Business  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
1742-2043  
DOI 10.1108/cpoib-04-2025-0103

## 1. Introduction

Qualitative research is particularly suitable for international business (IB) as it captures the richness, openness and complexity of rapidly evolving phenomena such as globalization, digital transformation and sustainability. It is uniquely suited to problematizing theories, opening the “black box” of IB phenomena, examining internationalization processes in depth and uncovering the “how” and “why” behind observed outcomes, while accounting for diverse contextual influences (Doz, 2011). Qualitative research involves naturalistic inquiry, where researchers fully immerse themselves – physically, mentally and psychologically – in the study’s environment, engage with participants and generate detailed, open-ended and localized accounts of the field. It draws on multiple sources of data that capture diverse actors’ experiences and perspectives, hence allowing for holistic understanding and avoiding hegemonic interpretation of investigated phenomena. It “starts from and returns to words, talk, and texts as meaningful representation of concepts” (Gephart, 2004, p. 455), generating evidence not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification.

Pluralism is inherent to the practice of qualitative research as it “accommodates different paradigms and different styles of research and research reporting” (Bansal and Corley, 2011, p. 234). This diversity has not always been realized in IB with Welch *et al.* (2011, 2022) arguing for openness in terms of different paradigmatic perspectives, modes of inference and theorizing styles. It also paints a rich and versatile picture of qualitative research allowing for critically questioning dominant academic axioms and discourses, as well as managerial orthodoxy in the IB field. However, pluralism adds complexity to qualitative research, which can, in various ways, lead to a fragmented understanding of what it entails and a false *laissez-faire* impression of how to conduct research, potentially posing challenges for IB scholars.

While we acknowledge that we cannot be exhaustive, we outline four of these key challenges below. First, we discuss the role of theory in qualitative research having in mind that researchers often struggle to position themselves under the “exploratory study” straitjacket. We then turn to the second challenge: retaining authenticity, i.e. genuinely and accurately representing participants’ perspectives, experiences and social realities in the conduct and reporting of qualitative research. There are typically no standardized methodological procedures to collecting and analyzing data that would set a unified norm for good qualitative research. Qualitative researchers undergo unique, personal journeys that are reported faithfully to enhance trustworthiness by demonstrating the suitability and plausibility of their methodological choices. The third challenge deals with theorizing from qualitative research, placing emphasis on the different theorizing styles. Traditionally, qualitative research has been related to the notion of transferability of the findings facilitated by propositional theorizing. Following calls for paradigmatic diversity, qualitative scholars increasingly acknowledge the limits of propositional theorizing and search for alternative approaches that promote particularization and contextualization instead of replication. The fourth challenge addresses the quality criteria used to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research. It is linked to the misconception that qualitative studies are haphazard or unscientific if they do not satisfy template-thinking or “positivistic” criteria such as reliability and validity. This challenge is possibly the most difficult to contend with for qualitative researchers, as it fundamentally questions the legitimacy of qualitative research.

These interconnected challenges create confusion for qualitative scholars in IB, often leading them to adopt a defensive stance as they invest considerable effort in justifying their right to pursue qualitative research. Our developmental suggestion for the IB community is to channel these efforts to educate readers about the opportunities and benefits vested in qualitative research. Drawing on our experiences as qualitative scholars, we provide practical guidance in the form of best practices, to support researchers in conducting and

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publishing qualitative work in *Critical Perspectives on International Business* (CPOIB) and other IB journals.

## 2. Navigating key challenges of qualitative research

### 2.1 *The limits of exploration*

Most qualitative research in IB has been used for exploration rather than theory extension or theory testing. This aligns with broader trends in the field of management, where the legitimacy of qualitative research is often tied to its exploratory role, with terms such as exploration, induction and theory-building used synonymously and interchangeably (Welch *et al.*, 2013).

This emphasis on qualitative research as primarily exploratory has led to a preference for qualitative positivism, that “uses nonquantitative methods within traditional positivistic assumptions about the nature of social or organizational reality and the production of knowledge” (Prasad and Prasad, 2002, p. 7). This paradigmatic approach largely assumes a concrete and apprehensible reality understood through so-called objective methods of data collection that produce generalizable knowledge. It distinguishes between inductive frameworks derived from in-depth empirical research and deductive models validated through hypothesis testing. Under this paradigmatic approach, the role of qualitative research has primarily been confined to inductive theory building, where researchers deliberately avoid engaging with preexisting theory at the outset, as this “might bias or compromise the findings” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 536).

It is important to note that the term “induction” has become problematic, having been applied to such a broad range of theoretical endeavors that it has lost much of its original meaning. Despite its widespread acceptance as a means of legitimizing qualitative research, scholars have questioned its promise to generate novel, empirically based theories. For instance, Klag and Langley (2013, p. 151) explain how being theory agnostic can potentially endanger the theorizing in qualitative research and lead to naïve empiricism. They note that developing an understanding of the world assumes connecting with existing theory and therefore induction – understood as “the production of generalizations through extrapolation from the observation of particularities” (Klag and Langley, 2013, p. 151) – can be problematic. This approach risks promoting a form of naïve empiricism, which overlooks the unavoidable influence of preexisting theoretical frameworks (however vague or implicit) on the development of new insights. Hence, theory building, which emerges from the continuous weaving and iteration of data, ideas and theories (Klag and Langley, 2013), featuring more closely the characteristics of abductive research, is potentially hampered if dialogical tensions are nonexistent and the relationship between the theoretical and empirical (data) worlds remains unquestioned due to a lack of theoretical engagement.

For example, Bendassolli (2013) observes that qualitative scholars need to go beyond induction in theorizing, i.e. with induction, qualitative research is able to describe and propose theories, but for the needs of explanation, also abduction and/or iteration with deduction are needed (e.g. in the form of grounded theory). Theorizing in qualitative research calls for creativity and intellectual acts from the researcher to observe and create connections between the phenomenon, data and theory (Bendassolli, 2013), which is more than what induction affords. Especially in IB, where the research questions can be both theory and phenomenon-driven (Doz, 2011), the linkages between theory and data do not seamlessly fit (only) into the inductive mold. Limiting qualitative research to inductive inferences significantly crops the theorizing potential vested in qualitative studies, curbing also the theoretical development of the field.

## 2.2 *The template trap*

As noted above, qualitative research entails multiple paradigms and philosophical traditions not always realized in IB (Welch *et al.*, 2011, 2022). It is a vibrant and contested field that accommodates positivist approaches (Prasad and Prasad, 2002) as well as alternative traditions such as social constructivism, interpretivism and critical realism (for further discussion, see Aguzzoli *et al.*, 2024). This paradigmatic diversity results in a lack of boilerplate in qualitative research, namely, there are no universally accepted templates or standardized structures for conducting and presenting studies. This diversity presents challenges for qualitative scholars in the IB field, as they must navigate expectations of rigor and relevance required for publication. Although qualitative research requires prolonged and deep engagement in the field, fostering intimacy with local settings that make each study a unique and personal journey, qualitative scholars still strive for a clear blueprint in their writings. This is evident in standardized qualitative manuscripts, where authors often downplay the importance of authenticity – representing participants’ perspectives and experiences in a way that faithfully reflects the study’s context (Schwandt *et al.*, 2007) – in their methodological reporting, concealing the “how” and “why” behind their decisions and actions in the field. Socialized into the disciplinary conventions of IB, we come to understand methodology as an impersonal and detached demonstration of study’s investigative procedures. Methodology is often applied and reported in generic or formulaic manner that does not do justice to the idiosyncrasies of the field or reduces fieldwork in simplistic linear steps. This practice is associated with the disciplinary conventions that often serve as templates or formulas and set expectations on how qualitative research should look like. Templates make it possible to report methodological decisions more efficiently and in a familiar and acceptable way to its intended audience. However, they also stifle creativity by promoting a uniform way of conducting qualitative research. Hence, they should be mindfully used, considering both advantages and disadvantages. Gioia *et al.* (2013, pp. 25–26) note:

[...] a number of methodology sections now seem to be adopting formats and procedural descriptions that are almost identical to those in the published works. [...] When the approach is treated as a template or cookbook, it not only constrains its innovative possibilities, but also seems to get in the way of using it to address one of its main intents: rigorously demonstrating connections between data and theory.

Hence, standardizing reporting may make a study more easily digestible, but it does not necessarily enhance its quality. In fact, it may overlook the nuanced and context-specific insights that qualitative research seeks to capture.

Another example of template thinking that sets expectations of how qualitative research should be conducted is the use of qualitative interviews and case studies as the sole methods to collect qualitative data. Indeed, it has been a convention in the field of IB that qualitative research equals only interviews and case studies. However, this is only partially true given there are numerous ways of conducting interviews and case studies on top of the vast array of other methods and approaches that can be used to design qualitative studies, as well as to collect and analyze data. However, qualitative scholars are willing to compromise the authenticity of their work as long as the aforementioned approaches ensure better chances for publication. Obviously, this generates a vicious circle leading to the rise in numbers of published qualitative interviews and case studies at the expense of other, potentially more suitable or revelatory qualitative approaches such as visual methods and art-based research (Clarke and Holt, 2017; Lehtonen, 2023).

Similarly, authors frequently draw on conventions or templates when they consider sampling processes (generic use of purposeful sampling), the data sources of the study or

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quality criteria (misconceptions about the notion of generalization) in qualitative research. These aspects are many times briefly and superficially reported in qualitative studies. As a result, they remain a black box, preventing readers from understanding what has happened during fieldwork, which compromises the dynamism, creativity and richness of qualitative research.

### 2.3 Theorizing through constructs

As qualitative researchers, we convert our engagement in the field into theoretical insights that plot together the empirical and theoretical worlds. As noted above, theory and methodology are interconnected and hence, our methodological decisions shape the ways we develop theory, i.e. our theorizing practices. The multiplicity of perspectives in qualitative research assumes different understandings of theory and, hence practices of theorizing, each producing its own distinct theoretical contributions. Theorizing styles produce explanations ranging from relationships among constructs and variables to thick descriptions based on rich and contextualized narratives (Cornelissen, 2017). The emphasis on constructs and variables has dominated theorizing practices in qualitative research in IB (see Welch *et al.*, 2011, 2022). Proponents of this theorizing style recognize that phenomena of interest are best understood when considered in terms of constructs and relationships between constructs that explain phenomena in a general way (see e.g. the Eisenhardt method and Gioia method). Viewed in this light, constructs help to generalize and systematize findings, make them more applicable across different contexts and enhance the study's scientific veracity. Focusing on constructs is also viewed by some scholars as a way to "mitigate" the potential subjectivity of qualitative research driven solely by narratives. This comes from the lingering perception that qualitative research is too interpretive and "biased", which can lead to findings being overly influenced by the researcher's personal perspective or interpretations. The mainstream deductive reporting tradition gives a further push to qualitative scholars to resort to reduction, i.e. it is more straight forward to report a study simplified to a selected set of constructs than as an iterative, contextualized learning story.

The emphasis on constructs leads to a specific view of what counts as theory and is realized in propositional theorizing. Propositional theorizing considers that the theoretical products of qualitative research are suitable for further testing with quantitative methods. For instance, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, p. 25) consider qualitative case study to produce testable propositions that bridge "qualitative evidence to mainstream deductive research." Commenting on their method, Gioia *et al.* (2013) note that it bridges "the often wide gulf between qualitative and quantitative researchers" (Gioia *et al.*, 2013, p. 11). Propositional theorizing is, in this light, closely linked to the reductionist tradition yet prevailing in IB research, where, for theories to be generally applicable, they need to reduce the rich reality they are engendered from to a few theoretical concepts (Burgelman, 2011). To meet the reductionist theorizing standards, qualitative researchers are often forced to leave out, e.g. context, despite its explanatory power and meaning, since it brings to theorizing complexity and particularity (which some may call phenomenon-driven truthfulness), instead of mere (atomistic) generalizability.

Propositional theorizing has been widely used in IB and broader management but also criticized. Delbridge and Fiss (2013, p. 327) consider theorizing through propositions is "a double-edged sword." On the one hand, propositions capture reality in memorable statements offering clarity of constructs and relationships between constructs. On the other hand, propositional theorizing reduces complexity as it points to a single, linear reality that is independent of the researcher and context. Criticism also stems from its linear and formulaic logic that departs from the contextual richness and interpretive tradition of qualitative

research (Bansal and Corley, 2011). Propositional theorizing can also limit critical engagement with the data, reducing the opportunity to question, critique, or expand upon existing IB theories, and discouraging alternative perspectives and the emergence of unexplored, innovative findings, marginalized voices and contextual idiosyncrasies. We echo Cornelissen's (2017, p. 379) concerns about the "quantitative refashioning of qualitative research" and encourage qualitative IB researchers to steer away from propositional theorizing to embrace the diversity of theorizing styles and hence, the richness and variety of theories.

#### 2.4 The "validity crisis"

The title of this section draws on Dennis (2013), who discusses the term "validity crisis" in qualitative research. This term refers to ongoing debates and challenges concerning the reliability and applicability of findings in qualitative studies. While qualitative approaches aim to capture complex social realities and diverse perspectives, concerns about maintaining objectivity and ensuring replicability have prompted the development of more rigorous strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of such research. Qualitative scholars frequently face criticism that the field lacks clear standards, leading to perceptions that qualitative studies are subjective and inconsistent, and therefore fall short of established quality criteria.

This challenge is perhaps the most difficult to address, as it questions the need for and the legitimacy of qualitative research. However, this challenge has also made qualitative scholars to actively pursue the clarification of terminology and rhetoric, oftentimes by aligning their research practices with those of quantitative research, and adopting quality criteria that mimic quantitative standards or draw from qualitative positivist traditions (Prasad and Prasad, 2002; Welch and Piekkari, 2017).

When criteria are a part of a study's methodological reporting, they seek, for example, to establish the representativeness of qualitative samples, the neutrality of qualitative researchers as well as "mainstream" conceptions of generalization, reliability and validity. In cases, this has resulted in doing "pseudo-qualitative" studies, where the researcher has followed "an implicit naïve positivist stance", forcing qualitative data and methods into quantitative mold (Paavilainen-Mäntymäki and Welch, 2013, p. 229). As a result, "providing criteria for its evaluation becomes a problematic process because what constitutes "good" research becomes a polysemous and somewhat elusive, concept." (Johnson *et al.*, 2006, p. 133).

A criterion, so far appraised and broadly used in qualitative research, also in IB (see e.g. Sinkovics *et al.*, 2008), is trustworthiness introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness further entails credibility (how truthful the derived findings are to the respondents' experiences and the research context), transferability (how broadly the findings are applicable to other contexts and situations), dependability (how likely similar findings might be derived if the study would be repeated) and confirmability (how explicitly the researcher's role in the interpretations is reported). As a follow-up, Lincoln and Guba (1986) addressed the issue of rigor within these criteria and concluded that they are incomplete. That is, due to their inherent roots in the positivist paradigm, the criteria should be complemented with the concept of authenticity to capture the quality of qualitative studies. In qualitative IB scholarship researchers have also noted challenges in applying the classical trustworthiness criteria. For instance, criteria prioritizing researcher neutrality can be challenging to implement in qualitative studies, which acknowledge that researchers actively influence the research process through their perspectives and interactions. In addition, positivist standards emphasize structured, predetermined methods, whereas qualitative research relies on flexibility, emergent themes and iterative data collection and analysis. Replicability, a

fundamental positivist criterion, poses challenges for qualitative research, as findings are shaped by unique interactions, social contexts and temporal factors that cannot be precisely replicated.

Similarly, the concept of rigor has been criticized for imposing too rigid and ontologically and epistemologically unfitting standards to qualitative studies, undermining their complexity and richness (Yadav, 2022). An alternative, also criticized but that has received more support, is transparency, defined, for example, by Reuber and Fischer (2022) as the clear situating and contextualization of the study to its ongoing phenomenon-driven, methodological and research process-related discussions. According to Moravcsik (2020), transparency can enable research evaluation by making the researcher choices and interpretations visible, but at the same time it can conflict with the researcher obligation to protect the participant confidentiality and data sensitivity. Transparency has also been criticized for its, potentially misinterpreted, linking to the quantitative criteria of replicability and credibility, giving preference to other characteristics of trustworthiness, such as authenticity (Pratt et al., 2019).

A key feature for those engaging with qualitative research is access to adequate and compelling evidence regarding the main choices made throughout the study. This enables readers to:

- understand the researcher's reasoning and thought processes;
- contextualize the findings for meaningful application; and
- acquire the necessary insights to support learning from the research.

Best practices are studies that clearly report the aforementioned choices, aligning them with the study's ontological and epistemological assumptions.

These studies often break free from the constraints of the mainstream positivist mold typically imposed on qualitative IB research. In doing so, they have the potential to significantly advance IB theorizing. Such approaches resonate with CPOIB by challenging dominant assumptions, embracing complexity and fostering deeper, more contextualized understandings of IB phenomena.

### 3. Best practices in qualitative research

#### 3.1 Engaging with prior theory through abduction

Perhaps one of the most intriguing parts of qualitative research is when researchers confront the empirical world with theory. In doing so, the qualitative researcher brings forth their own analytical and critical sense-making and reflexivity, the human intelligence and creativity that transforms raw data into meaningful and justified contributions for the use of broader audience. For the qualitative researcher, there is no single reality, but the reality is experiential and (co-) constructed. Reality exists in reference to the observer, making the researcher an inseparable and integral part of the study as without her/his active efforts no observations, interpretation, analysis or sense-making takes place (Barbour, 2001; Sætre and Van de Ven, 2024), impeding the emergence of contribution. The researcher operates as the *primus motor* in turning the raw qualitative data into meaningful and justified implications.

While neglected for decades, abduction has been implicitly practiced by qualitative researchers who often subsume it under induction. Abduction has its roots in pragmatist philosophy and the work of Charles Sander Peirce, aiming at generating novel theoretical insights facilitated by theoretical sensitivity and methodological heuristics. It relies on the creativity of the researchers but also their theoretical understanding. Indeed:

[...] rather than setting all preconceived theoretical ideas aside during the research project, researchers should enter the field with the deepest and broadest theoretical base possible and develop their theoretical repertoires throughout the research process (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012, p. 180).

In other words, it allows the use of theory for framing a study as well as the modification of existing theories and addition of complementary theoretical lenses in the course of the study to make sense of diverse insights.

Abduction involves continuous iterations between theory and data which are triggered by hunches of unexpected findings and “genuine doubt” that signal a lack of fit between data and existing theory, providing the opportunity for the development of tentative explanations and theories (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021, 2024). Abduction has also caught the attention of qualitative IB scholars (e.g. Schembri *et al.*, 2023; Ritvala *et al.*, 2021, p. 290). For instance, Ritvala *et al.* (2021, p. 290) draw on abductive reasoning to explain a failed foreign market entry of Guggenheim to Helsinki. They explain how familiarity with relevant IB literature allowed them to identify the limits of existing explanations *vis-à-vis* the investigated phenomenon and redirect the study from a case of non-linear internationalization to a case of organizational stigma by local audiences toward the foreign entrant. The authors visualize the cycles of abductive iterations by means of a figure that shows how empirical world (Guggenheim case) is confronted with different theoretical lenses to reach a plausible explanation (Ritvala *et al.*, 2021).

We suggest that abductive reasoning pushes researchers to examine the underlying assumptions of established IB theories. Instead of accepting a theory as an absolute truth, it invites critical thinking about alternative explanations, especially those that may not align with established paradigms and theoretical frameworks, such as in cross-disciplinary research. This can lead to the development of fresh perspectives that challenge dominant academic discourses in IB by questioning the adequacy of current theories to explain emerging phenomena. This also encourages an open-minded approach to academic scholarship that can challenge established theories and spark new research ideas. In this way, a preconceived set of broadly used IB theories does not present itself anymore as an albatross around a researcher’s neck, but rather as a voluntary repository of alternative explanations, available for scholars if having a role in a study, yet not dictating the theoretical framework or the course of the research.

### 3.2 *Focusing on the researcher’s unique journey*

Qualitative research frequently requires adequate space for reporting so that the uniqueness and richness of the study are conveyed to the reader. Schwandt *et al.* (2007) consider qualitative research as a contextually embedded process of learning, change, negotiation and action, where the researcher collects, interprets and reports findings through an inseparably dialogical process with the participants and the research setting. According to Doz (2011), the quality of a qualitative study hinges on the trustworthiness and depth with which its methodological foundations are developed and communicated. Unlike standardized approaches, the qualitative journey is inherently unique – shaped by the evolving interplay between researcher, participants and context – making methodological grounding not just a procedural step, but a reflective and adaptive process central to the study’s contribution.

Indeed, some qualitative scholars thoroughly consider and craft their methodology to ensure the clarification of terminology and rhetoric, and the establishment of valuable and meaningful research. They embrace the view that methodology is not just a “hygiene factor” (Buchanan and Bryman, 2018, p. 277), instead it is the heart of research: what researchers see or do not see and how they see it in the field. The methodology (section) of a study reflects the thinking and reasoning of the researcher (e.g. induction, abduction, deduction);

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the research practices in the field (e.g. sampling, data sources); the researcher's understanding of academic quality (e.g. authenticity criteria); the theorizing and reporting processes (e.g. theory production based on our paradigmatic assumptions, researcher's positionality). It serves as a "backbone," ensuring that ontological and epistemological assumptions, methodological choices and resulting theoretical claims are coherent and aligned (Harley and Cornelissen, 2022 – for an example in IB that demonstrates this fit, see Geary and Aguzzoli, 2016).

For instance, sampling is a methodological decision that ideally conveys this connection between theory and data in qualitative research since what we select, determines what (and how) we theorize. Yet, sampling is frequently approached in a rather mechanistic manner without capturing researchers' experiences in the field. Sampling is also seen in a simplistic manner, as it is often reduced to a single, predetermined choice in an initial phase of a project. It is commonly described by the "umbrella" label of "purposeful sampling," which points to the (justified) selection of information-rich cases, groups and individuals (also units, contexts and concepts) *vis-à-vis* the phenomenon of interest. Purposeful sampling is loosely used in IB as it rarely involves theoretically nuanced explanations of how and why some units were preferred over others in terms of a study's paradigmatic assumptions and envisaged theoretical contributions (Fletcher *et al.*, 2018). In the IB context, Fletcher and Plakoyiannaki (2010) advocate that sampling is not a stable routine but a dynamic component of fieldwork, which emerges by interrogating the *what* (phenomenon, context, unit of analysis), *how* (sampling strategies), *when* (temporality of fieldwork) and *how many* (small-N or large-N observations) of a qualitative study.

To promote the standing of qualitative research in IB, we suggest that qualitative scholars emphasize the importance of detail, bricolage, truthfulness and authenticity in planning and implementing qualitative studies. In doing so, we recommend that scholars focus on producing rich, detailed accounts that reflect the complexity of their research settings. Embracing methodological flexibility, or bricolage, can help capture diverse perspectives, while researcher reflexivity and attention to positionality enhance trustworthiness. Prioritizing authenticity and resisting overly formulaic reporting allows researchers to more faithfully represent the lived realities of participants and advance qualitative inquiry in IB (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012). Furthermore, by making the often-arduous research process – and the reasoning behind key decisions – visible to readers, scholars can challenge the misconception that qualitative research cannot withstand close scrutiny. Johnson and Rasulova (2017) further this discussion through the transformative-emancipatory principle, arguing that qualitative studies can achieve ethical meaningfulness by staying true to the values and quality criteria inherent to qualitative research, including its commitment to authenticity (Guba, 2004).

### 3.3 Making room for different theorizing styles

Enhancing IB theorizing encourages a critical stance toward philosophical traditions that restrict qualitative research to exploratory purposes, hereby overlooking its potential for generating explanations (Plakoyiannaki *et al.*, 2019). Despite the popularity of propositional theorizing in IB, it often abstracts knowledge into generalizable, reduced statements, potentially overlooking the situated, contextual nature of social and organizational IB phenomena. Rather than emphasizing generalizable claims, phenomena can also be understood in terms of flows of activities and events (for examples see Langley *et al.*, 2013; Langley and Tsoukas, 2016), and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Ponterotto, 2006) associated with the theorizing style of contextualized explanations (Welch *et al.*, 2011, 2022).

By moving beyond this, qualitative research can highlight how theories function in different contexts, revealing limitations and blind spots. Contextualized explanation is quite different to propositional theorizing as it reconciles context and explanation to capture generative mechanisms in context and time, moving explanations from the general (away from context) to the idiographic level. Relevant examples in IB can be found in the work by [Amdam and Benito \(2022\)](#) and [Niittymies et al. \(2022\)](#). The study by [Amdam and Benito \(2022\)](#) obtains new understandings of the aspects impacting the first foreign direct investment (FDI) decision by conceptualizing clock, event, stages and cycles of time, i.e. the fine nuances behind the FDI decision, which would have been overlooked without paying dedicated attention to the temporal context changes during the longitudinal study. [Niittymies et al. \(2022\)](#), in turn, focus on company de-internationalization and, to explicate how different lenses can turn our focus to very different explanations, approach de-internationalization via comparative, interpretive and post-structuralist historical approaches, the first revealing causal relations, the second temporal embeddedness and the third individual behavior.

[Cornelissen \(2017\)](#) and [Delbridge and Fiss \(2013\)](#) highlight the potential of typological theorizing styles in advancing multi-dimensional understanding of investigated phenomena. Typological theorizing facilitates the development of configurational arguments, incorporating in theory development the notions of equifinality and asymmetric causal relations ([Fiss, 2011](#)). Typological theorizing has not been fully realized by qualitative scholars particularly in the field of IB. A recent example can be found in [Leppäaho et al. \(2022\)](#) who draw on this theorizing approach to explain how different types of family firms use social network mechanisms heterogeneously especially with respect to the post-entry phases of internationalization.

[Mintzberg \(2017, p. 8\)](#) emphasizes the explanatory duty of theories, and denotes that:

I see explanation along a continuum, from lists (categories), to typologies (comprehensive lists), to impressions of relationships among factors (not necessarily ‘variables’), to causations between and patterns among these relationships, to fully explanatory models (which interweave all the factors in question).

He considers theorizing to be an ongoing process, and the emergence of alternative explanations the primus motor for gaining new understanding of the complex reality. Viewed in this light, qualitative studies hold immense potential for explanation, offering the flexibility to embrace diverse theorizing styles and thereby fostering a richer understanding of IB phenomena.

### 3.4 Embracing contingent criteriology

Assessing the quality of qualitative research has sparked ongoing debates among relevant scholars (e.g. [Johnson et al., 2006](#)). As noted above, traditionally, qualitative researchers have often adhered to a fixed or universal set of criteria, either mirroring deductive quantitative scholarship or drawing from qualitative positivist traditions. These criteria aim to ensure the representativeness of qualitative samples, the neutrality of researchers, the replicability of findings and the conventional notions of reliability and validity ([Lincoln and Guba, 1986](#); [Amin et al., 2020](#)). We echo [Welch and Piekkari \(2017, p. 715\)](#) who suggest that pluralism invites “a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes ‘good’ qualitative research” which is in turn hindered by the authors’ efforts to “squeeze their study into the dominant template despite the inconsistencies this may produce.” We suggest that any effort to assess and increase the trustworthiness in qualitative research invites reflexivity and awareness of the researcher’s philosophical commitments that shape qualitative criteria and

the study's (methodological) reporting. To address these limitations, qualitative researchers often adopt alternative frameworks, such as Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability – better suited to the epistemological foundations of qualitative inquiry. To complement, or substitute, the established trustworthiness criteria, Amin *et al.* (2020) provide an overview of operable authenticity criteria for qualitative researchers, consisting of fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity presented by Guba (2004). Table 1 offers a synthesis of their operationalization in qualitative IB research.

As a result, we suggest that, in alignment with Amin *et al.* (2020), Guba (2004), Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Lincoln and Guba (1986), qualitative IB scholars could choose the relevant trustworthiness criteria for their research, but also potentially complement these criteria with authenticity, or resort to the authenticity criteria altogether. As has been witnessed, advocating for a “new” quality criterion such as authenticity may demand additional effort from researchers. However, this effort is worthwhile, as authenticity speaks directly to the unique strengths of qualitative inquiry, ensuring that context-rich, revelatory and novel insights are not dismissed or constrained by traditional, ill-fitting quality assessments.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper strived to offer qualitative scholars – the readership of CPOIB and other IB journals alike – practical suggestions in support of conducting qualitative studies in a manner

**Table 1.** Authenticity as an alternative quality criterion in IB research

Authenticity criteria by Guba (2004, p. 45)	Application of authenticity criteria in IB
Fairness “The extent to which all competing constructions of reality, as well as their underlying value structures, have been accessed, exposed, deconstructed, and taken into account in shaping the inquiry product, that is, the emergent reconstruction”	Allowing the most plausible explanation to emerge abductively from the research process, rather than being anchored to a predetermined presumption of reality or a preconceived theoretical stance
Ontological authenticity “The extent to which individual respondents’ (and the inquirer’s) early constructions are improved, matured, expanded, and elaborated, so that all parties possess more information and become more sophisticated in its use”	Conveying the iterative learning of both the researchers and research participants throughout the research process, and illustrating how this learning contributes to (hermeneutic) knowledge creation
Educative authenticity “The extent to which individual respondents (and the inquirer) possess enhanced understanding of, appreciation for, and tolerance of the constructions of others outside their own stakeholding group”	Accepting, acknowledging and embracing pluralism, multiple perspectives and alternative explanations of the studied phenomenon
Catalytic authenticity “The extent to which action (clarifying the focus at issue, moving to eliminate or ameliorate the problem, and/or sharpening values) is stimulated and facilitated by the inquiry process”	Aligning the study’s ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiomatic approaches to support the study’s purpose and the role of the researcher in the inquiry process
Tactical authenticity “The degree to which participants are empowered to take the action(s) that the inquiry implies or proposes”	Protecting participants’ rights and integrity while creating a safe, trusting environment for sharing insights with the researcher

**Source(s):** Adapted from Guba (2004)

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## CPOIB

that respects the characteristics of qualitative studies, and allows their true voices to be heard while making theoretical contributions to the IB field. It draws directly from our experiences as qualitative researchers and from ongoing conversations with fellow qualitative researchers and teaching qualitative methods to PhD students. These discussions have served as critical forums for reflecting on the complexities of qualitative inquiry, the evolving role of the researcher, and the pressures introduced by emerging technologies. By grounding our reflections in these collective experiences, we aim to present a situated, practice-informed contribution to current debates in qualitative research.

We envisage qualitative research “as field of thousand flowers blooming” (see [Van Maanen, 1995](#), p. 133), embracing pluralism in our practices and theorizing is inevitable and desirable. If we were to build our existing knowledge using a single “template” or “boilerplate,” much of social reality would remain beyond our grasp, resulting in a deficient and one-sided understanding. Here, pluralism in qualitative research plays an indisputable role in bringing rich, contextualized aspects of societal reality closer to us – particularly through thick descriptions. Plurality in theorizing not only implies consideration of different theorizing styles but also refashioning of the ways we engage with qualitative research, namely moving beyond the inductive template, conveying our personal journeys in the field as well as embracing contingent criteriology. [Table 2](#) summarizes the above-presented key challenges present in today’s qualitative IB studies, alternative best practices to mitigate them and the benefits these changes to qualitative studies may bring to IB scholarship.

**Table 2.** Key challenges and best practices in qualitative IB research

Key challenges	Best practices for overcoming key challenges	Implications for qualitative research in IB
The exploratory, inductive research straitjacket	<a href="#">Schembri, Fletcher and Buck (2023)</a> <a href="#">Ritvala, Granqvist and Piekkari (2021)</a>	Theorizing in qualitative research in IB relies on the researcher’s ability to creatively and convincingly justify connections between phenomena, data and theory
The template thinking in methodological reporting	<a href="#">Geary and Aguzzoli (2016)</a>	The conduct and analysis of qualitative research in IB rely on making the researcher’s unique reasoning, choices and thought processes explicit and accessible in the reporting
The emphasis on propositional theorizing	<a href="#">Amdam and Benito (2022)</a> <a href="#">Niittymies, Pajunen and Lamberg (2022)</a> <a href="#">Leppäaho, Jack and Plakoyiannaki (2022)</a>	Qualitative IB research embraces the emergence of alternative explanations and unexpected findings from previously overlooked sources, in a non-predetermined and open-ended manner
The positivist quality criteria	<a href="#">Bruton et al. (2011)</a> <a href="#">Yagi and Kleinberg (2011)</a>	Qualitative IB research requires criteria that critically, thoroughly and truthfully assess the quality of the study, while also acknowledging its uniqueness and distinctive characteristics

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

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We further propose that the strength of qualitative research lies in reaffirming the agency of the human researcher as a critical and interpretive, reflexive agent, rather than as a passive, detached observer or data processor. As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly integrated into research methodologies, there is a growing risk of reducing rich, context-bound human experiences and creative intelligence to algorithmically digestible patterns, stripping away nuance and complexity from social inquiry. Yet, qualitative research is grounded in authenticity, ethical reflexivity, and interpretive depth. In this context, the researcher's subjectivity, positionality, humane interest and empathetic engagement remain irreplaceable, serving as the lens through which meaning is co-constructed with participants. Ultimately, preserving the human dimension is essential to ensuring that qualitative research continues to offer deep, context-sensitive insights into the dynamic and complex world of IB. For qualitative researchers to be able to have a finger on the pulse of IB reality and provide vivid IB theorizing reflecting that reality, actively and explicitly engaging in research is the recipe of impactful and meaningful research now, and preeminently in the future.

### Acknowledgements

The authors are in alphabetical order to indicate equal contribution to the ideation and writing of the paper. The authors would like to express gratitude to Professor Rudolf Sinkovics and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback during the writing process of the paper. The authors also acknowledge their colleagues in the Research Methods (RM) SIG of the Academy of International Business (AIB) for inspiring and advancing a thought-provoking dialogue on research methods in international business.

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