

EXITING THE FIELD: A MISSING PIECE IN THE PUZZLE OF QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we argue that exiting the field is an important stage of the research process, which has tangible and serious consequences for current and future research initiatives. However, much of the methodological literature does not include a discussion of how we disengage from fieldwork. As a stage in the research process it remains largely ignored and neglected. We suggest that this ignorance is to our detriment and the health of a qualitative fieldwork is not secured before exit is well understood. We attempt to address this gap by concentrating on practices and challenges associated with field exit. Towards this end, methodological and business relationships literatures are used to enhance our understanding on the nature and the key dimensions of exit as well as possible exit strategies and their respective advantages and drawbacks. This paper aspires to initiate a dialogue on the topic of exiting the field, which we find both relevant and timely and encourage other qualitative researchers to contribute with additional or different insights to the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Conducting rigorous, high quality field research is one of the ways in which scholars advance management theory. Different from conducting computer simulations, laboratory experiments and working with published data bases, conducting management field research requires dealing with numerous challenges inherent in studying real organizations and their members. An essential part of these challenges are the many various methodological choices and decisions field researchers have to make, often starting long before the actual fieldwork commences (before accessing the field site) and finishing after the actual data has been collected (after exiting the field site). Despite the fact that methodological choices and decisions are often presented as smooth and logical in the final (published) research products, in reality they are far from straightforward, clear-cut, and sterile.

This paper analyzes a cluster of issues related to making choices and decisions regarding one particular methodological theme, namely exiting the field. Exiting the research field is an inherent part of being in the field and an important component of the relational foundation,

practice and challenges of conducting field research. Despite its centrality and critical importance for research processes and products however, exit has for long been and still is a neglected issue (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). While the methodology literature is vocal on issues concerning getting access to the field, collecting data, dealing with relational challenges in doing research, behaving ethically in the field, etc., exiting the field is rarely defined or problematized (Altinay & Wang, 2009) and the multiple issues associated with it remain largely untouched in methodological discussions. Guidelines for how to exit a research site are not readily available. This imbalance is to researchers' detriment – the health of a qualitative research field project is not secured before the exit from the field is well taken care of. To be sure, different from authors who briefly, and in passing, mention exiting the field when discussing other methodological issues, we treat exit as a distinct methodological topic.

We adopt Edmondson and Mcmanus's (2007: 1155) definition of field research in management as "systematic studies that rely on the collection of original data – qualitative and quantitative – in real organizations". While some of our ideas are applicable to management field research in general, for clarity of presentation and disciplining the arguments, we limit ourselves to qualitative field research, i.e. utilizing qualitative methods to collect data in field sites. We define exit from the field as the process of withdrawing or disengaging from the research site where empirical data has been collected over a period of time. It is reaching closure to fieldwork and it is often associated with terminating relationships with research participants and members of the studied organization(s) in general. Typically, exit constitutes the ending stage of the data collection process in the field. Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (1988: 64) refer to exit as "getting out" (p. 65) and Schwandt (2007: 117) call it "departing the field".

Our objective is not to develop a list of mistakes to be avoided, do's and don'ts to be followed and solutions to be generated in relation to exiting the field. Instead, our approach is a reflexive positioning aimed at understanding the nature and the key dimensions of exit as well as analyzing possible exit strategies and their respective advantages and drawbacks. While avoiding a normative tone, naturally, we develop a few guidelines which are both permissive and guiding in nature and which we extract from the methodological literature and the literature in some other fields. In this sense the paper is an invitation to start a

conversation which we find both relevant and timely and we hope that other qualitative researchers will be motivated to contribute with additional or different insights and analyses.

To begin, in the next section we develop key arguments for why the conversation we initiate and engage in is relevant and interesting. We then situate our efforts in the broader methodological literature and in the marketing literature on ending exchange relationships to describe the sources that inform our ideas. On this basis we develop a classification of types of exit and outline possible exit strategies.

MOTIVATION: WHY IS IT RELEVANT AND INTERESTING TO EXAMINE EXIT?

To start with, what has motivated this paper is a combination of two facts: the fact that the issue of exiting the field has not been examined carefully and in detail and the fact that it is difficult to justify the lack of attention to the topic. As already pointed out, exiting the field is an inherent part of being in the field and the final stage of the fieldwork, so if all other stages have been addressed rather thoroughly, why is it that exit has been left out from such analyses? As a matter of fact, exit from the field can be “problematic and resource draining” (Altinay & Wang, 2009: 383).

Our other serious motive behind this paper is that how we exit has tangible and serious consequences for various actors and on various levels and this is why specifying and discussing exit contributes to our understanding of both fieldwork and ourselves as researchers in the field. First of all, how the *individual researcher* exits the field is a matter of professionalism and can influence her/his own credibility, reputation and identity. Exit addresses tangibly and explicitly the fact (as well as the feeling or the illusion) of leaving something that took long to create, namely the researcher’s personal and professional identity. Exit occurs after the researcher has gone multiple times through processes of identity establishing and (re)establishing, (re)defining, (re)shaping, (re)negotiating, and possibly also identity threatening. Towards the end of the fieldwork the researcher may have successfully communicated different sides of her identity or realized that establishing and projecting such an identity was an illusion. The issue of exit and how it is performed has

implications beyond the individual researcher and can seriously affect the reputation of the *research team* and of the *institution* she represents. In fact, the entire *research community* could be on the shoulders of the individual researcher when designing and performing the exit. Ideally, there should be a sense of collective responsibility to each other within the research community: individually, we are in the position to either burn bridges for others or pave the ground for colleagues to conduct fieldwork on sites we have been in. This is particularly detrimental in small population countries where the choice of suitable research sites is limited and business circles are closely knit. Finally, how one exits may influence the collaboration between the business and academia more generally. Exit is the stage of the research process when most of the expectations towards the researcher become explicit and concrete. For instance, how one exits the field can shape organizational participants' views on whether interactions between the business world and academia should be pursued in the future. Business managers' general skepticism towards researchers (Laurila, 1997; Yeager & Kram, 1990) and qualitative researchers in particular (Agar, 2010) is not well served by exits that are poorly managed. As a counter reaction, research participants may exercise control over research findings and even prevent the dissemination of research findings based on the data obtained from the field (Macdonald & Hellgren 2004).

Additionally, our reading of qualitative work proves that practicing researchers do not reflect on how they exit the field, even when they explicitly address other methodological components of their fieldwork. Hence, we miss a systematic discussion of how exit may actually take place. Our extensive academic editorial and reviewing experience tells the same story: we have not encountered a single review that has asked the author(s) to explicate details on exiting. Yet, we are convinced that many qualitative studies have a story to tell on how the field was exited and that details on this stage of the fieldwork could be directly relevant to crafting a sound, high-quality methodological discussion. Not engaging in such discussions prevents from important additional circles of learning.

At this point we also posit that our intellectual exercise is not only important, but also interesting and, we dare to claim, fascinating. First of all, exit is an example of an issue that seems to be, at first glance at least, rather obvious, but in fact it can be rather problematic. Additionally, there is a lot of richness and heterogeneity in how one can exit a research site. Indeed, there is nothing habitual about exiting. Instead, exiting is a discontinuing act that is

associated with uncertainty, surprise and doubt and can generate innovative solutions. Moreover, exiting is a transactional process which can also be abductive, puzzling and mysterious, a fact that only perpetuates the argument that it is interesting to study as a distinct issue in conducting qualitative fieldwork.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Several theoretical sources have formed the basis of the ideas presented in this paper. Among the crucial ones are a few methodological texts, some work on the relational foundations of research and the marketing literature on dissolving exchange (business) relationships. Next we briefly review them.

Prior (Close to Nonexistent) Work on Exit in the Methodological Literature

Qualitative fieldwork has been often employed by qualitative researchers to examine groups, organizations, social process and structures in a particular setting. It has been described as a means for grasping the complexity of organizational life taking into consideration social and human interactions; artefacts; stories and meanings generated in various research milieus (Cunliffe, 2010). Fieldwork as a highly intellectual and emotional process has been discussed as a series of activities that occur within temporal, political, personal and institutional contexts (Orr and Bennett, 2009).

The methodological literature offers numerous accounts on the activities associated with fieldwork that seem to coalesce into five broad phases: 1) setting objectives, 2) gaining access, 3) data collection, 4) data interpretation and 5) writing and dissemination of evidence (Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999; Ropo, Eriksson and Hunt, 1997). Viewed in this light, qualitative authors have highlighted the challenges associated with fieldwork including negotiating access (Laurila, 1997); establishing effective relationships in various research setting (Dutton and Dukerich, 2006); and writing up qualitative evidence (Pratt, 2009; Van Maanen, 2010).

We conducted a systematic literature review in order to trace publications that elaborated on the issue of exit. Table 1 summarizes the review. Our review included the following

journals specializing in qualitative research: *Qualitative Inquiry*; *Qualitative Research*; *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*; *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*; *Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management*; and *Organizational Research Methods*. We covered the time period from the first issue of a journal to July 2010. Additionally, we included special issues of other journals that focused on qualitative research methods such as *Industrial Marketing Management* (2010) and *Management International Review* (2006). Our analysis was also extended to textbooks (Creswell 1998, Flick 2009) and edited volumes (e.g. Bryman 1988) dedicated to qualitative research.

Insert table 1 about here

Despite our continuous efforts, we were not able to identify a single article or book chapter specifically devoted to the challenges associated with exit from the field in the methodological literature. The *Sage Encyclopedia of Social Sciences Research Methods* (2004) did not cover exit. While access, i.e. the ability to get close to the object of the study, has been widely discussed in the extant literature, the skills associated with disengaging with the object of the study and exiting the field physically and mentally are rarely discussed (cf. Czarniawska, 1998). Reflecting on the issue of exit raises important questions as to the foundations and legitimacy of our work, yet the issue of exit remains seriously ignored. Even special issues of academic journals specifically devoted to methodology challenges in qualitative research do not touch upon the topic of exit. For instance, the 1997 special issue on processual research published in *Scandinavian Journal of Management* includes eight papers that discuss methodological aspects of conducting processual research in organizations, five of which highlight the challenges associated with gaining access to the studied organization(s). None touched upon the theme on exit.

Yet, we only encountered a single book chapter that explicitly discussed the issue of exit, albeit not as its sole focus. Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (1988: 54) include the stages of “getting out and getting back” to the field following the stages of “getting in” and “getting on”, when discussing organizational research as a process. The authors highlight the equal importance of exit compared to other activities or stages in fieldwork and view exit from an

instrumental and opportunistic perspective in terms of how the researcher should execute and manage the exit phase. According to them, the best way to withdraw from an organization is to agree upon a deadline for data collection and stick to it. The researcher is advised to maintain good relationships with the organization in order to secure re-entry, or “getting back”, to the field.

The opportunistic approach to fieldwork adopted by Buchanan et al. (1988) seems to suffer from some limitations that the authors themselves partly acknowledge. Firstly, we would argue that it is very much geared towards short-term personal gains of the researcher and is thus rather instrumental. Second, the authors emphasize chance and serendipity as critical success factors in fieldwork at the expense of the skills and knowledge that the qualitative researcher has accumulated over time. Third, the opportunistic approach of fieldwork may have undesirable consequences for cultivating and sustaining trust in the research setting. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994) an opportunistic mindset between relationship partners may lead to self-interest seeking behaviour and hence, decreased trust. This premise may be applied to qualitative fieldwork in as much as researchers impose their own research agenda in the course of the study.

Other Theoretical Sources for Understanding Exiting the Field

Given the dearth of methodological literature on exiting the field, we subsequently turned to the literature on relational foundation of research and the literature on dissolving business relationships to gain insights on the process, dimensions and strategies of exit.

Literature on relational foundation of research

We find the literature on the relational foundation of research (Dutton & Dukerich 2006) useful in building our framework in the sense of viewing exit as a process consisting of multiple relationships with various actors unfolding over time. The relational foundation of research (Dutton & Dukerich 2006) views qualitative fieldwork as a set of partnerships between the researcher and the research participants. These partnerships may be mutually beneficial if catered and cultivated over the long run. While the opportunistic approach to

fieldwork may generate undesirable consequences for cultivating and sustaining trust between partners, a relational approach may contribute to a shared understanding of dissolving the research partnership. In the context of relationships literature, Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggest that an opportunistic mindset between partners may lead to self-interest seeking behaviour and hence, decreased trust. We apply this premise to qualitative fieldwork to later shed light on the dimensions and types of exit.

Agar (2010) suggests that managing fieldwork is a challenge for qualitative researchers since increasing scepticism may surround the role of a researcher in an organisation. He points out that “[...] organizations have their own elaborate histories of problem identification and solutions, not to mention the usual scepticism toward “qualitative” research more generally that I know so well from decades of experience in the substance use and abuse field.” (p. 288). Similar to Dutton and Dukerich (2006), Agar (2010) implies the importance of handling interactions with partners whom the researcher encounters in pursuing fieldwork. The relational foundation of qualitative research has been primarily discussed in the context of gaining access to research sites and creating relationships that sustain support of the research effort throughout its life span.

The importance of relationships in conducting qualitative field research has been particularly highlighted in ethnography. Cunliffe (2010: 231) describes the role of the ethnographer in the field highlighting social aspects of fieldwork:

“Ethnographers do what it takes to understand meaning-making: spending months onsite talking to employees, managers, and union representatives, hanging out at the cafeteria, attending meetings, and so on—to get a sense of their everyday lives. It is this type of fieldwork that generates thick description.”

Ethnography researchers have, themselves, acknowledged that exit is an underestimated issue. Van Maanen (2010: 244) has pointed out that “ethnographic work lacks closure”.

Literature on dissolution of business relationships

There is a rather extensive literature in the field of marketing on dissolving exchange business relationships (for an overview see Tähtinen & Halinen, 2002). This literature itself has borrowed frameworks, theories and vocabulary from other disciplines, such as social

psychology, sociology and economics. A seminal paper by Dwyer, Shurr and Oh (1987) departed from the conventional treatment of buyer-seller exchanges as discrete events in marketing research to stressing relational aspects which enable the creation of long-term trusting relationships. Dissolution of business relationships is seen as a distinct phase of relationship development process (Dwyer et al., 1987), which contains a number of stages taking place within a company (e.g. assessment and decision-making stages), between companies (interactive stages where relationship dissolution is negotiated and communicated) and at the level of broader network (Alajoutsijarvi, Moller & Tahtinen, 2000; Halinen & Tahtinen, 2002).

Exit communication is identified as the key element of dissolving business relationship. In some studies, there seems to be even an emphasis to equate exit strategy with communication strategies (see e.g. Alajoutsijarvi et al. 2000). Mostly building on Baxter's (1985) typology of communication strategies (direct-indirect, unilateral-bilateral) different dissolution communication strategies have been identified (e.g. Alajoutsijarvi et al. 2000; Giller & Matear, 2001) and showed that contextual factors (e.g. nature of relationship and dissolution) influence exit communication strategies (Pressey & Mathews, 2003).

The key insight from this stream of literature is that relationship dissolution is extremely complex: it occurs at multiple levels (individuals, organizations), at multiple phases, may take place at each stage of relationship development process, and has implications for broader networks where the dissolved relationship is embedded. While the quality of relationship dissolution process is mainly perceived by the actors involved, the outcomes of the dissolution affects the broader community of actors (Alajoutsijarvi et al., 2000, Tahtinen & Halinen, 2002). Also, despite of dissolved activities between companies, often social bonds between individuals remain (Pressey & Mathews, 2003). The underlying assumption is that of preference for on-going business relationships, which is reflected in frequent use of the marriage metaphor (see Tynan, 1997), questioning the applicability of ideas for lighter forms of engagement such as research relationships .

We now adapt and further develop the above discussed conceptual foundations and outline a framework for understanding and designing exit from the field.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DESIGNING EXIT FROM THE FIELD:

EXIT DIMENSIONS AND EXIT STRATEGIES

Key Dimensions of Exit

Based on our collective experiences and reading of the literature we have identified the following dimensions as the most important ones when discussing exit from the field. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive; rather they are strongly intertwined and overlapping.

Physical, mental and emotional dimensions of exit

Physical exit from the field means physically leaving the studied setting and implies the end of actual work of collecting data there. For example, in ethnography or action research, physical exit may also involve giving up office space, returning keys and equipment borrowed by the researcher for the duration of the research project. Disengagement from personal relationships, on the other hand, may be more complicated and involves mental, emotional and psychological stress (Giller & Matear, 2001; Czarniawska, 1998). Stebbins (1991) stresses lasting emotional consequences of fieldwork and asks whether researchers ever truly “leave the field”. The feeling of separation and loss after intensive and sometimes long engagement in fieldwork may be particularly strong when the researcher has established “high-quality connections” characterized by mutuality, positive regard and vitality (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). This stage in the research process may also be characterised by a sense of relief. In her ethnographic study of Japanese subsidiary in the UK Sharpe (2004: 319) describes how “[...] leaving the field for the final time was also emotionally demanding. I felt a huge sense of privilege that I could just ‘walk away’ from shop-floor life...” The mental and emotional dimensions of exit constitute a challenge for all researchers, but particularly for those with a strong social, relationship-oriented personality (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Additionally, the nature of qualitative research often predisposes researchers to try to identify to a certain extent with the research participants in order to understand their views and interpretations, keep them comfortable and motivated to further cooperation (Laurila, 1997). Stepping back from such identification

processes is not necessarily easy. Moreover, when research projects deal with painful, delicate or otherwise emotionally laden topics and research questions, researchers may naturally become vulnerable and be influenced by research participants. Taking this to an extreme, Macdonald and Hellgren (2004) label the state of too intense identification with the organization or key informants under study as the “hostage syndrome”. Just as hostages, the fate of the researcher is in the hands of their captors, i.e. the organization. Consequently, the researcher may surrender her interests to please her captors and generate findings and feedback that satisfy the organization. The lack of critical distance slows down the process of mental and emotional exit. In ethnography, this is defined as ‘going native’ (Chapman, Gajewska-De Mattos & Antoniou 2004).

Beautiful vs. ugly exit

Child and Smith (1987: 572) used the notion “good access” characterized by formal acceptance by company management, establishing a network of contacts and gaining access to crucial data. Alajoutsijarvi et al. (2000: 1270), on the other hand, introduced the metaphor of “beautiful exit” from a business relationship, “a strategy that minimises damage occurred to the disengaged, the other party and the connected network” and differentiated it from “ugly exit”, which leads to disastrous dissolution outcome. A beautiful exit from the field may be seen as a relational construct, a well thought out and implemented plan to disengage from the research site where empirical data was collected. It may mean a (re)new(ed) access to the same research site or a recommended access to a new field.

Simple vs. complex exit

The complexities of exit stem from the embedded nature of the research site. For example, a multinational corporation can be characterized as one company with multiple units and thus numerous exit points units. One may exit the foreign subsidiary while still continuing fieldwork at headquarters or vice versa.

An exit can be rather complex if the fieldwork was highly dependent on both gatekeepers and informants and if the relationships between those are not exactly straightforward. This

complicates and is in addition to the inherently uneven relationships between the researcher and the organization

Planned vs. unintentional exit

The temporal dimension – such as timing and speed of exit – is central in any exit process. While it is possible to anticipate the timing of data collection in research design (Buchanan et al., 1988), the possibility to capitalize on emerging issues and discoveries by the researcher is among the key strengths of qualitative research. This flexibility often means that instead of a scheduled exit, the exact timing of exit remains opened at the outset of research.

In addition to scheduled or postponed exit also a premature exit is possible. It can take place when either the research setting is not as insightful as it has been expected or when respondents are unwilling to share information or even refuse to participate in the research. A rapid exit process may cause damage to broader networks of relationships as time for making needed adjustments or communications is lacking (Alajoutsijarvi et al., 2000).

Unintentional exit can be abrupt, prolonged and, in extreme cases, never-ending. During the fieldwork there may be unexpected events and circumstances that are beyond the researcher's and the organization's control (e.g. unexpected crisis, acquisition, bankruptcy, a sudden massive change of leadership, massive layoffs, severe environmental changes) and that can terminate the researcher's involvement. In other instances unintentional exit can be caused by happenings in the field and it can be associated with emotional tension.

After we have identified key dimensions of exit, we now propose the notion of "exit strategy" as a conscious approach to managing relationships in the field in the final stage of the fieldwork. We specify a few key issues associated with exit strategies.

Exit Strategies

For presentation simplicity reasons, we do not compose an exhaustive list of exit strategy types; instead we list and describe a few that we find to be more common.

Exiting as a single act vs. repeated exit

Repeated exit refers to a situation in which the researcher returns to the same research site leading eventually to a new re-exit. Like access, exiting the field is not necessarily a single act or event. Soulsby and Clark (forthcoming) advocate a research design which they label the 'punctuated longitudinal case study'. It is characterized as an approach that intentionally collects qualitative data through repeated research visits to the same organizational settings. The end point of the study is moving, since each revisit extends the period of study, giving a new point of closure that can be characterized by process 'outcomes'. Ethnographic studies are cases in point as ethnographers tend to return to the field several times. Sharpe (2004: 319) studied work groups on the shop floor of a Japanese-owned manufacturing subsidiary. She "experienced the process of 'leaving' social group many times during the research process".

Also, a relationship's history and future is an important factor when planning and implementing exit from the field. A long relationship history may have resulted in a close relationship or even affection between a researcher and a study participants, requiring special attention paid to managing and communicating exit. Further, often a later re-entry, possibly for another research project, is wished. Therefore, a "sleeping relationship" rather than complete termination of a relationship (Giller & Matear, 2001) is aimed at, and therefore conservation of the relationship energy (Havila & Wilkinson, 1997), is important.

Self-oriented, opportunistic exit strategy vs. other-oriented, hostage type of exit strategy: "Giving" and "taking"

The exit stage brings to the fore implicit and explicit expectations that research participants project on the researcher. Providing feedback is the "give" ingredient in the take-and-give relationship with research participants after a long "take" period. The understanding of the deliverables and expectations towards the researcher vary considerably across research sites, participants and cultures. A social contract between the researcher and the participants may serve as a foundation for cementing mutually advantageous relationships and ensure shared expectations towards the research process (Van Oosterhout, Heugens &

Kaptein, 2006). The social contract is also dynamic in that it mirrors the changes in the research setting.

Often researchers are obliged to provide feedback to the research participants (and/or their managers) on the findings and in many cases access is granted conditional on this. In some cultural contexts, however, the interest in the outcome of academic research is less pronounced. Based on her extensive experience of conducting fieldwork in Eastern Europe Michailova (2004) reflects on the reasons why her local informants were not eager to receive feedback. She explains that they were reluctant to engage in feedback receiving because they viewed granting an interview as a personal favour.

A related aspect of providing feedback and exiting the field is protecting respondent anonymity and data confidentiality. Agar (2010: 288) highlights the importance of handling interactions with research participants ethically and warns researchers for using and abusing the field. This may threaten established ties and undermine the mutuality of trust with research participants. It may result in the organization extensively controlling its input to research (Macdonald & Hellgren 2004). Short-term abuse of the field may even imply embargo on the use of the already collected data and prevent the researcher from submitting the findings.

Timing and spacing of exit

Researchers are often faced with an accelerating pace of organizational phenomena that they investigate. The life span of a research project is often shorter than what we expect at the start. Currently, a culture of short-termism that promotes opportunistic pursuit of interests threatens long-term commitments to fieldwork (Brose 2004). It poses a serious challenge to the relational foundation of research (Dutton & Dukerich 2006).

During the life span of a research project different temporalities are likely to co-exist. Research participants may follow a different rhythm and have dissimilar temporal horizons than the researcher. This challenge is compounded as the long term versus short term orientation varies across cultures. As a result, a synchronized exit from the field can be

challenging. Moreover, the exit stage may coincide with other tasks of fieldwork such as data analysis and write-up.

The challenge is how to deal with exit when fieldwork increasingly defies temporal and spatial boundaries. Stannegård and Friberg (2001) discuss the notion of “fieldwork on the move” to signal the dynamic nature of fieldwork. The research participants one is studying may already be elsewhere. If so, how does one exit fieldwork when no physical interaction or presence is required as in on-line research (e.g. exiting netnography)?

As humans are relational creatures dissolving inter-personal or inter-organizational relationships are sensitive issues. Suitable ways of exiting the field are culture-dependent, meaning the special care needs to be taken to plan and communicate exit in different cultures. The role of space is central when conducting cross-cultural research or research across countries. International research teams are used for gaining access to different contexts (Salmi, 2010), but researchers are in fact silent about how exits from the field take place in these situations. In big international research projects timing of exit may differ markedly between countries.

CONCLUSION

This paper emphasizes the need to explicitly view exit from the field as a critical part and stage of high-quality qualitative field research. Our central argument is that exit is important, yet largely overlooked and ignored by researchers who are busy with and preoccupied by designing all other parts and stages of their fieldwork. This applies to novice and experienced researchers alike. Our aim is to start a conversation on exiting the field as a distinct methodological issue and invite others to contribute ideas and insights that can improve our collective understanding of this topic with the ultimate goal to improve the quality of fieldwork and the way it is articulated in published research.

Our work is subject to a few important limitations. First and foremost, the ideas in this paper are intended for qualitative field research, thereby excluding quantitative field research. Second, it is important to point out that the sources of our ideas for developing our framework are limited to three streams of literature – the overall methodological

literature, the literature on the relational foundation of research and the literature on dissolving exchange (business) relationships. Although this selection has helped make the scope of inquiry manageable, it has certainly limited the framework in terms of including other important dimensions in it. For instance, situating our study more deeply in the social psychology literature (e.g. Baxter, 1985; Duck, 1982), sociology (e.g. Simmel, 1950) or economics (e.g. Hirschman, 1970) are likely and promise to provide additional and novel angles to what we have presented here.

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Table 1:

Journal and publisher	Year of Inception	Years Reviewed	Number of Issues Per year
<i>Qualitative Inquiry</i> , Sage	1995	1995-2010 (July)	1995-2000: 4 issues 2001-2006: 6 2007-2008: 8 2009- :10
<i>Qualitative Research</i> , Sage	2001	2001-2010 (June)	2001-2004: 3 issues 2005-2007: 4 2008- : 5
<i>Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal</i> , Emerald	1998	1998-2010 (Issue 3)	1998-1999: 3 issues 1999- : 4
<i>Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal</i> , Emerald	2006	2006-2010 (Issue 1)	2006- : 3 issues
<i>Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management</i> , Emerald	2004	2004-2010 (Issue 2)	2004-2005: 2 issues 2006- : 3 issues
<i>Organizational Research Methods</i> , Sage	1998	1998-2010 (July)	1998- : 4 issues
Special Issues			
Focus of the Special Issue			Year, Vol. (Issue)
Case study research in industrial marketing			2010, Vol. 39 (1)
Qualitative research methods in international business			2006, Vol. 46 (4)
Qualitative research in International Entrepreneurship			2006, Vol. 4 (4)
State of Research in Marketing			2005, Vol. 39 (3/4)
Reflections on conducting processual research on management and organizations			1997, Vol. 13 (4)