

How to Survive in a Research Minefield. Challenges and Advice for Rookie Qualitative Researchers

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Abstract **Purpose:** The aim of this paper is to present and understand the challenges of conducting qualitative research from the perspective of novice researchers preparing their PhD thesis at the university.
Methodology: This paper shows the findings of qualitative study conducted with assistant professors and doctoral students at one of the Polish economic universities. The research was conducted in two stages – the first was a focus group interview (FGI) and the second consisted of individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) altogether with 11 novice researchers. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using a deductive-inductive approach.
Findings: The challenges identified include, among others, the lack of theoretical and practical knowledge of how to meet the criteria of methodological rigor; problems with synthesizing, selecting and structuring the collected material; the issue of ensuring consistency of the story told with adherence to methodological rigor; ethical or reflexivity dilemmas. All this is accompanied by a number of twists and turns, combined with a lack of experience and constraints on resources.
Practical implications: Findings will allow for actions to be taken that may help novice researchers, their supervisors, and people deciding on doctoral school programs to overcome barriers of preparing thesis using qualitative research. Showing the challenges and ways to overcome them in relation to different stages of the qualitative research process additionally strengthens practical implications.
Originality/value: So far, there has been a lack of papers showing the challenges in conducting qualitative research by novice economics and management researchers. This paper fills this gap.

Keywords novice researchers, qualitative study, challenges, stages of qualitative study, PhD preparation.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research is successfully used in various disciplines of science, sometimes being the only way to scientifically explain the phenomenon under study. This also applies to studies of organizations analyzed from the perspective of management or economics. At the same time, qualitative research involves many challenges for a researcher (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Gephart, 2004; Suddaby, 2006; Kalman, 2019; Wohlfart, 2020). They begin at the design stage and do not end (most often even increase) at the stage of field research, and its analysis and presentation (Johnston & Dowling, 2023; Saxena, 2017). What is more, all these challenges may vary significantly due to the specificity of the phenomena, processes and entities under study (Eisenhardt & Greabner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007; Moosa, 2013; Johnston & Dowling, 2023). They are often difficult to overcome for experienced researchers, but for novices, i.e., rookies just starting their journey with qualitative research, they can be like a minefield and are especially hard and stressful (Kalman, 2019; Dunn, 1991).

There are works in the literature that present the challenges related to the different stages of qualitative research, i.e., designing, running, analyzing, presenting, and publishing (e.g., VanderKaay et al., 2018; Anderson, 2010; Reay, 2014; Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2021; Rockmann & Vough, 2023), and some of them concern novice researchers (Johnston & Dowling, 2023; Kalman, 2019; Saxena, 2017; Wohlfart, 2020). However, there are important gaps in the literature regarding this topic.

Firstly, although some authors identify and describe qualitative research challenges referring to their own experience (e.g., Bansal & Corley, 2012; Gephart, 2004) also as novice researchers (Tsai, 2014; Ausband, 2006; Brown, 2021; Saxena, 2017; Wohlfart, 2020), very rarely (with some exceptions, e.g., Kalman, 2019) do they present qualitative research challenges based on the findings of empirical research on this topic, giving a voice to their research participants, i.e., allowing novice researchers to share their own reflections. Meanwhile, this is the most persuasive way to present, exemplify and explain what

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challenges are the most difficult, and what mistakes to avoid and how to do so (Wohlfart, 2020). This in turn allows novice researchers to run “*rigorous and high-quality qualitative research without being mentally and emotionally drained*” (Kalman, 2019, p. 346).

Secondly, only in some works are the challenges of qualitative research addressed with the reference to various stages of conducting this type of research—from design to presentation, including publication (Kalman, 2019; Saxena, 2017; Ausband, 2006). This is certainly in part because of the iterative nature of qualitative research, in which stages cannot be clearly separated. Many challenges occur during the whole research process to a greater or lesser extent. However, showing which challenges are the greatest for novice qualitative researchers and when they occur can be even more valuable from a practical point of view, for example, by providing such researchers with appropriate support at a particular point in the research process.

Thirdly, those papers that point out the challenges associated with conducting qualitative research concern disciplines such as, medicine, pharmacy, recreation, or other fields (e.g., Anderson, 2010; Dodgson, 2019; Eakin, 2016; Johnston & Dowling, 2023). There is a lack of works addressed to researchers in the field of organizational and management studies. Perhaps one reason is that quantitative research still dominates, especially in economics (Lenger, 2019), whose representatives also examine organizations.

Fourthly, artificial intelligence (AI) is nowadays indicated as useful tool for analyzing qualitative data. Therefore, there is an increasing discussion in the literature about the use of AI in qualitative research (Christou, 2023; Hitch, 2024; Sun et al., 2025). However, it must be stressed that researchers still play a key role in the process of conducting qualitative studies and for now AI is only a tool that can support them (Anis & French, 2023). But importantly, this supportive role of AI is possible only if a researcher has knowledge, competences and skills, as well as experience in conducting this type of research. Thus, there is an even greater need for a discussion on the challenges associated with conducting qualitative research, including the researcher’s competences such as intuition, creativity, sensitivity, and attention to ethical issues. Such a discussion is especially important for novice researchers who may mistakenly believe that AI is currently able to replace a researcher.

Finally, while it may be interesting, the context of the challenges faced by qualitative researchers conducting research in organizational sciences in countries where the tradition of doing qualitative research is still relatively short, e.g., Poland, has still not been presented in empirical studies. In Polish economics and business universities, only in the last years is qualitative research more often used and increasingly treated as a valid scientific approach, enabling the solving of scientific research problems. Therefore, PhD students and assistant professors are gaining more and more experience in conducting this type of research, although—as the findings of this research showed—they face a lot of challenges.

Thus, taking into account the above gaps, and at the same time the usefulness of qualitative research in organizational and management studies, the aim of this paper is to present and understand the challenges of conducting (designing, running, analyzing, presenting and publishing) qualitative research from the perspective of novice researchers, i.e., assistant professors and doctoral students. This paper presents the findings of two-stage qualitative research conducted with PhD students and assistant professors of one of the Polish economic universities. In total there were conducted interviews with eleven people: in the first stage there was a focus group interview (FGI) with five research participants and in the second stage there were six individual in-depth interviews (IDIs).

The contribution to existing knowledge is that the paper identifies and exemplifies numerous challenges of conducting qualitative research in organizational and management studies. Those challenges are broken down into stages of the research process and presented in an important and often overlooked context—firstly, from the perspective of the novices themselves; secondly, the research conducted in organization and management studies; and thirdly, in a Polish context that has hardly been discussed in the literature at all. Moreover, some of the challenges identified in the research have not been addressed in the literature so far. As Kalman (2019, p. 345) claims “*examining the experiences of novice researchers about qualitative inquiry may help both instructors and supervisors of qualitative research raise awareness of their students’ reflexivity, which is significant for developing a reflexive mindset and culture required for high-quality qualitative research*”. Thus, this research is also of practical value; it makes it possible to formulate a number of practical recommendations that can serve current and future qualitative researchers in organizational and management studies, especially novice scientists and their supervisors. This is especially important in the context of the AI, which at the current stage of its development, although can significantly improve the process of qualitative research, does not yet allow to avoid many important challenges of conducting qualitative research. At the same time, it generates new challenges (e.g., ethical ones) that researchers, including novice ones, will have to face.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Qualitative research challenges previously identified in the literature

As Denzin and Lincoln claim (2011, p. 6) *“a comprehensive definition of qualitative research is difficult to attain, because of the wide array of approaches and beliefs it encompasses”*. Each of these approaches allows us to conclude that this type of research is not easy to conduct, if only because of the diverse goals, the richness of the research methods used, or the complex nature of the reality under study. Thus, it may be surprising that among some researchers—especially those who have not dealt with qualitative research before—there is still an opinion that it is relatively easy (and much less demanding than in case of quantitative research) to conduct and analyze qualitative study. However, the simplicity of qualitative research is only apparent (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Gephart, 2004; Suddaby, 2006; Kalman, 2019; Wohlfart, 2020).

Labor and time consumption of qualitative research

The first difficulty is that it is very time- and work-consuming. Firstly, qualitative research usually requires fieldwork, which is exhausting and tedious (Kalman, 2019; Sangasubana, 2011; Creswell, 2007; Wohlfart, 2020). Reaching interviewees or their selection is often a complicated and time-consuming process (e.g., when we use the snowball technique). This is even more so for rookie researchers. As stated by Sandlerowski (1995, p. 180) *“beginning qualitative researchers often require more sampling units than more experienced researchers to “see” and to “make”*”. Secondly, qualitative research often uses in-depth interviews which are long and intensive (Gephart, 2004), because they either concern complex phenomena and processes or require extensive in-depth analysis of the considered issues. Thirdly, the analysis of qualitative research data is very laborious and time-consuming. Before it was possible to use appropriate computer software, now additionally supported by AI, qualitative research most often involved tedious manual transcription of interviews (Wohlfart, 2020; Kalman, 2019). Moreover, this type of research demands coding of large amounts of text. It is stressed that *“the fully automated touch-of-a-button analysis”* (Clark & Sousa, 2018, p. 2) as in quantitative research is not an option in qualitative analysis in which time is vital (Wohlfart, 2020). Even using AI to code material requires time and a lot of thought from the researcher, and it is still emphasized that – given the current capabilities of AI – this should not be left to AI alone (Hamilton et al., 2023; Marshall & Naff, 2024). For now, despite the enormous technological progress that has taken place before our eyes, including the use of AI (e.g., Anis & French, 2023; Sun et al., 2025), in recent years (both in terms of transcription or even coding and analyzing of material), it is still researchers who take responsibility for the results of data analysis. It can therefore be said that the role of the researcher is more important than ever before. The question of what the future of qualitative research will be using AI is a separate issue that remains open.

Fieldwork

Another challenge is fieldwork itself. Conducting field research is a big challenge both in terms of time, organization and logistics (VanderKaay et al., 2018). At the same time, however, there is a direct relationship between the quality of the researcher's contact with the field and the quality of research (Suddaby, 2006). The latter definitely increases when the research is conducted by the researcher him/herself and not by other people (not outsourced to a professional research company). Fieldwork requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the data and social context under study. As Gioia et al. (2013) said, you have to *“get in there and get your hands dirty”*.

Embracing a large amount of material

Working with words is tedious and difficult even for an experienced researcher due to the need to “embrace” a large amount of material (Gephart, 2004; Langley, 1999). The researcher is dealing with a multitude of sources (data from interviews, observations, analysis of documents, etc.) and needs to confront them in order to read clear trends or patterns (Kanter, 1977; Langley, 1999). Often, as a result, one receives a contradictory explanation and it is necessary, for example, to return to the field. As Saxena (2017, p. 319) claims, *“the data in a qualitative study is like a kaleidoscope – as the angle changes, the pattern visible through the mirror also changes”*. All of this results in researchers being overwhelmed by data, also due to its initial lack of structure. At the same time, without structuring data, it is impossible to build knowledge and draw conclusions (Gioia, 2004). Embracing a large amount of collected material and creating an appropriate data structure on its basis is an extremely tedious and difficult process, especially for a novice researcher. In this context, Gioia (2004; 2021) claims *“you gotta get lost before you can get found”* and Saxena (2017) calls the process of creating order out of chaos ‘muddling through’.

The lack of universal patterns for research analysis

Working with a large amount of material is even more difficult because in the case of qualitative research there are no universal algorithms or accepted patterns for their analysis (Suddaby, 2006; Malterud, 2001; Graebner et al., 2012; Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). VanderKaay et al. (2018, p. 2) claim that *“qualitative research is not one approach, but a collection of many methodologies with different theoretical foundations, approaches, and outcomes”*. Not without reason, Graebner et al. (2012) found that doing qualitative research is like ‘cooking without a recipe’. It all depends on many factors (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024), including the research problem, the adopted paradigm, a research procedure that is considered the most appropriate to solve the given problem, as well as the findings obtained in the study itself – these can also force modification or even a complete change of the procedure for running or analyzing the research.

Ensuring methodological rigor

Although there are no universal algorithms or accepted patterns for conducting and analyzing qualitative research, this does not relieve the researcher from the need to meet requirements related to the research procedure, i.e., ensuring methodological rigor at all stages of the research, especially data collection and analysis or theory creation (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2022). The criteria for this rigor vary in the literature (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse et al., 2002) and due to the lack of universality (each study is different), according to Huse (2000), the assessment of the rigor of works using qualitative research is not so easy. It can therefore be especially difficult for novice researchers. One of the most popular is the concept of research trustworthiness based on criteria such as research credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Very important, especially to assure research confirmability, is the need for the researcher’s continuous reflection on the research, i.e., so-called reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Robinson, 2014; Anderson, 2017), which may be an additional headache for an inexperienced scientist.

Consistency of the story and the rigor

Another challenge is to ensure the consistency of the presented story with the conceptual framework (if any) and the aforementioned methodological rigor (Malterud, 2001). The more intuitively a researcher interprets the data, the more difficult it is to explain the research procedure. Moreover, methodological rigor should not allow the story itself to be “lost” or marginalized. The story is key in qualitative research (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007), and its task is to show the reader the researched world in a new way. As Siggelkow (2007) claims, a theory cannot refer to itself.

Uncertainty

A characteristic challenge of doing qualitative research is the constant uncertainty (Robinson, 2014; Manson, 2002; Backman & Kyngäs, 1999) that accompanies the researcher throughout the entire research process – from its design, through running the research, its analysis or even publication. Ausband (2006, p. 765), comparing qualitative research to the creative process of quilting, claims: *“even though you have a plan, you really don’t know what the finished quilt will look like until it is all together”*. This is because of the iterative nature of qualitative research. Most often it requires the repetition of many previous steps (Marshall, 1996) due to, for example, new data, a change in the researched circumstances, or other elements that cannot be predicted before going into the field or analyzing the collected material.

Therefore, qualitative research is a kind of a roller coaster full of numerous twists and turns. They take place to a large extent during field research because it is there where the researcher is surprised the most. However, at the stage of data collection or analysis, these twists and turns do not end. Theoretical discoveries are often made while writing, which forces a change in the narrative and the way data are presented (Bansal & Corley, 2012). Thus, plot twists are possible until the very end. For example, Saxena (2017) refers to her experience writing a dissertation as a novice qualitative researcher and recalls that “the biggest jolt” at the final stage of her work was when her Thesis Examination Committee (TEC) asked her to do major re-work on the dissertation to complete it.

Researcher’s features

Finally, conducting qualitative research depends to a large extent on the researcher’s specific qualifications and features (including personality predispositions). These determine how the researcher will deal with certain challenges (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000; Kalman, 2019). Important are such features as experience, intuition (e.g., when the saturation effect has been achieved) (Sandelowski, 1995), patience (Gephart, 2004; Sandlerowski, 1995), interpersonal interaction skills – including the ability to convince people to talk and develop their thoughts – creativity, good organization of work, cognitive curiosity and sensitivity, including, so-called, theoretical sensitivity (Suddaby, 2006), i.e., the ability to perceive patterns or invisible

elements that are yet to become visible. Many of these features of a researcher, especially experience, develop over time, hence for rookie researchers the lack of these characteristics at the beginning of their adventure with qualitative research may be particularly painful.

METHOD

In order to identify, describe and explain challenges perceived by novice qualitative researchers at various stages of preparing their doctoral thesis, qualitative research was used. It follows the interpretative paradigm, assuming that reality is as perceived by the interviewees themselves (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Therefore, to truly understand the situation of a specific group of people, we need to give them a voice. Moreover, the context under study—being not formerly analyzed in the literature—is another argument for using this type of research.

To achieve the aim of this paper, research was conducted in two stages that lasted from March to May, 2021. The first stage was an FGI with five people, and the second stage was individual IDIs with six people. Thus, altogether 11 novice researchers were chosen in a purposeful sample selection in this research. This study follows a conceptual approach in sample size selection. According to this approach so-called “information power” determines decisions about the sample size, i.e., “the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participants is needed” (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016, p. 1). The criterion for sample size selection was therefore its adequacy in relation to the research aim (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024). Thus, the researcher was not focused on gathering a large number of interviewees, but on inviting those who, thanks to their experience, provide a valuable exemplification of the challenges faced by rookie qualitative researchers. To conduct both the FGIs and IDIs, an interview guide was used containing a range of issues that the researcher asked about during the interview.

In selecting the sample the following criteria had to be fulfilled by research participants in both research stages: 1) be an assistant professor at a university or a doctoral student at least in the second year of study (at the stage of at least planning empirical research); 2) before obtaining a PhD degree; 3) having some experience (based on the opinions of the interlocutors themselves) in conducting (at least in designing) qualitative research. All interviewees were studying the operation of the organizations in different branches (sport, tourism, public sector, performing arts, etc.) and from different perspectives (inter-organizational relationships, effectiveness, sustainable development, strategy, etc.).

The first FGI was conducted with a group of five doctoral students from one of the Polish economic universities. These were students in the second year of doctoral school in the field of management and were members of the same lecture group. In the FGI the researcher asked interviewees more general questions about the challenges of writing a doctoral thesis, including those related to designing, conducting, analyzing and presenting/publishing qualitative research. The FGI conversation showed that most of the interlocutors had little experience in conducting qualitative research and their statements – when it came to empirical research – mainly concerned challenges related to its designing.

Therefore, it was decided to conduct the second stage of research in the form of IDIs with more experienced, although still novice qualitative researchers – being at the stage of running field research or after its completion. Therefore, assistant professors (four people) and students in the final year of doctoral studies (two people) were selected for the research. All these people either submitted their doctoral thesis or were finalizing it. At this second stage of the research IDIs were conducted with these research participants, as it was believed that this form of interview would allow for a more in-depth discussion about the individual challenges in doing qualitative research. They were asked about the challenges related to the preparation of a doctoral thesis, including designing, running, analyzing and presenting/publishing of qualitative research. Indeed, this group of interlocutors had much more to say in the context of field research or its analysis, so it complemented-well the group of interlocutors from FGI, who in their statements focused more on the research planning stage. The characteristics of the interviewees at both stages of the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. FGI and IDIs interviewees' characteristics

Code of interviewee	Field/type of organization	Status (DS – doctoral school; AP – assistant professor)	PhD writing completion status
FGI			
FR1	Management/big and medium enterprises	Student of DS	Not finished; 2nd year of DS
FR2	Management/universities	Student of DS	Not finished; 2nd year of DS

Code of interviewee	Field/type of organization	Status (DS – doctoral school; AP – assistant professor)	PhD writing completion status
FR3	Management/football clubs	Student of DS	Not finished; 2nd year of DS
FR4	Management/coal mines	Student of DS	Not finished; 2nd year of DS
FR5	Management/organizations with multicultural teams	Student of DS	Not finished; 2nd year of DS
IDIs			
IR1	Management/museums	Assistant professor	Waiting for a PhD defense
IR2	Management/theatres	Assistant professor	Waiting for a PhD defense
IR3	Management/tourism organizations	Assistant professor	Waiting for a PhD defense
IR4	Economics/agritourism organizations	Assistant professor	Finishing writing
IR5	Economics/universities	Student doctoral studies (final year)	Finishing writing
IR6	Management/social organizations	Student doctoral studies (final year)	Finishing writing

Source: own elaboration

The FGI lasted 2 hours and 24 minutes. The IDIs lasted over 8 hours in total, of which the longest interview lasted 2 hours and 5 minutes and the shortest was 1 hour and 1 min. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online using the Google Meet platform. What is important, however, is that the interviewees talked about their experiences referring to qualitative research most often carried out before the pandemic, and thus, in the field.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The interview transcripts were then written down, coded and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach: data reduction, display, and verification. Both deductive and inductive codes were used. The deductive codes consisted of 8 different types of challenges of doing qualitative research known from the literature, presented in the theoretical part and in Table 2. The research analysis and using inductive (emerging) codes made it possible to specify these groups of challenges and characterize them using the perspective of rookie qualitative researchers in managerial and organizational studies in one of the Polish economics universities. Then the identified challenges were organized into categories related to the stage of the research process, i.e., designing (D), running (R), analyzing (A), presenting and publishing (P&P) qualitative research and all stages (AS) when a given type of challenge appeared in relation to each stage of research and it would be difficult to assign it to selected ones. The list of deductive and inductive codes, together with categories related to the stage of a research process is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The list of codes used in the empirical research

No.	Code (deductive)	Code (inductive)	Category - research stage
1.	Time and labor intensity of qualitative research	1.1 Preparing for interviews 1.2 Field research 1.3 Data analysis and interpretation	All stages (AS)
2.	Field work	2.1. Adapting to the interlocutors in the field 2.2. Logistical, organizational problems	Running the research (R)
3.	Difficulty of "grasping" a large amount of material	3.1 Synthesizing, selecting, and structuring the material from various sources 3.2 A large amount of material 3.3 Working with words as inspiring and satisfying	Analyzing (A)
4.	Lack of universal algorithms or accepted patterns of conducting qualitative research	4.1. Choosing one of the many ways in qualitative research approaches 4.2. Lack of universal patterns as an advantage	All stages (AS)
5.	Need to meet multiple requirements for ensuring rigor in the research procedure	5.1. Lack of theoretical and practical knowledge of how to meet the criteria of methodological rigor 5.1.a. Deficiencies in the doctoral school's study program 5.2. Doubts during the field research (ethical issues, quality of the interview conducted) 5.3. Applying triangulation of research methods 5.4. Providing faithful transcriptions 5.5. Doubts at the stage of data analysis and presentation 5.6. Ensuring reflexivity of a researcher	All stages (AS)
6.	Consistency of the story told with adherence to methodological rigor – the researcher's panache vs. methodological rigor	6.1. Decisions regarding the selection of quotes—quantity 6.2. Decisions regarding the selection of quotes—quality (informality)	Presenting and publishing (P&P)

No.	Code (deductive)	Code (inductive)	Category - research stage
7.	Uncertainty of the research process (qualitative research roller coaster)	7.1. Twists and turns 7.1.a. Emergence of new themes during conducting data 7.1.b. Re-coding 7.1.c. Going back to the literature 7.2. Lack of hypotheses	All stages (AS)
8.	Specific qualities of the researcher	8.1. Lack of a researcher's experience	All stages (AS)

Source: own elaboration

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, activities regarding credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were undertaken (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, prolonged engagement was ensured (at each research stage, the researcher conducted all interviews, asking additional questions and encouraging interlocutors to speak more broadly and support their statements with examples), triangulation of methods (IDI and FGI), and member checking – presenting the findings to a group of doctoral students for feedback. Transferability focused on assuring a thick description (Geertz, 1973) by presenting rich data (including quotations) and showing the context in which the study was conducted. Dependability and confirmability were ensured by making interview notes describing the setting and aspects of the interview that were noted during the interview itself and during transcript analysis. The notes also included the researcher's subjective reactions to the environment and their perceived relationship with the interviewees (reflexivity) (Berger, 2015; Robinson, 2014; Anderson, 2017).

FINDINGS

Qualitative research as time- and work-consuming

The interviewees planned or conducted research in various organizations differing in size (from micro to large enterprises), industry specificity (museums, coal mines, tourism), and sector affiliation (public, private or non-profit), etc. However, regardless of these differences, all of them stressed two key challenges, i.e., the time-consuming and labor-intensive nature of the qualitative research, which characterizes its various closely related stages. One of the interviewees said:

Taking into account the whole process, how long it takes, the fact that we meet different people, that this analysis later is extremely laborious, extremely laborious, from my point of view, I think that this [qualitative] research is not very difficult. But it is definitely not simple. [IR1]

Interviewees stressed that qualitative research requires devoting much more time than is often planned at the beginning. Moreover, especially for inexperienced researchers, it is also difficult to estimate this time:

If I plan something for six months, I can be sure that it can take me a year, right? Because there will be some issues (...). These are the issues of just implementation, and then the development of findings, right? That there are some additional threads, it was necessary to return to the literature. Because here it turns out that what I didn't think would be important, is important [IR3].

Referring to the first stages of qualitative research, it was pointed out that it was very time-consuming to prepare for interviews, as well as to arrange interviews, which was a serious challenge for novice researchers, often with a very limited budget and time for the research:

For example, I was in Warsaw, I was planning to finish my business trip, and I was one hundred percent almost sure, because this lady had already changed her mind twice. And then she says that she is very sorry, she feels bad (...), that she won't be able to do it. [She asks] if I'm staying on a little longer, I don't know a day or two that she would gladly postpone it. And then you wonder if you should prolong it, and if you can solve it in a different way. If it's possible, you prolong it, but imagine that you have a specific budget and you're supposed to stay there for some extra, I don't know, two days, and you simply don't have the money for it [IR2].

Other PhD students also emphasized the limited research budget:

Well, I'm tempted to research something. And even for some minor research for an article, I don't have any money from the university [IR1].

In addition, the interlocutors stressed that qualitative research most often involves long interviews, which not only makes the research time-consuming, but also makes it difficult to obtain consent for the interview and causes numerous dilemmas for novice researchers on how to conduct the interview. This also affected the quality of the interview being conducted:

You have this dilemma, you know more or less how much it comes out after a few interviews. And now: should you say that it takes an hour and a half and count on that if you stretch it over time, they won't be offended, or say it directly and potentially someone will pull out? Because if he thinks that he has to devote 2.5 hours to you, he will reject it (...). And, for example, in some cases I was under such pressure that I think I have to choose the most important questions now, because I might not finish it, because soon someone will tell me that he is very sorry (...). And then I don't know, either I went there twice or I missed that part of the interview, depending on what attitude someone had [IR2].

As the interlocutors mentioned, data analysis was also very time-consuming as it required a lot of concentration from them. This, combined with a lack of experience and the deadline for completing their PhD thesis, was very frustrating for the interviewees:

Well, surely the problem is with the coding itself, right? What parts of the text to mark and so on. How to do it, especially in those initial, initial phases (...). The very determination of the codes is also so, so accurate, so as not to miss anything. How general should they be, how specific should they be? (...). How to turn it into a structure? (...) Even more so when time is running out. And when one realizes that, I don't know, I can spend a maximum of one day on this, yes? I sit down to it, half of that day passes [smile], but I have just started [IR3].

Researcher's field work

Another difficulty pointed out by the interviewees was connected to field work. It was stressed that once a researcher is in the field, he or she needs to fully adapt to their interlocutors with whom a conversation will ultimately take place. Sometimes these interviewees turned out to be incompetent, causing the researcher to spend time on an interview that contributed little, and with limited resources of novice researchers—financial and time-related—this was a big problem:

So these are certainly some of the hardships of such field research, that there are times when we make an appointment with some institution, with some director, and the director goes out and appoints the least competent person, who won't help us at all with anything, and well, we're already there, we have to agree to it, and then we just leave unsatisfied. [IR1]

It was emphasized that important challenges were connected to the logistics and organization of the field work. Interviewees stressed that it was crucial to be logistically organized, especially in unfamiliar places, and coordinate this fieldwork with the time allocated for the entire research process. These challenges in the field were unavoidable for novice researchers who conducted research on their own in order to prepare their PhD thesis:

There is also something else, when someone is a little bit disorganized in life, and logistically in the field, in order to get to some points on time. Because it even happened to me that I checked myself on the map: oh, good, here it is. And then it turns out that they have some other branch and it's not on this street after all. Or I got lost somewhere, because of something (...). It's also so problematic such fieldwork (...) that it seems to me this can even be such a problem that someone might give up on such research in general [IR2].

Other problems or dilemmas related to conducting field research by novice researchers (e.g., ethical issues or triangulation of methods used in the field) were presented when discussing the challenge of the need to meet multiple requirements for ensuring rigor in the research procedure.

Difficulty of grasping a large amount of material

Interviewees also stressed the difficulty of grasping a large amount of material, which was especially important considering their lack of experience. A challenge for them was the selection and synthesis of material (often coming from different sources) and its structuring, which allows for the drawing of final conclusions. This was all the more problematic because qualitative research is mainly working with words, as in the extensive material from transcriptions of interviews alone:

As for whether you're horrified by the amount of text, it certainly scares you less if you already know what to expect than if you don't know what it looks like. And it's the first time you're confronted with it, that it can be such a huge number, because that's where thousands of these transcriptions can go, so it's really a lot (...). It's a little bit different between someone who has experience and someone who sees something like this for the first time [IR2].

The interviewees emphasized that after coding was completed, the large amount of the material generated, combined with their inexperience, overwhelmed them and caused them a lot of stress:

Suddenly you sit down with a pile, just hundreds of pieces of paper, from which you have to take this, take out this essence, this most essential thing (...). Tears appear, because I remember that it was like this, that I read all this many

times, and basically such an element of breakdown appeared here. What am I actually supposed to do with this? What now, how am I going to deal with this? (...). I stressed out a lot about it, given the fact that I already knew how many of these codes there were, because there was an incredible amount of it all out there [IR1].

The interviewees stressed that this was all the more of a problem because regarding their PhD thesis, the work had to be limited in volume:

It came to the stage of analyzing these findings, and suddenly it turned out that the first problem I wanted to address there in the empirical part could easily take 60 pages. Well, now ... – how to reduce it? [IR3].

Of course, here it is also worth mentioning the text limitations that we have a problem with, and it is clear that this work [PhD thesis] couldn't be very extensive. Especially since it was about one empirical chapter, and in a certain number of pages we simply had to close. And that added stress, of course [IR1].

Although the interviewees stressed that one difficulty, especially for them as novice field researchers, can be understanding and correctly interpreting the words of the interlocutor, working with words was also perceived by them as interesting and enjoyable:

I think it's worth mentioning that we are dealing with a great variety of statements (...). So this working with words a little bit was like in Polish classes, in high school, learning what the author meant. Well, and I think it was extremely enjoyable, very cool [IR1].

Lack of universal patterns

The interviewees also spoke about the challenge that there are no universal algorithms for running and analyzing qualitative research – that relatively often things are intuitive and strongly dependent on the experience of the researcher. At the same time, however, they stressed that they did not perceive this challenge only in terms of a difficulty. Interestingly, some argued that it might even be beneficial in terms of a qualitative researchers' openness or flexibility:

I don't know, maybe in these quantitative [research] it's so that you actually have something specifically presented there and you know what to do, you have some step by step, and here there is actually such greater conventionality. Also it's so little structured and so fluid maybe between the one and the other, that I don't know, something is not pure grounded theory (...), there are some hybrids between these approaches. And that's also such a difficulty, because you actually have something from extreme to extreme, maybe some edge, but in between you can choose whether you turn more in this direction, at some stage, or more like this, or maybe you want just this, or maybe you want to combine it with something else, whether you want this type of questionnaire, or maybe you enrich something else (...). Maybe this is even better that you can choose for yourself, that you have some room to maneuver, that you don't have some such rigid framework [IR2].

At the same time, as further considerations also show, the problem for some novice researchers was that they were unable to choose between different paths in conducting qualitative research. Moreover, they did not have adequate theoretical preparation to conduct qualitative research (also due to deficiencies in the doctoral study program) and they did not have a supervisor or another person at the university who, having experience in conducting qualitative research, would guide them appropriately:

We don't just want theory. Someone telling us what research is. We would just like to see it in practice, sometimes using examples [FR5].

But what if I have trouble doing good research? Because I can't do it and that's it. For example, it really annoys me and it's somewhere in my head. And it causes fear in me. So what if I write a great theory and do a great literature review (...). Now I'm afraid that I'll just do the survey and someone will tell me: "No, it was done wrong. This is where you should do a focus group", which I have never heard of being able to do something like this before (...). It's a weakness of this system (...). What pains me is not that we have no methodological skills at all, and I mean that sincerely (...). I had a problem choosing a methodology for the thesis outline, I felt very bad about it because I didn't know the methods [FR3].

There are some classes that, in our opinion, at least in mine, build my skills as a scientist to a small extent [FR1].

We have very few methodological subjects, and even if we had some (...) they were not conducted in such a way that I learned anything more from them [FR4].

I know what I care about because I know more or less, and I cannot achieve it because I don't have sufficient knowledge or tools [IR1].

The need to meet multiple requirements for ensuring rigor in the research procedure

For the interviewees, an important difficulty was the methodological rigor that must be ensured at various stages of the research procedure in order to increase the trustworthiness of the qualitative research (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability).

The interviewees mentioned that they had many doubts when conducting their field research associated with ethical issues, the quality of interviews and other elements assuring research trustworthiness, especially credibility. Such doubts are entertained to some extent by every researcher, but they are much greater for novices:

Some doubts arise all the time, yes? After another interview: and was it understood in this city [municipal office] the same as in that one, and if different, then: what problems will it lead to? And so on and so forth. So, there are a lot of such doubts that are growing somewhere all the time [IR3].

I have this feeling that some things are impossible to surmount (...), if only with this kind of ethics. Should you give this name, or should you not give it? However, someone agreed, but then maybe someone will figure out what the entity is? I'm already talking about the publication of findings. I don't know, you also have in the course of the research that you are not supposed to suggest these answers, and that someone is supposed to speak freely. But you don't know if sometimes you don't direct them too much, whether your questions don't already contain some elements that suggest something, while it's supposed to be a free speech resulting from the interviewee's point of view. But you're also not sure if it's just well asked, whether you haven't already smuggled something in this question, that someone is guiding and suggesting something there. Or (...) you shouldn't tell who you talked to, and sometimes such things slip out (...). So, certain points of methodology [criteria of methodological rigor] are one thing, but also such real-life behavior in this live conversation, it's kind of another matter [IR2].

Novice researchers also found it difficult to triangulate research methods, which is one of the methods for raising qualitative research credibility. Some claimed that for them – as inexperienced researchers – it was difficult to focus on two methods simultaneously in the field – such as conducting observation and interviews:

It's a lot of work, because the interviews themselves are already demanding. And yet if I were to focus on observation, sort of separately, in addition to those [interviews], it's difficult, it's really difficult [IR2].

The research participants also pointed to the difficulty of ensuring faithful transcription of the interviews, which is crucial to the credibility of the research. Due to the limited time to prepare the transcription, and at the same time the long time to do the transcription themselves (at the time the interviews were conducted, there was little software available that would effectively transcribe in Polish, and there were additional costs involved) some interviewees outsourced it. However, its quality was not adequate:

Transcriptions are an endless topic. Because if you do it yourself, you are assured that they are super, perfect. But when you outsource it, for example, me, I am aware that some of my transcriptions had deficiencies, even though they were corrected many times [IR2].

At the same time, the interviewees said they were aware that faithful transcription is crucial to ensure methodological rigor, since sometimes seemingly insignificant statements in retrospect (after analyzing the entire material) turn out to be crucial to the phenomenon under study:

What especially comes out in the analysis, it turns out that there is some small sentence, which at the beginning we thought had no meaning and could be omitted, thrown out somewhere – because it is just some side plot – but then at the stage of analysis it turns out that it is very important [IR3].

Among other things, it was mentioned that it was a great challenge for novice researchers to ensure research trustworthiness, especially dependability and confirmability, due to the difficulties at later stages of conducting qualitative research (especially its analysis, interpretation, and presentation) associated with, for example, coding material or selecting relevant quotations. This requires the researcher to be reliable and, as one interviewee put it, “constantly on guard”, moreover it cost novice researchers a lot of stress:

Apparently, many people have talked about something like this, but the ability to choose that right quote that reflects what I also want to talk about in my work— that was difficult. On the other hand, I know that it cost me everything— simply a lot of tears, neurosis and a lack of sleep and stomach aches [IR1].

Very important in the case of qualitative research trustworthiness (especially confirmability) is reflexivity, i.e., the researcher's continuous reflection on their relationship with their subjects (organizations and people representing them) and the studied social context at many different stages of the research process, which can be especially difficult for rookie researchers. The interviewees stressed, for example, that a researcher knows the studied environment well, because they have been in it for a

long time, but then doubt arises as to whether the conclusions of the research really come from the field, or whether they stem from the researcher's background:

I think this is an absolute pitfall when it comes to qualitative research. I used to catch myself that I was so familiar with local governments and the functioning of people in local governments, the appointment of people to positions in cultural institutions, that, well, in a sense, sometimes maybe I oriented myself that these could be my observations (...). Certainly for me, especially in the case of public museums, it was a certain kind of trap (...). That's a difficulty, indeed [IR1].

Consistency of the story told with adherence to methodological rigor – the researcher's flair vs. methodological rigor

Also important in qualitative research is the need to combine methodological rigor, including language characteristic of scientific papers, with ensuring the flair of the researcher in presenting an original and interesting story found in the field. This is because it is important that methodological rigor does not overshadow the interesting story supposed to draw the reader into the world of the interviewees. One interviewee, conducting research among performing arts organizations (theatres), spoke of how difficult it was for her at times to find the right balance between the often very loose quotes presented as she called them – “unscientific”, and maintaining the serious narrative required in scientific works:

But you could see in some [quotes] their different artistic fancies, some way of speaking, some such, well the specifics of this artistic world. In the case of some people, because some of them were even very careful in their statements to make it very cool, coherent, and some were in general without stress and just said how they feel and see it. So, it made me think more about what I should give as a quote, because I knew that it was, that it reflected [research reality] well. But whether, I don't know, to give it, whether it may not be very serious, or not very scientific. Or some too spontaneous, too relaxed speech, some, I don't know, with these curse words of various kinds it is also a problem – one always wonders whether to give this or that, to camouflage it somehow. Whether to cut it out or not [IR2].

Uncertainty of the research process, its twist and turns because of the iterative nature of the research

Another challenge for interviewees was the uncertainty of the research, for example, where the researcher will go in the research process; also, the duration of the research was perceived as very uncertain, which considering the limited time to complete the doctoral thesis, was a significant challenge:

There are still a lot of such doubts that arise at a later the stage of the research, which, well, don't necessarily arise during quantitative research, yes? (...). If we already assume at the planning stage of this research – if it is assumed that in the case of such qualitative methods it is possible not to give hypotheses, and so on, then it seems to suggest that it is also difficult not only to predict the findings of these studies, but the duration, right? [IR3].

The interviewees stressed that because of the iterative nature of qualitative research, it was full of twists and turns:

But maybe it's also difficult that when in the course of the research you see that something goes differently, that you change, that you alter, adjust it somehow, that you don't stick rigidly to something you've established, because you see that maybe it would be necessary to do this and that [IR2].

The same interlocutor mentioned an interview that she initially thought was useless, but unexpectedly, after analyzing the whole research material, it turned out to be one of the most important for the entire study:

From Krakow, I was totally heartbroken by this interview. I was under the impression that this is in general completely side issues, about some things that are not this at all, I was under the impression that I didn't ask anything, I don't have answers to my questions, but I have a pile of some other things. And I already... I just wrote off that interview. But how much of it I used for that doctorate, it was really a huge amount! And it's such cool, interesting [stuff] from a different point of view, when no one else was talking about it. [IR2].

Because of the iterative nature of qualitative research, interviewees often mentioned the need to return to the same activities, e.g., related to data collection or analysis. They stressed that even the research findings ultimately presented in the dissertation, were changing until the very end. Thus, they perceived working with the data as a never-ending story, which frustrated them a lot because of the limited resources for the research—time (the need to complete the doctorate on time) and budget:

Just you know there are new codes (...). Because before that, I either didn't know about something at all, or I didn't assume at all that it would be so important compared to some other issues. And once I see that the third time they talk about something, well then you go back (...). It's so problematic that you have the feeling that it's some kind of never-ending story (...). And it's more, I don't know, frustrating, well, that you would like to finish it already, to have it sorted out somehow, and here something keeps emerging all the time, something new all the time. That wasn't actually there, so you would still read something, see something, and that's how it goes [IR2].

Specific qualities of the researcher

As emphasized in the theoretical part, the specific qualities of the researcher, such as intuition, human interaction skills, flexibility, openness, etc. are crucial when conducting qualitative research. However, the role of experience, which was most lacking for novice researchers starting their “adventure” with qualitative research, was particularly emphasized:

Even at the stage of arranging interviews I just felt inexperienced, impatient. But it was through the prism of this inexperience that I remember the first interview, the pilot one, which I conducted on my own, it ended up so that I was all sweaty, hot and terribly stressed about it all. And with each subsequent interview I saw that just with my experience, with subsequent interviews I feel more and more confident and I also find it easier and easier to talk. I'm able to quickly interrupt threads that were irrelevant, towards which the interviewee was heading (...). And the first interview was how I let the interviewee flow. And that experience ... gaining that experience was important [IR1].

It's hard to talk about experience here, which was zero before, so I was actually the first to deal with this type of situation and interviews [IR2].

DISCUSSION

The research identified and described the challenges of conducting qualitative research, not in general terms – as has been most often presented in the literature to date (Holmes, 2020; Magilvy & Thomas, 2009) – but from the perspective of novice researchers, allowing them to express their reflections on the issue. This specific context of rookie qualitative researchers preparing their thesis in one of Polish economics universities provided enriched and detailed knowledge about the challenges of conducting such research. Moreover, the study presented and arranged the qualitative research challenges by study stages, from design to presentation and publication phase. The research showed that in the case of novice researchers the vast majority of challenges of doing qualitative research, i.e., time and labor intensity, lack of universal patterns, the need to meet multiple requirements for ensuring rigor, the uncertainty of the research process, and that the specific qualities of the researcher are present in all phases of qualitative research, i.e., designing, running, analyzing, presenting, and publishing. Additionally, the research has shown that some of the challenges were specific only to selected phases: for running qualitative research these were the challenges related to field research (logistical, organizational and time challenges very burdensome in in case of time pressure to complete PhD thesis); for the analyzing phase – difficulty of “grasping” a large amount of material (its synthesis, selection and structuring—even more difficult in the absence of a researcher’s experience and a supervisor familiar with qualitative research methodology), and for presenting and publishing—the need to assure consistency of the story told with adherence to methodological rigor, see Figure 1.



Figure 1: Challenges of conducting qualitative research at its various stages from the perspective of novice researchers

Source: own elaboration

A more detailed presentation of those challenges from the perspective of novice researchers with the reference to individual research stages, rarely found in the literature (e.g., Kalman, 2019; Saxena, 2017; Ausband, 2006), is done in Table 3. Such an approach makes it possible to show which challenges and why are the most significant for novice qualitative researchers and when (at which stage of qualitative research) they occur. This, in turn, brings us closer to potential recommendations on how to best meet these challenges, also with the help of the academic community in organizational and management studies.

Table 3: Characteristics of challenges of doing qualitative research from the perspective of rookie researchers

No.	Challenge	Research stage	Characteristics
1.	Time and labor intensity of qualitative research	All stages	The long duration of the entire research – from design to analysis and interpretation (often longer than assumed at the outset and hard to predict), being all the more problematic for novice researchers with limited resources, especially given the budget and time to complete a PhD dissertation: - the labor-intensive and time-consuming nature of preparing for interviews, e.g., the long process of modifying research questions (often due to a lack of experience) or searching for data prior to the empirical study; - long duration of the research itself (e.g., due to long in-depth interviews) making the process of interviewee recruitment difficult; raising some dilemmas for novice researchers, e.g., whether to inform about the potential time required for the interview, also potentially affects the quality of the interview being conducted (research credibility); - time- and labor-intensive data analysis and interpretation—a lengthy and difficult coding process; a necessity to go back to previous stages due to the iterative nature of qualitative research (see point 6.) – all the more difficult for novice researchers.
2.	Field work	Running the research	The need to adapt in the field to the interlocutors, especially to their accessibility and competences; Logistical, organizational problems, especially in unfamiliar territory all cause additional stress for novice researchers related to their limited experience and resources (time [for finishing their PhD thesis], budget for research, etc.).
3.	Difficulty of “grasping” a large amount of material	Analyzing	- The difficulty of synthesizing, selecting and structuring the material from various sources, especially for a novice researcher, being often stressful or even “paralyzing” (especially with limited time to complete the research and the limited volume of the future PhD thesis); A large amount of material in the form of transcripts that demands tedious, long and often difficult working with words. At the same time, working with words, although labor-intensive, was perceived by novice researchers as inspiring and satisfying.
4.	Lack of universal algorithms/ accepted patterns of conducting qualitative research	All stages, in particular, running and analyzing	The difficulty – especially for inexperienced researchers – of choosing one of the many options in qualitative research approaches, for example, the way of data analysis (coding). At the same time, this challenge perceived as an advantage of qualitative research by some novice researchers.
5.	Need to meet multiple requirements for ensuring rigor in the research procedure	All stages	Difficulty in ensuring methodological rigor at various stages of the research procedure aimed at increasing the trustworthiness of qualitative research (i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability). Problems in this regard arise from: Lack of theoretical and practical knowledge of how to meet the criteria of methodological rigor – lack of opportunities to acquire this knowledge in the course of doctoral studies; - Many doubts during the field research, potentially reducing the credibility of the research—related to ethical issues, the quality of the interview conducted (e.g., did the interviewees properly understand the question? If not, what could be the consequences? Were the identities of other interviewees accidentally revealed – did the interviewee guess who the researcher had spoken to earlier? Were answers not suggested by the interviewer?, etc.); - Difficulty for novice researchers of applying triangulation of research methods in the field – difficult to focus simultaneously on observation and interviewing, which can also reduce the credibility of the research; - Difficulty in ensuring credibility by providing faithful transcriptions—due to limited time for PhD thesis preparation, outsourcing transcriptions that are not always faithful to the original; - Difficulty in ensuring trustworthiness of the research, especially dependability and confirmability, due to doubts of inexperienced researchers in carrying out the research procedure at later stages—especially at the stage of data analysis and presentation, e.g., doubts about the way of coding the material, selection of citations accurately reflecting the studied phenomenon, etc.; - Difficulty in ensuring trustworthiness of the research, especially confirmability, due to the need for constant reflection by the researcher regarding his/her relationship with the studied subjects and social context (reflexivity) at each stage of the research, which distinguishes quantitative from qualitative research and for inexperienced/less experienced researchers constitutes an additional difficulty (reflexivity as a process based on experience that novice researchers lack).

No.	Challenge	Research stage	Characteristics
6.	Consistency of the story told with adherence to methodological rigor – the researcher's panache vs. methodological rigor	Presenting and publishing	Novice researchers' doubts about how many quotes to present, about their style of expression , often very unusual and informal, so that the presented story does not dominate the requirements of methodological rigor and allows consistency to be maintained with the objectives of the work, and conversely, to ensure that the researcher's desire to meet scientific requirements, including the use of scientific language and the methodological rigor associated with it, does not overshadow the story.
7.	Uncertainty of the research process (qualitative research roller coaster)	All stages	Uncertainty accompanying the entire research process due to the many twists and turns resulting from the emergent, as well as the iterative nature of qualitative research (important especially for novice researchers due to the need to complete their thesis within a certain time frame): 1. Uncertainty resulting from the frequent lack of hypotheses , causing the researcher to never know where the study will go or how long it will last (when the saturation effect will occur) 2. Numerous twists and turns due to the iterative nature of qualitative research and the emerging character of the findings , i.e., the need to revisit previous steps of the research procedure, e.g., re-coding, going back to the literature, emergence of new themes from interviews that the researcher previously considered irrelevant to the topic, etc. All this gives novice researchers the feeling that data analysis is a "never-ending story" and hinders the development of findings and the formulation of final conclusions in the doctoral thesis.
8.	Specific qualities of the researcher	All stages	Particularly strongly emphasized the lack of experience in conducting qualitative research by novice researchers, especially at the beginning of the research process, strongly hindering it.

Source: own elaboration

The challenges presented in the "Challenge" column in Table 3 are more general in nature, i.e., they apply to both experienced and inexperienced researchers, since they are mainly due to the specifics of qualitative research, as stressed previously in the literature. However, some of the identified challenges presented in Table 3, those in the "Characteristics" column, are new and are specific to novice researchers. These may also arise from other conditions related to the social context in which the interviewees operate, especially the type of scientific area: organizational and management studies, and the university where the research was conducted. Moreover, they may depend on whether and to what extent the novice researchers received help from their supervisors, what kind of support their university provided, or what stage of their research work they were at when the research was conducted.

Thus, the added value of this study is that it not only identifies which challenges are particularly difficult for novice researchers and when, but also why and what the potential consequences of facing these challenges might be. Even when research findings presented below are supported by the other literature on qualitative novice researchers' challenges, often these conclusions were not supported by empirical research, as it is done in this paper. Moreover, this study shows some of challenges from a different perspective than before. Interestingly, some factors previously identified in the literature (Gephart, 2004; Langley, 1999; Kalman, 2019; Huy, 2012; Graebner, Martin, & Roundy, 2012) as solely or mainly difficulties in conducting qualitative research were seen by the interviewees not necessarily in terms of problems, but also as advantages of qualitative research (e.g., working with words or the lack of universal patterns)—more about it further in this section.

Referring to particular groups of challenges in terms of the time-consuming and labor-intensive nature of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Gephart 2004; Sangasubana, 2009) (point 1. in Table 3), all the interviewees stressed that the long and arduous research process in qualitative research (at all its stages) clashes with the reality of academic work, where researchers are held accountable for projects (including PhD theses) that must be completed within a certain timeframe (Eakin, 2016; Wohlfart, 2020; VanderKaay et al., 2018; Nagel et al., 2015). The research findings presented in this paper showed what the consequences of such time pressure may be. For instance, it often prevented novice researchers from deepening their research as much as would be desired, or created a strong sense of frustration. Regarding the stage of research designing, the interviewees mentioned, for example, the challenge of the long and tedious, even called "unpleasant" process of arranging interviews. Moreover, they strongly emphasized their inexperience in doing field research. They mentioned having a wide range of doubts at this stage. One of them was how to direct the interview after asking broad open questions. This problem is also mentioned by Johnston and Dowling (2023), who suggested that for novice researchers the ladder question technique may be helpful. Participants also had doubts whether to inform potential interviewees in advance about the long duration of the interview. As a result, it was not uncommon for novice researchers to have to re-schedule an interview (which made research process longer), or for some questions to be dropped in a hurry (which potentially negatively impacted the credibility of the research). Such situations, they said, caused them a lot of stress, especially when conducting their first interviews. Thus, the role of advice from more experienced researchers is crucial already at the research design stage. This is in line with Wohlfart's reflections (2020, p. 3) on the first own qualitative research: *"The result of our work was (1) way too long, (2) way too rigid and*

(3) *inclusive of far too many topics. Looking back, I regret that the other researchers did not intervene or improve the structure of the interview guide*". Regarding the stage of research analysis and interpretation, similarly to Kalman's (2019) findings, novice researchers often stressed the long, difficult, and extremely tedious coding process.

It is worth adding that there is currently an ongoing discussion on coding qualitative research with the use of AI (e.g., Sun et al., 2025), and one could claim that this challenge (i.e., the tedious coding process) is no longer relevant. However, the same current research shows that AI still does not solve the problem of difficult and tedious work on text coding, AI is possibly treated as an additional coder (e.g. for the purpose of triangulation), and the researchers should do the coding on their own anyway (Marshall & Naff, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

Regarding the challenges of fieldwork itself (point 2. in Table 3), the findings of the study showed that the biggest problems here were logistical, organizational, and time challenges (VanderKaay et al., 2018). For novice researchers with limited time and research budget, this fieldwork was seen as difficult and very stressful. However, the interviewees revealed that at the same time they perceived this stage of research as very informative. It was also pointed out that outsourcing the research to an external research agency would avoid some of the identified logistical or organizational challenges. However, they were aware that it would prevent them from gaining experience – so valuable for a novice researcher – and would not enable the collection of such valuable research material as can only be acquired by a researcher through direct contact with the field (Suddaby, 2006). Such awareness among novice researchers is certainly important and valuable, but it can be gained only after fieldwork, during which much can be learned (Saxena, 2017; Wohlfart, 2020). As Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019, p. 44) claim, *"the 'craft' of qualitative research is best learned by doing, which also means making decisions, mistakes, and having the patience for understanding to clarify with time and practice"*.

Another challenge for novice researchers was grasping the large amount of material (point 3. in Table 3). The main problem for them was the synthesis, selection and structuring of the most valuable content. This is a challenge even for more experienced researchers (Kanter, 1977; Langley, 1999), and thus, proved to be particularly difficult for novice researchers. As they mentioned, they felt absolutely overwhelmed with data and even, as one interviewee put it, "paralyzed" by it. Huy (2012) calls this phenomenon "data asphyxiation". The research showed that these feelings were strongly associated with two issues: the need to maintain a certain structure and volume of the PhD thesis, it could not be too extensive, and also the limited time for completing the doctorate, on which the person's further academic career often depended. Interestingly, the literature indicates that working with words, compared to working with numbers, can be more difficult (Gephart, 2004; Langley, 1999). However, at the same time, some of the interviewees found this work inspiring and developing, much more enjoyable than, for example, quantitative analysis. One interviewee even described it as similar to working with puzzles, resulting in an overall picture, i.e., an interesting and coherent story. This is interesting result, because much more often the challenges and problems are stressed by qualitative researchers in the area of grasping the large amount of material, especially by novices.

Another challenge for novice researchers was the lack of universal algorithms or accepted patterns of conducting qualitative research (point 4. in Table 3). This is in line with the general literature on qualitative studies (Suddaby, 2006; Malterud, 2001) – the so-called "cooking without a recipe" (Graebner et al., 2012). However, as the research has shown, for inexperienced researchers this challenge was of particular importance at the stage of analyzing data, especially for those who could not count on the help of their supervisors. For instance, the interviewees found the need to choose between different methods of text analysis difficult—often indicating that they did not have sufficient knowledge on the subject or experience. This is consistent with other research on the challenges for inexperienced researchers in conducting qualitative research (e.g., Backman & Kyngäs, 1999; Wohlfart, 2020). As VanderKaay, et al. (2018) stress, in qualitative research the choice of a set of methods can be approached quite pragmatically. Such a pragmatic approach is also recommended for novice scientists (Silverman, 2011; Patton, 2002; Seale et al., 2007). Hammersley, for example, says that novice researchers should be encouraged to become *"neither ostriches nor fighting cocks"* (2004, p. 557). However, regardless of which research approaches and methods are used, researchers should be knowledgeable about them in order to pragmatically select them. This, as the research has shown, has often been a problem for rookie researchers. At the same time, however, some interlocutors who had the support of their supervisors saw the lack of universal patterns characteristic of qualitative research also as an advantage. The fact that they perceived a certain freedom in thinking and acting, which they could probably afford thanks to the support of more experienced colleagues, has not been emphasized in the literature in the context of novice researchers so far.

Quite a lot of attention was paid by the interviewees to the need to meet the many requirements of the research procedure (point 5. in Table 3)—to ensure methodological rigor—i.e. research trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) at various stages of the research procedure. Of all the challenges, this one was the most difficult for the novice researchers (it is worth noting, however, that many of the other challenges discussed here largely boil down to this very challenge). Here, the interviewees referred to a number of problems, particularly at the stage of conducting fieldwork. They mentioned a lack

of theoretical and practical knowledge of how to meet the criteria of methodological rigor in qualitative research – they claimed that they did not obtain this knowledge during their doctoral studies. This is in line with the shortcomings of the educational process at universities (however, not necessary in the field of organizational and management studies) mentioned in works of Nagel et al. (2015), Charmaz, (2014), Eakin (2016), and VanderKaay et al. (2018). Moreover, the interviewees mentioned numerous doubts, including ethical ones, while conducting interviews (Robinson, 2014; Tsai, 2013). This corresponds with Moosa's (2013, p. 483) reflections as a novice researcher regarding problems in anonymizing and representing research participants from a small community: *"Although ethical guidelines are written to inform and guide researchers, how these guidelines are interpreted by novice researchers can present some formidable challenges to those carrying out research in different cultural contexts"*. Additionally, novice researchers mentioned the difficulty of applying triangulation of methods, which resulted from a lack of experience (Sangasubana, 2009). They indicated mistakes in outsourced transcriptions, which they were not able to do on their own due to the need to complete their thesis on time, and at the time when this study was run, there was a lack of access to computer software for doing transcriptions in Polish. This is in line with Moosa (2013, p. 492), who claims that time constraints did not allow her to conduct the research as she wished: *"my research did not involve the participants to this [desired] level, and their voices were also not brought to the fore as much as I would have wished because my agenda to complete the thesis presented time constraints that prevented me from involving my participants at every stage of the research process"*. All this negatively affects the research credibility. The participants also pointed to difficulties in ensuring the trustworthiness of the research, especially dependability and confirmability, due to difficulties at the stage of data analysis and presentation, e.g. doubts about how to code material or how to select relevant citations accurately so as to reflect the studied phenomenon, etc. This corresponds with Wohlfart's (2020, p. 3) experiences as a novice researcher: *"I found it extremely difficult to select exemplary quotes (wanting to find affirmative statements from all interview partners of a specific category in order to generalize for that sub-sample)"*.

Finally, the interviewees also mentioned that their constant reflection regarding their relationship with the studied social context (reflexivity) (Berger, 2015; Anderson, 2017), which is important at every stage of the research to ensure its trustworthiness (confirmability), as also very difficult for them. This difficulty is natural for any field researcher (Robinson, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Sangasubana, 2009), but as the research findings show, it is a particular challenge for inexperienced researchers. Dodgson (2019, p. 2) claims that novice researchers *"may become overwhelmed by the complexity of situating his/herself in relationship to the participant other"*. Holmes (2020) also stresses that novice researchers usually have to struggle with identifying their positionality. This is because their values, and thus, also the subjective contextual aspects of their positionality or 'situatedness' often changes over time (Holmes, 2020). Moreover, Holmes' (2020, p. 4) findings show that reflexivity is a skill resulting from the process, i.e., the experience gained by the researcher: *"exploring their positionality and writing a positionality statement can take considerable time and much 'soul searching'. It is not a process that can be rushed"*. Therefore, taking into account all the identified difficulties, the findings of this research follow Anderson (2017) and Tsai's (2013) advice that in order to ensure methodological rigor in their research, novice researchers should rely on their thesis supervisor and the peer review process for good quality journals.

Another challenge is to ensure the consistency of the story told (in a new and interesting way) with adherence to methodological rigor and the work's assumptions (point 6. in Table 3) (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007). At the research presentation and publication stage, such a problem can occur especially among inexperienced scientists (Kalman, 2019). Indeed, as the research findings show, novice researchers had doubts about how to ensure a balance between capturing the specifics of the interviewees/industry/environment studied (reflected, for example, by very loose and informal quotes) and the assumptions and rigor (including language) of a scientific work. To some extent this relates to Saxena's (2017) reflections as novice researcher, who mentioned that a challenge for her was presenting findings in such a way that they follow methodological rigor and do not appear as obvious statements to the readers. Thus, based on the research findings, one can agree with the advice of Malterud (2001) that here again, the role of supervisors is very important. Such supervisors should pay attention to ensuring that the choice of citations does not detract from the scientific quality of the work, but also that there is not an excessive focus on methodological rigor at the expense of an interesting presentation of the story.

Regarding the uncertainty of the entire process (see point 7. in Table 3) in qualitative research (Manson, 2002; Robinson, 2014), the interviewees claimed that this was due to the many twists and turns (Bansal & Corley, 2012; Saxena, 2017) during all research stages, resulting from the emergent and iterative nature of qualitative research (Backman & Kyngäs, 1999). This is in line with Kalman's (2019, p. 354) research findings, which showed that *"the challenges faced in data collection, analysis and interpretation caused the novices to feel uncertainty, vulnerability, and a sense of hitting a brick wall, which in turn triggered them to engage in a struggle to get out of the knots in which they were tied up"*. Kalman's (2019) participants perceived qualitative research as "blurry and demanding". This study has shown that this was a very difficult challenge leading

to frustration for novice researchers as they had to complete their theses within a set and limited timeframe, while at the same time it was unclear when the research would be completed and what the ultimate outcome would be (for example, because of a need for re-coding, going back to the field or to the literature, and/or the difficulty in predicting when the saturation effect would occur). This corresponds with what Backman and Kyngäs (1999) claim, that while uncertainty occurs during the whole research process, especially when building theory, novice researchers may experience the phases of qualitative research as very chaotic, and may feel unable to make any discoveries at that point.

Finally, in terms of the important characteristics of the researcher (point 8. in Table 3) (Gephart, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000; Suddaby, 2006; Siggelkow, 2007), the inexperience of the interviewees in conducting qualitative research came to the fore, causing a lot of stress for many interlocutors during all stages of the research process, especially when they conducted their first interviews. Creswell (2007) claims that it is the experience of qualitative researchers in collecting and analyzing data that shapes the whole research process.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the challenges identified can currently only be partially reduced by using AI in qualitative research (e.g., in relation to transcription or partial analysis of material that must be finally analyzed by the researcher anyway). Still, despite the growing usefulness of AI, due to its limitations – it is the researcher who designs the qualitative research and decides on each element of the research process, and above all takes responsibility for each of these elements. The characterized challenges will certainly change in the future, but this is a topic for a different discussion and many questions in this regard still remain unanswered.

CONCLUSIONS

The research also allowed us to identify some practical recommendations, directions for future research, as well as limitations that should be eliminated in future research.

Regarding practical recommendations there is a great need to deepen novice researchers' knowledge and, above all, practical skills with regard to conducting qualitative research. The research showed that among the interviewees, both knowledge and practical skills were a stress-inducing factor at various stages of conducting qualitative research. Qualified qualitative researchers are therefore needed, who as lecturers at the university, provide practical guidance in conducting this type of research. It would be very good if such lecturers were at the same time experienced supervisors, i.e., people most closely working with doctoral students. As research has shown, this is a very important element, since the lack of supervisors' competences in running qualitative research was a significant challenge for inexperienced researchers who decided to do qualitative study. It was also stressed in the literature by Nagel et al. (2015) who mentioned that choosing a mentor or supervisor for qualitative research may be difficult because many scientists at universities have experience in quantitative rather than qualitative research. Thus, also institutional and financial support for educational programs is needed. As Wohlfart (2020, p. 4) calls: *"I want to appeal to researchers with experience in qualitative research: help us! Specifically, study programs of the Humanities and Social Sciences need to integrate courses and texts on qualitative research. Currently, qualitative research is often being negated by lecturers, researchers and journal editors alike."* Certainly, taking care of the curriculum, including an appropriate number of hours in qualitative research methodology, workshops conducted by experienced researchers who are themselves qualitative researchers, would be beneficial for those preparing dissertations in qualitative studies.

It is also important to increase the knowledge of both novice researchers and experienced researchers, including supervisors, in the field of using AI for qualitative research. Here, the role of experienced researchers seems crucial, because – in the face of the possible uncritical admiration for AI by rookie researchers and the desire to speed up or facilitate many works related to qualitative research – it is they who should be responsible for safeguarding the qualitative research trustworthiness. Although AI can facilitate or speed up many works, it still lacks certain properties, especially those that are key in qualitative research, such as researcher intuition and deep analysis skills (e.g., emotions, nuances, atypical elements) (Anis & French, 2023; Sun et al., 2025). Qualitative researchers should know both the advantages and disadvantages of using AI in order to conduct valuable research using this tool. Supervisors must also draw inexperienced researchers' attention to ethical issues (such as using AI to transcribe research, analyze material—e.g., coding) (Marshall & Naff, 2024). The interviewees should be, for example, aware that their image or statements are being analyzed by AI and becoming part of the training material.

Finally, taking into account the above, it would also be worthwhile to create or develop (where they already exist) so-called qualitative communities of research and/or practice, the creation of which has already been advocated by other authors in other qualitative research communities (Eakin, 2016; Cheek, Corlis, & Radoslovich, 2009). Such groups of researchers enable knowledge sharing, learning and support, especially for less experienced researchers. It is important that such communities are

formed in relation to a specific research area/discipline, in this case, organizational and management studies. Such a group of people with similar experiences, passions, problems or challenges are always eager to discuss and develop their knowledge and skills. Given that in many scientific communities qualitative research still has to prove its standing in science, such groups would also help strengthen the position of the research itself in the community and create a kind of qualitative researcher culture. According to Denzin (2016), the future of qualitative research is now, which is why these types of communities are urgently needed, including in Polish universities, as the findings of this research show.

On the basis of the research, some recommendations for future empirical research can also be formulated. Firstly, as mentioned before, some of the challenges of conducting qualitative research were not necessarily perceived only negatively by novice qualitative researchers. Some of them were perceived as stimulating, inspiring or cognitively creative factors. In this regard, it would be worth conducting more in-depth research in the future to determine whether this perspective is dependent on, for example, age (as a characteristic of young people [more curious about the world, with an open mind] or as reflective the level of experience in conducting qualitative research, or on whether a novice researcher has someone experienced to help, thanks to which he/she is less stressed about the challenges associated with qualitative research and at the same time enjoys the positive benefits they bring). Secondly, it would be worth comparing the experiences of novice Polish qualitative researchers with those from other countries, as well as other universities. It may turn out that some of the identified challenges are different, for example, due to the different status of qualitative vs. quantitative research in a particular country, or due to a different curriculum in doctoral schools. It would also be worthwhile conducting similar research in other communities of novice researchers—i.e., not only among researchers in organizational and management studies, but also among representatives of other fields and disciplines. This type of research (e.g., regarding medical or nursing students) does exist in the literature (Anderson, 2010; Dodgson, 2019; Eakin, 2016; Johnston & Dowling, 2023) but it is relatively scarce.

This research has some limitations. Firstly, the study was carried out with a group of 11 novice researchers, hence the findings are limited and not representative. Additionally, only a few of these people were at the stage of completing qualitative research for their doctoral thesis and their experiences in particular were used to identify challenges at all stages of the research process. The remaining participants mainly commented on the substantive preparation provided by doctoral school (the stage of designing the research). Secondly, the conclusions drawn are dependent on the context in which the research was conducted—i.e., researchers from one Polish university and from the field of organizational and management studies. The situation may have looked different if the study had included novice researchers from other countries or from a different area of science. For example, qualitative research conducted on topics related to medicine, e.g., among seriously ill or infirm people (e.g. Johnston & Dowling, 2023), shows that some of the challenges identified in this study can be even greater, and result from difficult conversations that require empathy and delicacy.

Nevertheless, many of the identified challenges and their nature will most certainly be similar in other communities, while the research itself can serve as a basis for further discussion on the subject.

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