



Choose, compose, contemplate: Semantic theorizing in management research

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# Choose, Compose, Contemplate: Semantic Theorizing in Management Research

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**By analysing life stories through a reflexive semantic theorizing process, this article introduces an alternative to many conventional coding-based qualitative analysis techniques. Rather than relying on coding techniques that often strip narrative data of its context and nuance, following the proposed approach helps preserve the richness and complexity of interviewees' lived experiences. The approach we present comprises three stages: (1) vertical analysis using chronological coding and phenomenological writing to explore individual trajectories, (2) horizontal analysis involving the construction of thematic axes and analytic writing to uncover collective patterns, and (3) reflexivity, interwoven throughout, to account for the researcher's positionality and influence on the research. Drawing on an example, our article demonstrates how this reflexive bricolage enables both concrete and abstract semantic theorizing. Specifically, the approach we present is intended as a guide for researchers who seek to theorize from rich qualitative data that reconstruct social or individual events from the perspectives of the interviewees. This theorizing process contributes to management research by offering a pluralistic and context-sensitive method that bridges individual experiences with broader theoretical insights, challenging dominant trends towards extreme standardization and abstraction in qualitative inquiry.**

Is it viable to examine the notes, but not the melody?  
(Selden, 2005, p. 126)

Management discipline acknowledges the theorizing potential embedded in individual experiences, recognizing them as valuable sources of insight (see Grenier and Collins, 2016). Within this perspective, the personal narratives of employees serve as powerful sensemaking tools, enabling researchers to better understand and take actions about complex organizational phenomena such as workplace practices, identity construction, and learning processes (Guber, 2011). To analyse these rich, context-specific stories, management scholars commonly draw on a range of coding-based qualitative analysis techniques, including thematic analysis (see Jenkins *et al.*, 2012), grounded theory (see Fuller and Lewis, 2002) and discourse analysis (see Heikkinen, Lämsä and Niemistö, 2021). Most such coding-based methods facilitate the process of theorizing by uncovering connections and explaining the underlying reasons for the occurrence/non-occurrence of specific events, actions or organizational dynamics (Cornelissen, 2017).

However, these qualitative approaches are challenged by the dominance of factor-analytic styles of theorizing that prioritize abstract models and linear causal relationships. This tendency pushes qualitative research towards a form that mirrors the variable-driven approaches of its quantitative counterparts (Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). Such a push risks marginalizing the explanatory styles that are central to qualitative inquiry. As Delbridge and Fiss (2013) argue, management discipline is in fact dominated by a narrow conception of theorizing which overlooks complexity, context, patterns and researcher's involvement in favour of generalized, often decontextualized models. Consequently, the explanatory depth that qualitative research can offer in understanding organizational life is crowded out, limiting the diversity and relevance of theoretical contributions. An examination of published management articles clearly shows this overemphasis on categorization and proceduralism (Balachandran Nair, 2022; Bell, Kothiyal and Willmott, 2017; Cunliffe, 2022). For instance, articles claiming to use the Gioia methodology often replicate the same abstraction process and homogeneous format

of presenting findings. This trend may inadvertently result in the exclusion of insights that do not fit into the model's structure, thereby diminishing the depth of findings.

More broadly, regardless of the specific technique adopted for analysing interview data, prevailing expectations encourage decontextualization, erasure of ambiguities and the production of objective and uniform accounts – qualities which interview data, by their very nature, rarely possess (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). In response to these expectations, methodological templates have gained legitimacy through their repeated use in top journals and the normative expectations of reviewers, editors and mentors (Cilesiz and Greckhamer, 2022; Harley and Cornelissen, 2022). While these templates have enhanced procedural clarity and comparability across studies, their widespread adoption has also produced a less-examined consequence: A growing disconnect between qualitative analysis practices and the context-sensitive theorizing they are meant to support. Robust theorizing requires engagement with the underlying intricacies to explain why particular aspects of the phenomenon emerge, persist, or fail to occur (Sutton and Staw, 1995). When qualitative analysis is guided primarily by standardized coding procedures or templates, analytical attention is redirected from acknowledging and accounting for contextual conditions and relational dynamics to data reduction. This is a constraint to theorizing from qualitative data.

The central problem, therefore, is the absence of methodological guidance for theorizing with contextual complexity rather than systematically reducing it. This gap is particularly consequential in the study of managerial/organizational phenomena, which cannot be meaningfully interpreted without attention to the situated factors that produce or shape them (Plakoyianaki *et al.*, 2019). Qualitative theorizing is therefore inherently situated in, rather than abstracted from, time and space. Yet, researchers are often at a loss to understand how to move from rich, contextually embedded descriptions towards theoretical explanations of 'how things hang together' (Cornelissen, 2017), without stripping away the very complexity that enables such explanations. As a result, scholars face persistent tension between producing analytically rigorous theory and preserving the thickness and contextual grounding of their data. This unresolved methodological tension motivates our article. The approach we propose seeks to address this problem by offering a systematic way to support theorizing from qualitative data while retaining contextual richness as an analytical resource.

In the *Organizational Research Methods* featured topic 'Templates in qualitative research', Pratt, Sonenshein and Feldman (2022) advocated the introduction of methodological bricolages as analytical alternatives to templates. Mees-Buss *et al.* (2022) promoted the use of

heuristics instead of templates. Building on these contributions and in line with the perspective of Alvesson and Gabriel (2013), we propose an approach that does not 'do violence to experience' (Pratt, 2008). We suggest the findings to be rooted in data, in their context, with proper consideration of the researcher's involvement in the theorizing process. We hence offer a 'guiding heuristic' or a 'bricolage' to theorizing (Mees-Buss *et al.*, 2022; Pratt, Sonenshein and Feldman, 2022) compatible with the originality and creativity that qualitative research demands (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Weick, 1989).

Our heuristic comprises three stages, each encompassing different possible analytic moves, which can be adopted flexibly by researchers. Furthermore, this heuristic leverages the engagement of the researcher by documenting their agency in the research process and explaining their role (Hansen *et al.*, 2025). This emphasis on the researcher's agency aligns closely with the broader recognition of reflexivity in qualitative research. Reflexivity involves critically reflecting on one's position, assumptions and influence on the research process. Failing to practice reflexivity leaves the subjectivities involved hidden and unaccounted for, thus weakening the ethical and analytical strength of the study involved. Nearly every issue of qualitative methods journals includes at least one article addressing reflexivity, underscoring its established importance in the field (Berger, 2015). Despite this recognition of its importance, reflexivity is still not systematically and intentionally included in data analysis processes. We address this problem by presenting a reflexive bricolage that we term 'semantic theorizing process'.

Our theorizing process is particularly suited to research questions that aim to explain how and why organizational/managerial phenomena unfold in context. It is suitable for studies where preserving contextual richness is analytically central, and where theorizing requires tracing interdependencies, sequences and contingencies rather than isolating variables or categories only. It is hence not appropriate for studies that require standardization or generalization across larger samples or case sets. In the next section, we introduce the types of theorizing which are facilitated with the new approach. Next, we present the stages (vertical analysis, horizontal analysis, reflexivity) and analytical moves involved in the semantic theorizing process, with examples. Afterwards, we present the discussion, contributions, limitations, future directions and conclusion sections, respectively.

## Theorizing from qualitative interview data

All styles of theorizing are aimed at explaining the phenomena under investigation. While theorizing, the researcher takes a conceptual leap, from raw data to a set of abstract or clearly defined concepts, relation-

ships and explanations that offer meaning and relevance (Klag and Langley, 2013). Despite this common objective, different ways of theorizing vary in the types of explanations they provide (Abbott, 2004). Cornelissen (2017) classifies them as semantic, syntactic and pragmatic. Of these three classifications, the semantic program is the one which best captures the strengths of qualitative interview data. Semantic theorizing aims at explaining the specificities of the individual stories in interviews and assimilating them to more and more general patterns, showing regularities across time, samples or settings.

As per Cornelissen (2017), semantic theorizing could be concrete or abstract. The former involves thick descriptions of the actions, thoughts and beliefs of the interviewees – showing the ramifications and intricacies involved in the phenomena. Concrete semantic theorizing is thus about creating a montage. The nature of explanation in the semantic concrete program is to provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973). The abstract semantic theorizing on the other hand is about pattern descriptions: The data are reduced into patterns, sequences or clusters of observations all the while appreciating the richness and individual details. Ideally, abstract semantic theorizing should identify sequences and relationships, processes and typologies, whilst not losing sight of the particularities of the individual data (Tsoukas, 2009). It entails transforming the rich narratives found in the data into more structured forms that support the development of abstract theoretical concepts (Klag and Langley, 2013).

#### *Need for a new approach to semantic theorizing*

To counter the limitations of prevailing explanatory frameworks, there is a vital need for abstract and concrete semantic theorizing in management scholarship. It offers a sophisticated alternative to methods that rely on oversimplified categorization or rigid causal testing, which neglects the inherent complexity of causality (Cornelissen, 2017). This type of theorizing will also address concerns about the state of theory in management discipline, which is often referred to as becoming overused (Courpasson, 2013). Thick descriptions, which are central to semantic concrete theorizing, enable researchers to uncover the assumptions and contextual nuances of a phenomenon in ways that transcend rigid propositional formats. This approach also empowers researchers to critically examine widely held assumptions, either through reflexive inquiry or by identifying anomalies and complexities in the data (Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013).

Such semantic theorizing cannot be separated from the underacknowledged role of the researcher. Through the acts of collecting, coding and categorizing data, researchers inevitably transform it. They are not neu-

tral observers, but active participants in the meaning-making process. Much like Hermes, the mythological messenger, researchers function as translators of interviewees' narratives. The analytical choices depend on the researchers' understanding and interpretation of the data. Furthermore, all interpretations are relative and dependent on, among other factors, the applied theoretical lenses (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) and the researcher's disciplinary background (Fleetwood and Ackroyd, 2004).

Hence, during analysis, researchers must preserve the integrity of interviewees' perspectives and experiential knowledge (Pratt, Sonenshein and Feldman, 2022) while reflecting on their own position within the research process (Locke, 2015). Hansen *et al.* (2025) highlight how objectification of data arises when researchers distance themselves from the data they analyse by deliberately downplaying the personal implications of their involvement in its creation. This practice presents the data as neutral and uncontaminated, relying on an objective ontology that suppresses the inherent subjectivity of qualitative inquiry and silences the researcher's voice (Alvesson, 2023; Langley and Klag, 2019). As a result, the authentic voices of both interviewees and researchers are lost, diminishing semantic theorizing based on interview data (Fendt and Sachs, 2008).

To be interpretively rigorous, such studies should instead reflect the lived experiences of the interviewees and embed the researchers' experiences and positionalities (Cunliffe, 2022). The goal should not be mere categorization but conceptual abstraction, what Sudaby (2006, p. 636) calls 'lifting the data to a conceptual level'. This involves tracing patterns of action, interaction and meanings that may be tacit or explicit. What is needed is thus a more reflexive semantic theorizing process – one that honours interviewees' experiences, acknowledges the interpretive role of the researcher and remains committed to the generation of semantic explanations. In the following sections, we introduce an approach to analysing interviewees' life stories that embody these principles.

### **Semantic theorizing – Bricolaging reflexively**

We call for a reflexive, hermeneutic approach (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) to data analysis. In general terms, reflexivity refers to 'turning back on, or taking account of, a person's self' (Holland, 1999, p. 464). While there are different variants of reflexivity (e.g. transdisciplinary reflexivity, which moves within, across, around or beyond paradigms), our focus is specifically on reflexivity which lies within the confines of individual qualitative research projects (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023; Wilkinson, 1988). Even within the context of qualitative research, while there have been several calls for 'reflexivity'

(e.g. Alvesson, Hardy and Harley, 2008; Cunliffe, 2003), the responses to these calls substantially differ from each other. For instance, the hermeneutic approach adopted from phenomenology considers the researchers' presuppositions as central entities in an investigation. This approach considers the perspectives of the researchers not as problems to be solved, but as stances through which understanding the *researched* is possible (Walsch, 2003). In this article, we use the term 'reflexivity' to refer to this approach which emphasizes the personal and relational dimensions involved.

While the importance of reflexivity was already identified by previous methodologists (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), it is still not incorporated completely into qualitative research designs (Charmaz, 2014). In Straussian grounded theory, for example, analysis typically proceeds through three stages – open, axial and selective coding, designed to code and categorize data. Although widely used, this open–axial–selective sequence leaves little room for reflexivity and often strips away the complexity of the studied phenomenon, functioning more as a template than as a flexible process. As an alternative to templates, Pratt and colleagues (2022) introduced bricolage, a metaphor for organizing the analytical choices or 'moves' that fit the specific goals of a study. The bricolage foregrounds the researcher's agency in shaping the analysis (Pratt, Sonenshein and Feldman, 2022). A successful bricolage hence results in a coherent arrangement that links data, findings, theory and researcher engagement. The researcher, much like a bricoleur, works with available resources and actively constructs an arrangement suited to the demands of the study (Duymedjian and Rueling, 2010).

The theorizing process we propose in this article involves one such bricolage which was developed for the analysis of life stories collected through semi-structured interviews. The individual experiences collected through life stories have high semantic theorizing potential (Cornelissen, 2017; Kourti, 2016). By collecting life stories, the researcher aims to understand the interviewees' lived experiences and relationships as expressed in their own personal voices (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Futing Liao, 2004). This interpretation not only involves understanding the backgrounds and histories of the interviewees, but also reflexive thinking on the part of the researcher (Antoniadou and Crowder, 2019). The researchers engage in conversations with the interviewees and deeply immerse themselves in the collected data.

The intersubjective dynamics involved in a research relationship activate the fantasies and the feelings that are connected to the researchers' past and potentially 'cue them into what they think is occurring between' themselves and the interviewees (Holmes, 2014; Parker, 2010, p. 18). Delving into their dynamics can help researchers in embracing their vulnerability and using their emotions and feelings as sources of knowledge

(Gemignani, 2011). But how can researchers practically be reflexive? The approach we suggest urges the researchers to 'question the way they position ourselves in relation to others...in their methodology, interactions, and research accounts' (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013, p. 385). It considers the effect that immersion in the research has on the researchers – for instance, their vulnerability (e.g. emotional fatigue) during immersion (Borraz, Zeitoun and Dion, 2020; Sherry, 2013). Being reflexive can also aid researchers in understanding their individual frames of reference and relationships. It encourages researchers to be 'vigilant of own reactions to interactions with interviewees, and the implications thereof for the integrity of the data' (De Rond and Tunçalp, 2017, p. 26).

Our semantic theorizing process involves such a bricolage of different analytical moves which seek to recognize the researcher's engagement and the subjective nuances of the interviewees' accounts (Hansen and Trank, 2016; Macbeth, 2001). It involves a series of moves which aid in analysing the data at individual and collective levels. Jointly, these moves constitute what we call 'vertical' and 'horizontal' analyses. Our theorizing process is ontologically grounded in the view that social reality is co-constructed, contextual and dynamic. Epistemologically, it aligns with interpretivist and constructivist traditions that view knowledge as emerging through the entanglement of the researcher and the *researched*. The different analytic moves and the intertwined reflexivity are at the centre of this process. In the next section, we discuss and explicate this approach using an example – A study exploring the motivations driving career transitions among organizational executives who became coaches ('executives-turned-coaches').

## Semantic theorizing process

The semantic theorizing process we propose differs in kind, not merely in degree, from established qualitative approaches. Conventional methods typically proceed through the systematic fragmentation of narratives into codes, categories and aggregate dimensions (e.g. Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). In such approaches, the primary analytic unit is the data segment, and abstraction emerges through categorization and structuring. In contrast, semantic theorizing begins with reconstruction. The primary analytic unit is not the data segment, but the lived trajectory. Rather than merely aggregating codes into categories, the approach plots configurations that preserve the experiences of participants coherently. In this sense, the approach offers a model of theorizing that foregrounds meaning.

This theorizing process is well-suited for examining organizational phenomena characterized by transitions

Table 1. Context of the example study

To illustrate, we draw on a study of executives-turned-coaches in France, in which this approach was first applied. Through data collected over a span of 7 years, one of the authors of this article examined the life stories of 25 executives-turned-coaches. The author was not an executive-turned-coach, but rather a PhD candidate who came from a non-academic family background. The purpose of the study was to understand the power and identity processes in addition to the intertwined social and subjective dimensions of career transitions. Most of the interviewees were former managers who held responsibilities in large public and private sector organizations in different fields (football, industry, training, etc.). Life stories were instrumental in capturing the social contexts, cultural norms, power relations, etc., in which individual careers were embedded (Moreau, 2020). The interviewees were interviewed multiple times, resulting in 76 interviews. Each interview was 45–125 min long (see Moreau, 2020). The interviews covered topics related to the reasons behind becoming a coach, the meanings that the interviewees give to being coaches, the overall coaching and training experiences, the experiences prior to becoming coaches and the future expectations regarding coaching careers. The data emphasized the dynamic nature of career transitions and the way the interviewees experienced them.

and lived experiences such as shifts in roles, identities or contexts; processes of adaptation and sensemaking under conditions of uncertainty or ambiguity; and the reconstruction of practices and relationships in response to evolving organizational/personal circumstances. Examples include executives transitioning to leadership or coaching roles; employees navigating mergers, restructurings or transitions to remote work; professionals negotiating identities across cultural or career boundaries; and individuals managing work-life transitions such as caregiving or parental leave.

Since bricolaging involves combining analytic moves specifically tailored to one's own research project, what we present here is not intended to be used as a prepackaged arrangement of methodological moves. Rather, it is an effective assemblage of analytic moves (Pratt, Sonenshein and Feldman, 2022), shaped by researchers' deliberate choices in line with their specific research objectives. At the core of this approach, and what distinguishes it from existing methods, is the organization of analytic moves into specific stages – vertical analysis, horizontal analysis and reflexivity (interwoven throughout). Such assemblages emerge from careful observation of which moves provide efficient and convincing ways to conduct research (Pratt, Sonenshein and Feldman, 2022). This is not an argument for methodological looseness, but disciplined flexibility. Researchers' competence lies in drawing on a broad repertoire of moves and selecting those best suited to their research aims. Researchers may adopt the moves individually or in combination, provided the resulting analysis still maintains a unified framework and the generated theoretical insights are grounded in the participants' perspectives.

Apart from reflexivity, the vertical analysis stage involves the moves 'chronological coding' and 'phenomenological writing', both of which illuminate the insights from individual interviewees. The horizontal analysis subsequently explains the findings from the entire sample, through two other moves – 'axes construction' and 'analytic writing'. We elaborate on the theorizing process in the section below, using an example. Refer Table 1 for details about the example study's context. Figure 1 provides a summary of the semantic theorizing process.

### Vertical analysis

The researcher transcribes the interviews of all interviewees. In the first move of vertical analysis, which we call 'chronological coding', each interview narrative is individually deconstructed and reconstructed in a chronological order. The deconstructed data are then reconstructed to develop chronologies of the individual interviewees (Paille and Mucchielli, 2013). While the interviewees' stories might not always present a linear storyline, through this move, a chronological sequence can be produced (Saldanha, 2013). For instance, in the example study (see Table 1), the career transitions experienced by the interviewees were a result of multiple professional and personal processes and events (Denave, 2006; Landour, 2012; Negroni, 2005; Salman, 2015). To identify and organize different aspects of the life stories in this study in a chronological manner, we used a simple rubric. The rubric criteria referred to different stages of the interviewees' professional lives (*studies, career, transition, training to coach, and activities involved in coaching*). Figure 2 depicts such a chronological sequence from an interview in the example study.

The second analytical move in vertical analysis involves the preparation of phenomenological statements for each interviewee. This move consists of interpreting and formulating meanings about significant features of the interviewees' life stories and writing thick descriptions of these meanings. The statements are thus based on the detection, identification and explanation of multifarious features in the individual chronological sequences (Paille and Mucchielli, 2013). These features could be events, judgments, beliefs, emotions, motivations or any other specificities. The chronological sequences from the first move act as fasteners or threads (Van Manen, 1990) around which the abstraction and description of the meanings behind the individual interviewees' experiences are secured. In the example discussed earlier in this section, the chronological coding of the interviewee's life story led to the development of the following phenomenological statement:

The interviewee had initially trained to be an engineer but then turned down the position of store staff manager as it

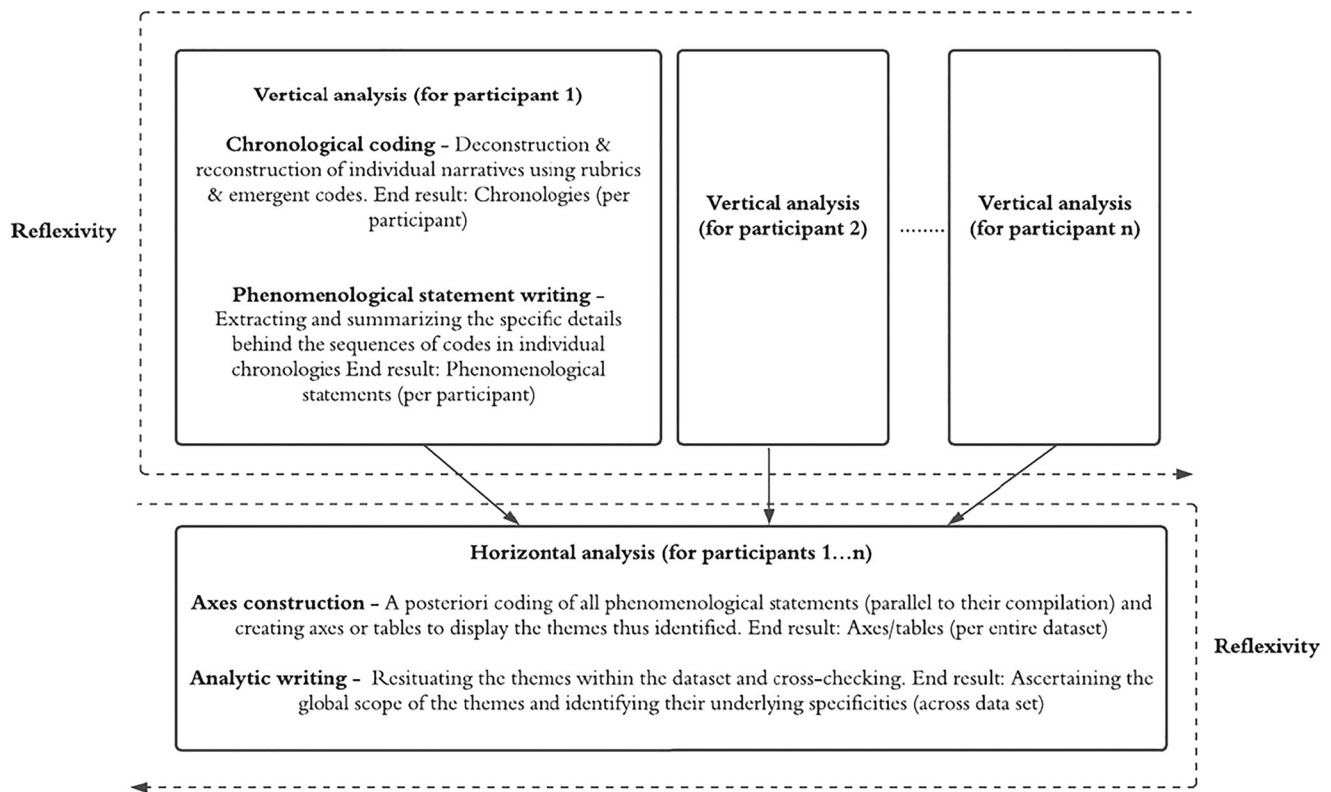


Figure 1. Semantic theorizing process – Summary

was not mobile enough for her. Then she spent five years as a clinical trial technician. She was responsible for monitoring and quality. “I had fun, I learned every day, there was life. I liked it,” she said. But after five years, she felt she had done her time. Then came the suffering. Work became heavy, and the sense of saturation set in. She described being mistreated in meetings, working under a “really rotten” manager who made her cry. The culture, she said, was “pretty disgusting,” “rotten with the money,” and “completely sclerotic.” She had seen too much discomfort and was often in conflicts, she had a “fairly strong temperament” in disputes. Then a buyout happened. “The whole nature of the profession changed,” she said. It no longer suited her. She ended up in the hospital, alone, suffering from stomach aches. She was tired, bored by the routine and reporting, and deeply unhappy.

She had a breakthrough: “I will pack everything up and go.” She went on parental leave after the birth of her second child—six months that gave her time and space. “The process was already underway.” She was fed up, lost, and took a skills and talents assessment. She uncovered a “real pervasive conflict of values”—how to reconcile professional life with family life. She became open to change and decided to train as a coach. Two months later, she was dismissed from work. (She would’ve resigned otherwise.) After two years of unemployment, she created her own job in coaching, with her mother as a partner. Since then

she has been helping others through the very emotions and difficulties she had known. Yet she acknowledged the paradox: “These are worlds... we help people but also have to deal with businesses.” She laughed and concluded simply: “We need to eat.”

Through such a vertical analysis of all the life stories in the example study, we identified the length of the prior work experience, details of the previous job/sector (types of careers held, salaries and benefits, opportunities for self-development), major triggers to transition, activities and experiences which preceded transition, etc., of each individual interviewee. In a similar manner, future researchers can use the chronologies and phenomenological statements in vertical analysis to piece together descriptive and abstract information about the lived experiences of each interviewee. Phenomenological statements thus help in preventing ‘slippage’ (Eilifsen, 2011), that is, they help in pinning down the deeper structures of the interviewees’ experiences which could easily elude us during the coding and categorizing involved in the traditional coding-based analyses. The conceptual leap to be made during this move was the uncovering of the meaning behind each interviewee’s trajectory – in line with what is expected of semantic concrete theorizing (Cornelissen, 2017). The compilation of phenomenological statements (i.e. the last move of vertical analysis) is often

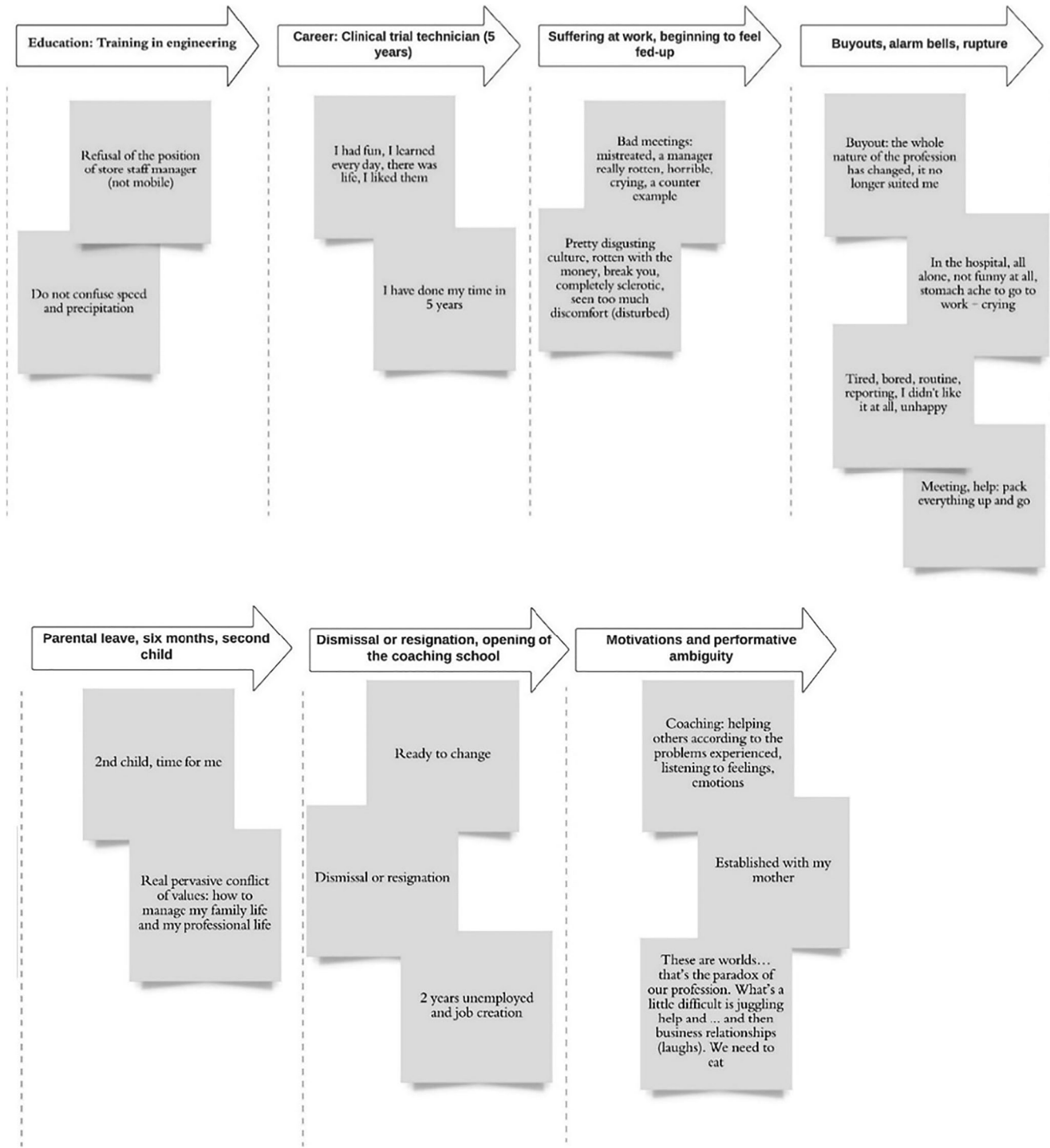


Figure 2. Career trajectory (chronological sequence) of an interviewee in the example study. Note: The text in the arrows denotes the chronological codes and the post-it notes include researchers' summaries of verbatim excerpts from data

conducted parallelly with the first move of horizontal analysis.

*Horizontal analysis*

During horizontal analysis, the focus of the analysis shifts from the individual interviewee to the whole sam-

ple. Two moves are included in this stage – axes construction and analytic writing. The first move, as the name denotes, involves the *a posteriori* coding of all the phenomenological statements and the subsequent creation of a mapping schema to display the theme categories (axes) thus identified. Indeed, the use of axes in analyses were already suggested by grounded theorists.

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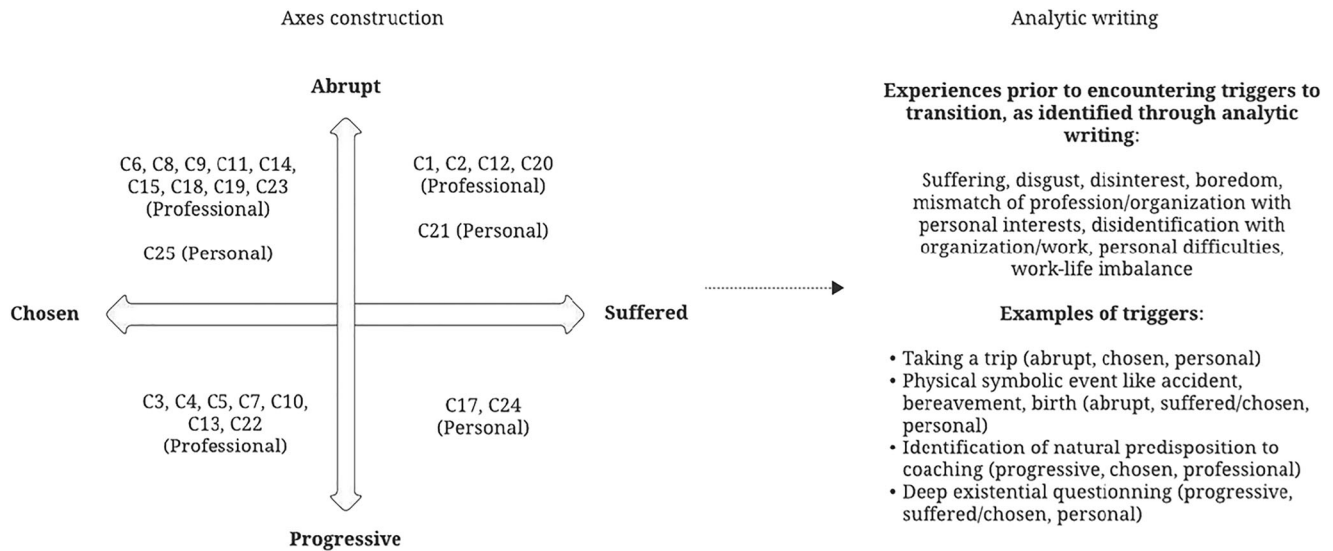


Figure 3. A mapping schema with axes showing triggers to career transitions and extracts from the subsequent analytic writing: An example. Note: The interviewees are denoted by  $C_n$  ( $C_1$ ,  $C_2$ , etc.) in the schema

However, these axes were intended to be fixed categories solely rooted in pragmatist and interactionist social theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Although such a coding paradigm is user-friendly due to its prescriptive nature, it might persuade researchers to force pre-determined axes on the data rather than allowing the axes to emerge from data. The micro-sociological, action-oriented approach which underlies these axes might also constrain researchers who come from other disciplinary areas (Kelle, 2007). The axes in the semantic theorizing process that we propose do not have these limitations.

In our approach, axes construction is a flexible move. The phenomenological statements developed during vertical analysis are cross-sectionally dissected to identify common themes (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2013). This *a posteriori* coding process is iterative and guided by the context of the study. Initially, the themes derived through *a posteriori* coding might be descriptive enough to include all the nuances of the phenomenological statements of the interviewees. Then, through further iterations, they are distilled into overarching abstract categories, which end up being axes. Furthermore, to properly understand the nature of the experiences depicted through the axes, they should be put in context. This involves situating the interviewees in their relevant positions within the mapping schema formed by the axes.

In the example study, we check for divergent yet related theme categories in the phenomenological statements for creating axes. For instance, a career transition is considered as unforeseen and speedy (theme: ‘abrupt’) or gradual (theme: ‘progressive’) in nature. Likewise, the transition could be purely due to an individual choice (theme: ‘chosen’) or could contrarily be due to the suffering endured at a former job (theme: ‘suffered’). When

we include the nature of the triggers leading to the transitions (themes: ‘professional’ and ‘personal’) also into this mix, we have three categories of themes, that is, three axes. Figure 3 shows a mapping schema created based on these three axes. In Figure 3 (left-hand side), if the career transition is due to a sudden dismissal from a taxing job, the interviewee is situated on the upper right (‘abrupt, suffered, professional’) quadrant of the schema. Instead, if the transition is gradual and because of attending a personal development training program, the interviewee is situated on the lower left (‘chosen, progressive, professional’) quadrant.

Indeed, creating mapping schemas becomes more complicated when there are a larger number of theme categories. In such cases, instead of the mapping schemas, researchers can use another form of pictorial depiction (tables, grids, frameworks or diagrams). It is also important to note that the axes we identify might not always be exclusive categories. While constructing a mapping schema or a similar pictorial depiction, it might sometimes be difficult to situate interviewees neatly into different positions, due to the fuzzy nature of personal experiences. For instance, in the mapping schema example we discussed, some interviewees might not fit in neatly into a single quadrant if their transition is triggered partially due to an individual choice and partially due to the suffering endured at a former job (e.g. transitioning due to attending a training session for coaching after being fired from a previous job). Continuing the horizontal analysis through analytic writing can be helpful in conserving the intricacies involved in such fuzzy memberships by revising the axes and themes and/or by identifying more of their underlying properties.

During the analytic writing move, elaborate notes about the significant circumstances beneath the different axes (Saldanha, 2013) are to be prepared. This move helps in framing, cross-checking and identifying the implicit and explicit meanings of the axes in their original context. For instance, Figure 3 contains the axes ‘abrupt/gradual’, ‘personal/professional’ and ‘chosen/suffered’. In this specific example, the axes denote the triggers leading to career transitions. During analytic writing, detailed notes on the themes and the circumstances preceding these transitions were prepared. The interviewees had mentioned feelings of ‘disgust’, ‘exhaustion’, ‘disinterest’, ‘boredom’, ‘mismatch of interests’, ‘feelings of meaninglessness’, etc., which, together with the eventual triggers, prompted them to leave their jobs for a coaching career. At the end of horizontal analysis, we had thus identified the axes, the corresponding themes, their essential properties and the positions of individual interviewees in the mapping schema. See the right-hand side of Figure 3 for details.

It is to be noted that the identification and description of axes, themes or interviewee positions are not the only functions of the horizontal analysis stage. Rather, the cross-sectional nature of this stage can also help in ascertaining the significances and implications of the interviewees’ positions in the mapping schema. In this manner, in the sample study, we identified how the interviewees’ positions in the schema determined the speed of their subsequent transitions. For instance, the transitions which were ‘abrupt, suffered, professional’ were rapid and denoted by terms such as ‘leaving the circuit’, ‘marking a break’, ‘stopping overnight’, ‘running away’, etc. Indeed, depending on the specificities of each study, these positions can imply different features. Some such features could include the nitty-gritties of the conditions, the actions-interactions and the consequences-outcomes underlying the transitions (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The conceptual leap involved in the horizontal analysis is more in line with the abstract semantic theorizing (Cornelissen, 2017). During both vertical and horizontal analysis, the researchers need to continuously and iteratively revisit and confront individual data with collective data, data with findings and initial findings with emerging findings. However, such iterations, together with the subjective nature of the approach, could lead to tensions during the analysis process. By giving a place to the researcher’s role in the research process, reflexivity can help in teasing out such tensions and in presenting potential solutions.

### Reflexivity

Reflexivity acknowledges that knowledge is not simply wrenched from an objective reality but co-constructed between researchers and the *researched* (Hardy and Clegg, 1997). Reflexivity allows researcher to remain

open to multiple perspectives, challenging the assumptions and taken-for-granted rules that shape research decisions. In the theorizing process, reflexivity plays a critical role by enabling researchers to question their own thinking, biases and practices. This self-awareness helps navigate dissonances between researchers’ expectations and the lived realities of interviewees, ensuring that theorizing is grounded in the complexity of the phenomena studied (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). In essence, reflexivity transforms theorizing from a purely analytical exercise to a practice where alternative constructions of the data and the self-critical interpretations of the researcher’s own paradigmatic, political, theoretical, methodological and social dispositions are encouraged (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). By critically examining how they relate to the interviewees, researchers act as impactful instruments of inquiry (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2017).

In the semantic theorizing process we present, reflexivity is particularly valuable for revealing the entanglement of the researcher with the research topic, the *researched*, and the findings. The personal and dispositional factors such as gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, personal values, social identities, beliefs, educational background, interests, emotions, expectations, etc., can impact the researcher–*researched* relationship and the subsequent knowledge creation (Balachandran Nair, 2025; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). One way to be reflexive is by preparing positionality statements, which clarify the researcher’s background, role and relation to the field. For example, one of the authors of this article states his position in the example study as follows: ‘As a PhD candidate entering the field of coaching for the first time, I was initially not relating to the interviewees’. Such statements may include assumptions, values or emotional responses that affect the inquiry. Reflexivity is not about eliminating, but acknowledging and working with these influences. The positionality statements are intended to be revisited iteratively throughout the theorizing process, as a continuous re-evaluation of one’s position as they engage with the research.

As Dörfler and Stierand (2021) and Vom Lehn (2019) note, bracketing could also be another valuable tool for being reflexive. Bracketing involves exploring and integrating one’s beliefs through peer dialogue or introspection rather than through setting them aside. Reflexive memos also serve as spaces to document analytical insights, procedural decisions, emerging interpretations and the researchers’ own potential biases. Memo writing allows researchers to critically examine their own thinking and the decisions made using data analysis (Balachandran Nair, 2025). In our case, writing memos helped the author in tracking internal tensions and recognizing moments of distortion: ‘I also feel like an imposter. I feel fragile as a researcher pursuing a topic

which is new to me'. This self-reflection revealed how feelings of imposture and a desire for validation shaped the initial research outcomes. Reflexivity helped him challenge these feelings as well as his grand theoretical attachments. Due to his engagement with Foucault's work on power, domination, emancipation and ideological deconstruction, he had initially sought to confirm a critical narrative of rupture in executive careers. He was expecting stories of burnout or rejection of corporate life: 'During my initial interviews, I heard the interviewees saying that they shifted to coaching due to burnouts at their previous jobs. I wanted the later interviewees also to tell me the same – That they shifted to coaching because they were burned out or fed up with their previous jobs...'. However, over time, being reflexive led to a deeper awareness of his own selective listening and denial of the experiences of the latter interviewees. For instance, during vertical analysis, he recognized:

...my blindness, denial, and refusal to acknowledge what the interviewees are actually saying... I am ignoring how some companies enabled their employees to feel useful, to participate in a collective project, to act, to feed their families, to ensure their future.

This turning point allowed for a reinterpretation of the data – not as evidence of 'career breaks' but as stories of reappropriation and continuity. 'It is not a [negative] "career break" that always leads people to become coaches. It can be a desire to reappropriate, in continuing on their own on a new career path.' Thus, reflexive confrontation with personal assumptions shifted the theorizing from a narrative of rupture to one of micro-emancipatory bifurcation, allowing for more nuanced themes in the horizontal analysis stage – such as *abrupt vs. progressive, suffered vs. chosen* transitions – and recognition of outliers. For example, an interviewee emphasized not burnout, but disrespect, as the cause of transition: a subtle yet important distinction that reflexivity helped preserve.

Reflexive practices such as positionality statements, memo writing and bracketing not only foreground the researcher's role, but also strengthen the trustworthiness of the analytic process by making interpretive choices explicit. Relatedly, reporting on how reflexivity was practiced is essential. At present, reflexivity is often mentioned in articles as an apology for the study's lack of objectivity (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023). We maintain that it should be presented instead as a contribution to methodological transparency. Researchers should outline the decisions and dynamics involved by highlighting the personal, interpersonal, methodological, experiential and/or contextual dimensions (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023). For instance, in the example study, the researcher explained that aligning the work with Critical Manage-

ment Studies encouraged him to think critically and practice reflexivity.

The role of reflexivity in shaping the theorizing process also deserves attention. In the example study, the author illustrates this impact across different analytic stages. During vertical analysis, he acknowledged, 'I failed to recognize ambivalence in respondents' transitions due to my own internal critique of corporate ideologies. Through reflexive writing and discussion, I reinterpreted these accounts as psychosocially resonant rather than ideologically contradictory'. Similarly, in the horizontal analysis stage, 'Reflexive confrontation with my assumptions shifted the framing from a narrative of career rupture to one of micro emancipatory bifurcation'. By articulating how reflexivity plays a role in the semantic theorizing process, the researchers make the complexity of the theorizing process and the evolving relationship between data, theorizing and the researcher visible. Thus, reporting the reflexivity of the researcher is also an ethical consideration. Through incorporating reflexivity in their final reports, the researchers take responsibility for their interpretation through a discussion of their own biases and conceptions which affect their personal and social horizons of understanding (Josselson, 2007; Kosonen, 2018).

## Discussion

The vertical–horizontal analytical structure is not merely a scaffold for organizing qualitative data, but a theorizing logic. Vertical analysis treats meaning as biographically constituted, requiring the reconstruction of individual trajectories to understand the meanings behind individual experiences. The variability of individual experiences is faithfully deconstructed and reconstructed during vertical analysis. This stage involves the comprehension of the individual data and its reappropriation through writing, linking, arranging and describing the experiences of the interviewees in a chronological order. It helps in exploring the meanings that interviewees hold for their different experiences through *a priori* organization of the identified chronological sequences. At the end of this stage, phenomenological statements are compiled to reconstruct the narrative experiences.

Horizontal analysis, by contrast, theorizes across meanings by identifying patterned relations and dimensions of variations among trajectories. The sequencing of these stages is therefore analytically consequential. The *a posteriori* coding which parallels the phenomenological writing allows for the cross-sectional analysis of the data. The themes identified from the phenomenological statements of individual interviewees are cross compared with those derived across the sample. Axes are created based on the categorization of the identified

themes. The analytic writing that follows further assists in determining whether the identified theme categories are similar or different across the data set. Resultantly, more solid definitions for the axes can be developed. In our example of the executives-turned-coaches, the ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ triggers identified across different life stories were connected to different career types and transitions during the axes creation. The inter-individual differences thus identified helped in questioning the normative models of career transition (Moreau, 2020).

While traditional coding-based methods involve coding and categorizing, the semantic theorizing process involves bricolaging as well. By bricolaging different analytic moves in vertical and horizontal analyses, the researcher can construct axes across the sample (e.g. different triggers to transition) and at the same time specify the properties and sequences of interactions at the individual level (e.g. how specific triggers led to transitions) (Mjøset, 2004). However, even while bricolaging, it is crucial to maintain the sequencing of the analyses – vertical analysis followed by horizontal analysis. Vertical analysis stabilizes the semantic content of experiences before any horizontal abstraction, allowing the latter to operate on meanings rather than on isolated data fragments. Placing horizontal analysis after vertical analysis ensures that theorizing proceeds from lived meaning to patterned explanation, rather than from premature categorization to post hoc interpretation. The vertical–horizontal sequencing thus prevents explanation-free narration and experience-blind abstraction.

The third stage in the theorizing process, that is, reflexivity, is entwined within the first two stages. In semantic theorizing, reflexivity is not a supplementary part. Rather, it is interwoven into the analytic process. Reflexivity is a precondition for semantic theorizing, shaping how meanings are interpreted rather than merely regulating how research is conducted. As illustrated in our example, reflexive thinking transformed the framing of career transitions from narratives of rupture to narratives of bifurcation. Reflexivity thus redirects axes, reinterprets tensions and refines theoretical claims. Appendix 1 gives a glossary of the key terms related to semantic theorizing.

The theorizing process we present allows researchers to critically engage in and account for the sequences, interactions and interdependencies in the interview data (Dougherty, 2015; Urquhart and Fernández, 2013). This process thus permits the development of theories which are strongly grounded in the data by representing ‘the general pattern, while retaining its contextualized elements, situating the narrative in the specific context’ (Pratt, Sonenshein and Feldman, 2022, p. 6). This article thus responds to calls in management for research which examines the lived experiences and context-dependent

theorizing (Farndale *et al.*, 2022). The article also extends the literature on the analysis of narrative data by proposing a theorizing process that not only aims at finding categories across a sample but also on the details at the individual level. The reflexive stage allows the researchers to take their own attachments, assumptions, agendas and biases into consideration – a crucial element for semantic theorizing.

In the case of our example study examining the career shifts of executives-turned-coaches, this reflexivity helped in the interpretation of the career transitions as bifurcations rather than linear changes. By combining the vertical and horizontal analyses with reflexivity, the involved author was able to show how careers function as systems of power that shape people’s identities. The reflexive vertical analysis revealed that these bifurcations often result from a combination of personal investment, professional difficulties and internal dissonance between one’s authentic self and their organizational role. The reflexive horizontal analysis helped in identifying how these tensions lead to a gradual or sudden saturation, triggering a crisis and a re-evaluation of one’s career. These nuances would’ve been missed if the author had pursued the data with only pre-existing notions and no reflexivity.

The memo writing allowed the researcher to identify how he was missing out the fine details in the life stories of the interviewees. By revisiting data with this awareness, he found how coaching emerged as a meaningful alternative to the interviewees by allowing them to realign with their values and reclaim autonomy. These findings challenge traditional managerial views of career transitions and offer insights for Human Resources, coaching educators and career counsellors. (See Moreau (2020) for more details.) By presenting this theorizing process, we also highlight the importance of a symbiotic relationship between the researchers and the *re-searched*, without which management research runs the risk of disregarding important organizational phenomena and subsequently becoming irrelevant to real-world practices (Githens, 2015).

## Contributions

Rather than calibrating existing templates or merely applying established approaches in new settings, we construct a new approach that reorients qualitative inquiry towards semantic theorizing and create a re-framing of how theory building can be practiced in qualitative research (Aharonson *et al.*, 2025). Drawing on a bricolage logic, our framework integrates vertical and horizontal analyses to enable both thick descriptions and pattern abstractions across the data. This dual orientation allows researchers to engage with semantic

theorizing at both concrete and abstract levels, without reducing one to the other. Importantly, the approach underscores the researcher's active role. By foregrounding how interpretation is inevitably shaped by the researcher's personal and dispositional factors, we argue that greater reflexive awareness enhances trustworthiness and guards against the silencing of both interviewee's and researcher's voices.

While the fundamental aim of coding-based methods in qualitative research is 'to elicit fresh understandings about patterned relationships between social actors and how these relationships and interactions actively construct reality' (Suddaby, 2006, p. 636), we highlight how traditional coding processes often reduce this richness and unintentionally dehumanize interviewees' accounts through too much separation from the reality (Cunliffe, 2022; Voynnet-Fourboul, 2012). Our study also challenges the positivist tendencies that treat coding as a technical exercise, arguing that such approaches diminish the semantic theorizing potential of qualitative inquiries.

Finally, our contribution lies in offering researchers a structured yet adaptable framework of analytic moves. The approach accommodates variation in research objectives, designs and resource constraints while maintaining analytic coherence and trustworthiness. For instance, in studies where the full biographical structure is not central and the focus lies on specific critical events, the chronological coding step in vertical analysis may be abbreviated – particularly when narratives are already presented in a coherent temporal flow. Similarly, phenomenological statements are not essential in exploratory research where in-depth phenomenological interpretation is not the primary aim. When working under time or resource constraints, it is reasonable to produce full phenomenological statements for a select number of interviews, while representing the remaining data through shorter notes or annotated excerpts. In horizontal analysis, if the goal is to highlight shared themes rather than explore variability, the construction of axes may be unnecessary. These flexibilities do not imply analytic arbitrariness. Rather, they recognize that semantic theorizing benefits from methodological sensitivity, where analytic moves are tailored to research aims while remaining systematic. In doing so, we equip researchers with a scaffold of practical tools needed to generate richer and more nuanced theoretical insights from interview data.

The semantic theorizing process is beneficial not only for researchers but also for practitioners. HR professionals, coaches, and organizational leaders can benefit from such an approach which maps configurations of experiences. Such maps can inform the design of HR interventions, career transition support, leadership development programs, and Diversity, Equity, and In-

clusion (DEI) practices. Semantic theorizing is particularly useful for studying managerial phenomena characterized by nonlinearity, tensions and interdependencies. Contemporary organizational processes such as career transitions, crisis management, DEI initiatives and digital transformations involve bifurcations, contradictions and nonlinear trajectories. The semantic theorizing process retains their multifariousness during the analysis, without defaulting to linear assumptions or rigid categorizations. Furthermore, the traceability of the stages of the theorizing process strengthens the transparency and credibility of the claims made.

## Limitations

Our approach is not without limitations. Several researchers contend that the absence of reflexivity in research is institutionalized, stemming from academic training that emphasizes objectivity and discourages subjectivity. While we contend that meaningful institutional transformation can begin at the level of the individual researcher, facilitated by our approach, it alone cannot fully address these entrenched institutional challenges. Second, we recognize that positionality statements are not one-size-fits-all reflexivity tool. Especially when it comes to reporting, careful consideration is required regarding the type and depth of information shared. Our aim in emphasizing the use of positionality statements is not to mandate the disclosure of sensitive personal details in a final report, but to encourage researchers to reflect on how their perspectives, experiences and potential biases may influence the research process and its outcomes. Positionality statements should hence be context-sensitive and ethically responsible, ensuring they do not put researchers at risk. If incorporated in final reports, they should therefore be framed in ways that convey reflexive awareness and analytical stance without requiring the disclosure of potentially harmful information.

Next, the semantic theorizing process is designed to enhance reflexivity in analysing data which is narrative in nature (e.g. life stories, narrative interviews, oral history, etc.). But it might be unsuitable in research contexts where researchers do not have access to the interviewees' lived experiences or where data collection is very structured. This form of theorizing is clearly ill-suited also for studies employing large-N samples. Similarly, it does not align with quantitative and positivist qualitative methodologies. Another potential problem posed by our theorizing process is that the introduction of multiple layers of analysis, each involving distinct interpretive moves, may unintentionally produce a level of complexity that could discourage researchers, particularly those new to qualitative inquiry.

## Avenues for future research

Future research could explore how the stages and the moves we outline might be adapted to other types of qualitative narrative data, such as ethnographic field-notes. Opportunities also exist to examine how reflexive semantic theorizing process could be combined with other approaches such as visual methods or discourse analysis. Furthermore, future researchers can apply our theorizing process in longitudinal research to enrich the understanding of identities, practices or cultures that evolve over time. Methodological inquiries may explore how the reflexive practices we suggest (i.e. positionality statements, memo writing, and bracketing) can be systematically incorporated not only during data analysis but also after data analysis, for instance, during reporting. We do not seek to offer a template for reporting semantic theorizing. Rather, researchers can draw on non-template discussions of reporting (e.g. Balachandran Nair, 2021a) to narrate their own semantic theorizing processes. Future research can further advance this conversation by discussing and developing more effective ways of reporting the semantic theorizing process in particular. Another promising direction lies in studying how the integration of semantic theorizing into doctoral training may influence institutional practices and researchers' methodological choices. Lastly, scholars could assess how semantic theorizing contributes to broader debates on pluralism in management theory, thereby advancing more inclusive forms of theorizing.

## Conclusion

Management researchers exploring phenomena in organizational settings resulting from, for example, departmental reorganizations, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) successions, introduction of diversity and inclusion initiatives, layoffs, crisis recovery plans, etc., can use the semantic theorizing process in their research. However, we request them to avoid considering the semantic theorizing process as a 'readymade alternate'. Instead, we encourage them to embrace, abandon and question the individual moves and the stages of the semantic theorizing process as they deem fit. This can be accomplished by adapting, relaxing or remixing the moves and the reflexivity tools (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Balachandran Nair, 2021b; Grey, 1994) after careful consideration of their underlying rationale. The introductory quote in this article poses a question: Is it viable to examine the notes but not the melody? In other words, can data be meaningfully analysed without attending to the subjectivities it embodies? We conclude that for those engaged

in semantic theorizing, the answer is unequivocally no.

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## APPENDIX 1: Glossary of key terms in the article with their definitions.

Term	Definition
Analytic moves	Different steps in the research process for designing, collecting, analysing and presenting the findings in a qualitative study. When cobbled together, the moves present unique ways of meeting the researchers' distinctive research purposes.
Analytic writing	The second move in the horizontal analysis stage of the reflexive semantic theorizing process. Analytic writing involves the preparation of elaborate notes about the historic circumstances beneath the different themes and theme categories (axes) in the mapping schema. As a result, the axes are re-situated within the data. This re-situation helps in framing, cross-checking and identifying the meanings of the axes and the corresponding themes in their original context.
Axes construction	The first move in the horizontal analysis stage. It is conducted parallelly to phenomenological statement writing. In this stage, the phenomenological statements are coded a posteriori to identify descriptive and abstract themes and theme categories. Subsequently, axes are created to display the identified theme categories. The interviewees are then situated in their relevant positions within the mapping schema of the axes.
Bricolage	An active choice of analytic moves from a broader set of methods, for the purpose of creating an effective arrangement of moves which will help conduct the concerned study in an optimal manner.
Chronological coding	The first move of vertical analysis. During chronological coding, the transcript of each individual interview is deconstructed and reconstructed into a chronological order using predetermined rubrics. The rubrics can be amended as the analysis progresses.
Phenomenological statements	The second move in the vertical analysis stage. It is conducted parallelly to the axes construction. The sequences and codes identified during chronological coding are reworded and transformed into statement format to abstract their phenomenological meanings.
Reflexivity	The researchers' continuous (self) acknowledgement and interrogation of their own personal and dispositional factors (class, social identities, beliefs, educational background, etc.) and the influence of such factors on the <i>researched</i> and the research process. Some of the factors mentioned may remain relatively static, while others could be dynamic, evolving and shifting throughout the research process.

Note: Some terms included in this table could have multiple meanings. The definitions provided here only include their meanings within the context of the topic discussed in this article.

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