



“Systematic combining”—A decade later

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ABSTRACT

Ten years ago we published a paper in this journal: “Systematic Combining—An abductive approach to case research”. The aim of the present paper is to further articulate and emphasize key features of ‘systematic combining’ as a non-linear, non-positivist approach, in contrast to the mainstream perspectives on case research as represented, for example. The discussion revolves around three themes. First, we compare case studies based on replication logic with single case research. Second, we discuss the research processes in studies relying on these approaches. Third, we analyze the types of theories that can be developed from these two kinds of studies. We then discuss some general problems related to the assessment of the quality of the type of case studies we advocate. The paper ends with a concluding discussion addressing the opportunities available for case research, of which systematic combining is one of many alternative approaches.

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1. Introduction

After the 1999 IMP conference in Dublin, Damien McLoughlin, the Editor of the JBR special issue from the conference, invited us to submit the paper we had presented: “Case studies in business market research—an abductive approach”. The special issue was published in 2002, including the paper, with a slightly revised title: “Systematic combining—an abductive approach to case research” (Journal of Business Research, 2002, 55, pp. 553–560). In 2011 it came as a surprise to us to find that our contribution was the most cited JBR paper in the first decade of the new millennium. The attention the paper received can probably be explained similar to the way the influential book by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is characterized by Suddaby (2006, p. 640): “it outlines a procedure by which formerly tacit processes are made explicit.” This is precisely the reaction we have received from colleagues in the research community dealing with qualitative studies relying on single case research.

At first sight it may seem paradoxical that well-established case research approaches rely on implicit processes and procedures, since qualitative case studies have been identified as offering the most interesting research opportunities (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; Suddaby, 2006), as well as representing the most frequently cited pieces in the Administrative Management Journal. They have also been cited by a number of the winners of the AMJ Best Article Award (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). There are two explanations for this inconsistency. The first relates to journal publication conventions implying that “the process of abduction which likely goes on in most if not all promising research projects, is largely hidden from view” (van Maanen, Sörensson, &

Mitchell, 2007, p. 1149). According to the authors these processes are hidden because journals require “a rather strict separation between the presentation of results and conclusions and between the presentation of theory and method”, while in reality the research process “is often messy, idiosyncratic, and difficult to articulate.” One of the main objectives of the paper on ‘systematic combining’ was to make the actual process more visible.

The second explanation for the paradox relates to the perspective applied in the mainstream case study methodology literature. Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch (2010, p. 109) identify “two dominant authorities on case studies in business studies—Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2003)”. These two authors have contributed substantially to the legitimization of the case study approach and provided researchers with highly relevant tools and techniques for the undertaking of case studies. However, these tools and techniques are useful for one specific type of case research: multiple case studies relying on replication logic are thus representing a linear and positivistic approach (Dubois & Araujo, 2007; Easton, 2010). According to Piekkari et al. (2010:110):

“[This] process is linear with clearly identifiable phases and corresponding decisions, with recommendations for best practice at each stage. Best practice lies in clearly specifying the research purpose and developing theory prior to data collection; deciding on the key features of the case design and case boundaries prior to data collection; using multiple sources of evidence to converge on a single explanation; adhering to standards of validity and reliability adapted from quantitative research; and structuring the case report so it is aligned with the research purpose”.

Systematic combining and other approaches advocating non-linear and non-positivistic research, represent alternative procedures for case studies with very different characteristics than those proposed by

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Yin and Eisenhardt. In the JBR paper from 2002 we did not make fully clear how the systematic combining approach differs from mainstream recommendations for how to perform case studies, since we relied on support from Yin and Eisenhardt in a general claim for the relevance of case studies.

The aim of this paper is to point out significant prerequisites for and consequences of a non-linear and non-positivistic approach to case research. In this effort we further articulate and emphasize key features of systematic combining based on abductive logic, as presented in the 2002 paper. We also rely on arguments from other researchers that suggest alternative approaches to case studies than those recommended by mainstream positivist advocates. The discussion revolves around three main themes. First, we bring up the major differences between multiple case studies based on replication logic and single case research. Second, we compare the research processes applied in studies relying on these two approaches. Third, on this basis, we analyze the major divergences between the theories that can be developed from the two types of case studies. Then we discuss some general notions regarding evaluation of the quality of the type of case studies we propose. The paper ends with a concluding discussion.

2. Replication logic versus single case theorizing

According to the positivistic approach, multiple case studies are more appropriate for theory building than single case designs. For example, Yin (1984, p. 48) claims that “the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as more robust”. The same opinion is repeated in the latest edition of his book, where Yin argues that when researchers have the choice and the resources, multiple design is “preferred over single-case design” (Yin, 2009, p. 60). In another of his publications, the standpoint is made even clearer, as witnessed by the claim that data from multiple case studies “provide greater confidence” (Yin, 2012, p. 7). Moreover, in comparison with studies based on single cases, “a stronger and potentially more desirable use of the method is conducting multiple-case studies” (p. 131).

Eisenhardt's arguments follow the same trajectory and are quite similar. Her seminal paper from 1989 (“Building theory from case study research”) is a plea for multiple case design, suggesting that “a number between 4 and 10 cases usually works well”, without any further arguments (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 545). Two years later Eisenhardt motivated the choice of multiple case designs with the claim that they “develop more elaborate theory”, and that by bringing together several patterns “the researcher can draw a more complete theoretical picture” (Eisenhardt, 1991, p. 620). Over time, the arguments for multiple cases have been increasingly articulated. Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, p. 27) claim that through multiple case designs the resulting theory becomes “better grounded, more accurate, and more generalizable” and furthermore, “the resulting theory is often more parsimonious (and also more robust and generalizable)” (p. 30).

The arguments above concerning the pros and cons of single and multiple case studies have not been accepted unanimously. A rejoinder came from Dyer and Wilkins (1991), whose main criticism of Eisenhardt's, 1989 paper relates to the standpoint that increasing number of cases provides better conditions for theory generation. The authors conclude that the proposed multiple case study approach more or less neglects the impact of the substantial contributions from classical theory generation research, which built on single case studies. Therefore they recommended researchers to be aware of the benefits stemming from “the careful study of a single case that leads researchers to see new theoretical relationships and question old ones” (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, p. 614). In particular, they claim that extensive single case descriptions would make it possible to take the rich context surrounding the cases into consideration. Similar arguments are put forward by, for example, Siggelkow (2007, p. 20), as reflected in the statement that “a single case can be a very

powerful example”, and Langley (1999, p. 699), who claims that “this strategy provides a powerful means of deriving insights from a single rich case”.

Our own 2002 standpoint when arguing for ‘systematic combining’ was that “when the problem is directed toward analysis of a number of interdependent variables in complex structures the natural choice would be to go deeper into one case instead of increasing the number of cases” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 558). This is in line with Dyer and Wilkins (1991) who advocate ‘deep case studies’ rather than ‘surface case studies’. Their main criticism of the positivistic approach is that the point of departure in ‘ready-to-test hypotheses’ “focuses so much on the constructs developed and their measurability that we often miss the context, the rich background of each case” (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, p. 613). Similarly, Peattie (2001, p. 260) warned against summarizing the findings in dense studies because “the very value of the case study, the contextual and interpreting nature of forces, is lost when one tries to sum up in large and mutually exclusive concepts.” Moreover, the potential benefits of empirical richness made Weick (2007, p. 18) express “an argument for detail, for thoroughness, for prototypical narratives” because too much reliance on constructs tends to “strip out most of what matters”. When researchers name and formalize they move farther away from their initial impressions. While this step is necessary in order to communicate findings a price is paid, since any conceptualization leads to “greater intellectual and emotional distance from the phenomenon” (Weick, 2007, p. 18).

The main argument in Dyer and Wilkins (1991) is that we need better stories rather than better constructs. However, their problem with the positivistic approach seems not to be primarily related to constructs as such, but to the ways in which they are embedded. In advocating ‘classic’ single-case studies they claim that “the very clarity of the constructs stem from the story that supports and demonstrate them” (p. 617). In these studies clarity is achieved by the choices of researchers “to focus on contexts and on describing the phenomenon and context richly”. However, in the claim for good stories it is important to consider that detailed and thorough descriptions of the empirical context “need not reveal the deep structure of hidden processes” (Folger & Turillo, 1999, p. 756). The authors argued that discovery of essential features of a phenomenon “does not always come from gathering more and more observations or from describing more and more details about these observations”. The conclusion of the authors was that we need both better constructs and better stories, which is in line with Eisenhardt's comments to the rejoinder by Dyer and Wilkins (1991) where she considered “better stories versus better constructs” to be a false dichotomy (Eisenhardt, 1991, p. 625).

According to Eisenhardt (1991, p. 620), one of the central arguments in her article from 1989 is that “multiple cases are a powerful means to create theory because they permit replication and extension among individual cases”. Replication is considered crucial since individual cases can then be used for corroboration of specific propositions and in this way “eliminate chance associations”, in turn leading to more elaborate theories (p. 620). For Yin, too, replication logic is a necessary ingredient in any attempt of theory development and “only with such replications would the original finding be considered robust” (Yin, 2012, p. 54). If the outcome of replication is contradictory “the initial proposition must be revised and retested with another set of cases”.

This argument for a positivistic approach has also been questioned. For example, it is problematic to impose the logic of replication on the social sciences since observations in this field are “unique in nature” and therefore the “principle of replicability would become a strait-jacket that impedes rather than enhances social sciences” (Tsang & Kwan, 1999, p. 761). Their main objection to replication is that a particular study can never be repeated by another researcher, and not even by the same researcher, “since both subject and researcher changes over time” (p. 765). In our view there are also obvious contradictions between the claims for replication and the arguments for the relevance of the case study approach. In Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, p. 25), case studies

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