



Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, Aristotle University of
Thessaloniki, emplak@econ.auth.gr

Seminar 1:

What is a case study?

Purpose of this course

- To introduce you to the diversity of ways of conducting case study research;
- To understand the main decisions a case researcher must make during the research process;
- To improve your own research practice;
- After this course, you will be able to evaluate the quality of case research and enhance your own case study design.

The challenge of case study research

‘Unlike other research methods, a comprehensive “catalog” of research designs for case studies has yet to be developed ... Unfortunately, case study research designs have not been codified.’

(Source: Yin 2009, pp. 25-26)

What is a case study?

- 1) 'The case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings'. (Eisenhardt 1989, p.534)
- 2) 'An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.' (Yin 2009, p.18)
- 3) 'The researcher explores a single entity or phenomenon... bounded by time and activity... and collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time...' (Creswell 1994, p.12)
- 4) 'Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied ... By whatever methods we choose to study the case.' (Stake 2005, p.443)

What is a case study? - Cont'd

- 5) 'The detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events' (George and Bennett 2004, p. 5)
- 6) 'Examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principle.' (Mitchell 2000, p.170)
- 7) 'Case study is better regarded as a form of reporting than as a strategy for conducting research. I recognize that some scholars consider the case study to be an eclectic but nonetheless identifiable method. I prefer to regard it in a narrower sense: a format for reporting' (Wolcott 2002, p.101)

A recent definition

- ‘Case study is a research strategy whose characteristics include
- A focus on the interrelationships that constitute the context of a specific entity (such as an organization, event, phenomenon, or person),
- Analysis of the relationship between the contextual factors and the entity being studied, and
- The explicit purpose of using those insights (of the interactions between contextual relationships and the entity in question) to generate theory and/or contribute to extant theory’

(Source: Mills, Durepos and Wiebe 2010, vol. 1, p. xxxii)

Our definition

- Our definition: A case study is a research strategy that examines, through the use of a variety of data sources, a phenomenon in its naturalistic context, with the purpose of 'confronting' theory with the empirical world (Piekkari et al. 2009)
- During the case study process, the relationship between theory and the empirical world is explored, destabilised and reconstructed (Dubois & Gadde 2002)
- A holistic, not 'variable-oriented' approach (Ragin 1992)
- A research strategy which involves more than the choice of method for data collection or analysis (Hartley 2004)

Answer to 'what is a case study' varies depending on

- Discipline in question e.g. psychology (= clinical study of individual) versus anthropology (= participant observation of community)
- Time period (Platt 1992: Yin vs inter-war period)
- Context (e.g. challenges of doing cross-border research)
- Philosophical underpinnings (Seminar 2)
- Design decisions: scope, research purpose, number of cases (Seminar 3)
 - Data sources (Seminar 4)
 - Theorising purpose (Seminar 5)
 - How it is written up (Seminar 6)

History of the case study in American sociology (Platt 1992)

- Case study defined by what it is not (p. 19)
- Common throughout: distinguishing feature of case is 'the collection of data on many variables for each case' and placing of data on individual cases in a rich context (p. 20)
- Early period (1920s-1930s):
 - quantitative/qualitative distinction (p. 19)
 - value of case study regarded as lying in the elicitation of personal meanings (p. 22)
 - diverse range of methods used to conduct case studies
 - case researchers struggled to specify analytical process used (p. 23)
 - theorising from cases through classification of individual cases into types
 - discrepancy between 'ideal type' in methodological literature and published case studies (pp. 37-38)

Platt (1992) cont'd

- Mid period (1940s):
 - Advancement in statistical methods to access personal attitudes; case study analysis increasingly looked towards statistical methods: 'stark antithesis' between qualitative/quantitative lost (p. 22)
 - Greater scepticism about theoretical contribution of cases, especially basis for generalisation (p. 28)
- Later period (1950s-1960s):
 - In methodological literature, case study 'no longer a focus of professional interest' (p. 17)
 - Case research still being conducted, but increasingly associated with participant observation (e.g. Becker 1970) (p. 22)

Revival of the case study: Yin (Platt 1992)

- Yin 'significantly different' from the classic interwar period (i.e. 1920s, 1930s) (p. 45)
- Differences (pp. 45-46):
 - Not inductive
 - Not concerned with historical depth, richness of data
 - Access to personal meanings not a focus
 - Preference for multiple cases
 - Case study a logic of design
- Legitimation of the case study, but 'at the cost of giving up some of the traditional claims and strategies'? (p. 46)

Legitimising the case study in management research

- Like Yin, Eisenhardt defends the theoretical value of the case study: 'building theory from cases is likely to produce theory that is accurate, interesting and testable' (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, pp. 25-26)
- Defence of the case study very much directed at a quantitatively oriented audience, framed in familiar language: positions inductive case-based theory-building as 'one of the best (if not the best) of bridges from rich qualitative evidence to mainstream deductive research' (p. 25)
- Contrasts theory building approach with other qualitative research which is 'highly descriptive, emphasizes the social construction of reality, and focuses on revealing how extant theory operates in particular examples...' (p. 28)

The case study today and tomorrow

- A timely issue: new publications across several disciplines (e.g. political science, management, education)
- Growing diversity of approaches: going beyond Yin and Eisenhardt
- Examples: Byrne and Ragin (2009), Thomas (2011), Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010), Piekkari and Welch (2011)

When is a case a case study?

'the fact that the researcher focuses on one single case does not make it a case study'

(Verschuren 2003, p. 126)

Is this a case study?

- Testa, M.R., Mueller, S.L. and Thomas, A.S. (2003): Cultural fit and job satisfaction in a global service environment, *Management International Review*, 43, 2, pp. 129-248.

Our data: Review of IB journals

- Four core international business (IB) journals
 - *International Business Review*
 - *Journal of International Business Studies*
 - *Journal of World Business*
 - *Management International Review*
- 134 case study articles during 1995-2005 and 22 from *JIBS* during 1975-1994
- Categorisation and analysis of 1747 articles in two stages:
 - 1) Quantitative, qualitative (other than case studies), mixed method, non-empirical/non-research or case study
 - 2) Content analysis (quantitative and qualitative) by three researchers

Our main findings (Piekkari et al. 2009)

DISCIPLINARY CONVENTION

- Exploratory
- Interview-based
- Multiple cases, including large-N case studies
- Implicitly positivist
- Cross-sectional

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

- Theory testing, explanatory, negative case
- Ethnographic
- Single case; innovative multiple case designs e.g. matched pair, dual track
- Interpretive
- Longitudinal

An explanatory case study

- ‘We report in this paper the findings of a five year longitudinal investigation of the adaption process of US franchising know-how in Israel’ (p. 132).... ‘Our in-depth study of Israel represents our attempt to follow closely and provide a real time account of the actual instance of transfer.’ (p. 136)... ‘We assess a variety of alternative explanations for the observed pattern of results (p. 133)’.... ‘Following Yin (1989) we employed an explanatory case study methodology’ (p. 136).

(Source: Szulanski, Jensen and Lee 2003)

An interpretive case study of mergers and acquisitions

‘The solution in this study has been to settle for an interpretive approach focusing on experienced ambiguities among the acquired employees ... By this ambiguity approach I refer to embracing interpretations of contradictions, confusion and other heterogeneities (instead of denying them in a search for mere homogeneity)... Understanding the acquisition comes when one takes several stories into account...’ (Risberg 2001, p. 61, 73) To achieve this, Risberg interviewed employees at both HQ and subsidiaries, and at different organisational levels.

The ethnographic case study

“One of the researchers was placed as a liaison officer at the south plant of JDC (located in a Southern state of the United States); in return, she was allowed to gather ethnographic data and to videotape interactions between Japanese and American workers on the factory floor. The method, participant-observation, is widely used in the field of linguistic anthropology...”

(Source: Sunaoshi, Kotabe and Murray 2005, pp. 60-61)

The large-*N* case study

‘ We conducted semi-structured interviews with 83 managers of 62 firms. These firms included 4 holding companies (HCs), 17 wholly owned enterprises (WOVs), 30 equity joint ventures (EVJs), 2 contractual joint ventures (CJVs), 1 representative office (RO) and 8 firms with mixed forms of operations. We followed the steps recommended by Yin (1994) and Eisenhardt (1989) in our analysis. ’

(Source: Wang, Tong and Koh 2004, pp. 169, 171)

Conclusion

How did your view of the case study change as a result of the first session?