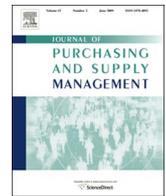




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Purchasing & Supply Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pursup

Notes and debates

A call for broadening the range of approaches to case studies in purchasing and supply management

Anna Dubois^a, Asta Salmi^{b,*}^a Chalmers University of Technology, Department of Technology Management and Economics, S-41296 Gothenburg, Sweden^b Lappeenranta University of Technology, School of Business and Management, Skinnarilankatu 34, FIN-53850 Lappeenranta, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Case study
Diversity
Reflection
Serendipity
Problematization
Supply chain management research

ABSTRACT

Case studies are frequently adopted in purchasing and supply management studies, but the field would benefit from more diversified approaches to this method of scientific inquiry. The inherently flexible case study approach allows for benefiting from the often serendipitous features and non-linear, interactive patterns of scientific work. We urge scholars to be open about their research paths and pay more attention on reflection and learning aspects of case studies. Furthermore, problematization rather than gap-spotting can serve as a fruitful grounding for formulation of research questions. The academic community can contribute to diversity by supporting and legitimizing different approaches to case studies, as long as these approaches are well grounded and argued for.

1. Introduction

This Special Issue focuses on novel research methods in the area of purchasing and supply management (PSM). Our note comments on case studies, which are not a novelty in this research field. Rather, case-based articles are frequently published e.g. in *JPSM*, and they are thus appreciated, or at least accepted, by the research community. However, a relatively standardised way of dealing with and of motivating case studies seems to be followed. In this note we suggest development of more diversified approaches to this inherently flexible method of scientific inquiry. Also, we suggest that paying more attention to reflection in and on case studies would be a way of advancing research in the field of PSM.

Several scholars have discussed the use of case studies in the area of PSM and operations management (see e.g., [Voss et al., 2002](#); [Dubois and Araujo, 2007](#); [Ketokivi and Choi, 2014](#)). Indeed, in the broader field of management studies, there is a spur of interest towards qualitative research approaches ([Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009](#)). Recent methodological discussions have focused on the issue of explicating the different traditions. For instance, there are calls for more pluralistic approaches in international business when theorising from case studies ([Welch et al., 2011](#)) and discussions of what constitutes good case studies in industrial marketing ([Piekkari et al., 2010](#)). Moreover, these authors observe that scholars tend to refer to the same key sources – most notably [Yin \(2013 and previous editions\)](#) and [Eisenhardt \(1989\)](#) – when building the foundation for their case

studies. These references are frequently used to motivate and legitimize case studies and often relatively little more is said about the approaches adopted.

It is, however, important to note that there are different traditions in and approaches to case research. Both Yin and Eisenhardt present a view on case research that is basically positivistic, while other scholars advocate alternative approaches: for instance, ‘intrinsic’ case studies ([Stake, 2005](#)) or critical realist approaches ([Easton, 2010](#)). While recent methodological discussions and reviews have raised the emerging versatility in approaches to case research, it is unclear to what extent such approaches have been adopted in *JPSM*, or in the PSM field more generally. In this note we look into this and wish to highlight the possibilities involved in using case studies in more diversified ways to advance our understanding of PSM phenomena.

2. Case-based articles in JPSM

To set the stage we have taken a brief look at what types of case studies have been published and how case studies have been motivated in *JPSM* articles since 2010. We searched for articles with the criteria of having the term ‘case’ in the title, abstract or key words of the article. We excluded articles that were not actual case studies (for instance, the term was used in a different meaning (e.g. [Ancarani and Kamann, 2010](#)) or a previous case study formed the basis for a quantitative study). As a result, we identified 37 case-based articles published in *JPSM* between 2010 and 2015. We found different case designs: 16

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: anna.dubois@chalmers.se (A. Dubois), asta.salmi@lut.fi (A. Salmi).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pursup.2016.09.002>

Received 7 September 2016; Accepted 29 September 2016

Available online xxxx

1478-4092/ © 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

single case studies and 21 multiple case-based papers were published. Thus, both designs seem to be equally adopted. In order to understand how researchers argue for and/or legitimize case study approaches we looked at the key methodological references used in the papers. Three papers (an interview-based study, a narrative study and an application of a method) had very brief (or no) reference to methodological literature. In the remaining 34 case studies, we see that except for two articles (Hultman et al., 2012; Tchokogué et al., 2011) all refer to Yin and/or Eisenhardt in the methodological section. Thus, these two authors play a significant role, which suggests a dominating positivistic stance of case-based research in the field. However, the philosophical basis of the case studies are rarely discussed.

3. Dominating vs. emerging views on case research

The strong reliance on positivistic approaches to case research has consequences. First, the positivistic approaches rely on a *linear* process of theorizing from case studies (Yin, 2013; Piekari et al., 2010). In contrast, other scholars describe case research as an emergent and flexible process – e.g. as noted by Ragin (1992), the process of doing case research, or ‘casing’, is about finding out what the case is a case of. Similar ideas have been presented by Dubois and Gadde (2002) who propose that theory development in case research involves a process of ‘systematic combining’ wherein there is a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical observation.

Second, the strong reliance on the ‘standard’ references to case research makes us question whether conscious methodological choices are made and to what extent the researchers *reflect* upon and open up their research processes. The *learning* aspects involved in the process of a case study, resulting in reconsiderations of the empirical inquiry and of the theoretical choices, are seldom made visible. Also, the role of *serendipity* is largely ignored. Central for serendipity, or unsought finding, (Merton and Barber, 2004; Roberts, 1989), is that the analyzed problem is solved through a combination of observation, of the researcher’s background understanding, and of his/her ability to explain the phenomenon. Hence, serendipity does not equal pure chance or luck, but is rather a research capacity, which could be explicated and promoted more.

Third, the positivistic approach to research typically relies on ‘gap-spotting’ as opposed to *problematization* when constructing research questions (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011). Sandberg and Alvesson find the dominance of gap-spotting surprising given that it is “increasingly recognized that theory is made interesting and influential when it challenges assumptions that underlie existing literature” (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011, p. 23). Problematization, in contrast, opens up opportunities for advancing knowledge which involves challenging current assumptions and theories. Hence, problematization aims at trying to disrupt the reproduction and continuation of an institutionalized line of reasoning. The particular importance of posing innovative research questions is stressed by these authors.

In view of the extensive use of positivistic standard references in case-based papers, we wonder if the researchers referring to them actually follow the recommended positivistic approach to case studies? Or, if their case studies follow less deductive approaches, do they refer to these sources for legitimation purposes? If they would reflect on and explicate their research processes, how would these be described? We suspect that making the research paths visible would show serendipitous features and non-linear, interactive patterns of which researchers are presently silent. Moreover, reflection and learning aspects of case studies relate more to problematization as a feature of the process than the typical *ex ante* gap-spotting.

Brinberg and McGrath (1985) suggest that research paths progress through three different domains: a substantive ‘real-world’ domain, a conceptual domain, and a methodological domain. They note that each domain can be a starting point for conducting research and, most importantly, that any study covers all three domains. While we see that

the path does not need to be linear, and indeed seldom is, it seems crucial that the researcher explicates the path taken. In this way, the inevitable back-and-forth character of research processes (Van Maanen et al., 2007) and the potential moments of theorizing (Michailova et al., 2014) can be shown and reflected upon. Such descriptions would arguably strengthen the research and contribute to develop our methodological procedures and therefore deserves to be reflected upon by the researcher.

4. Advancing the PSM field by case research

In line with other scholars arguing for more pluralism for case studies (e.g., Welch et al., 2011), we suggest that PSM studies would benefit from a broader understanding of the variety – as well as development of the variety – of case study approaches. Knowledge and acceptance of a broad range of case study approaches among authors, editors and reviewers determines what kinds of case studies will be published. Therefore, the academic community can contribute to diversity by supporting and legitimizing different approaches to case studies, as long as these approaches are well grounded and argued for. Furthermore, to advance the field of research, we encourage scholars to be more explicit about their research processes (see e.g. Andersen et al. (2016) as a recent example) instead of slavishly following conventional ways of reporting their case study methods. Finally, we call for more methodological debates and suggestions of novel ways of designing and framing case studies to challenge dominant methodological and theoretical conventions. Case studies will continue to be needed in future PSM research and they are valuable, for instance, for investigations of contextual issues (such as, understanding purchasing in various national and institutional settings), of dynamics (such as, changes in interdependencies in supply networks), and of emerging issues (such as, sustainability in purchasing and supply). We strongly believe that diversity will take the field further, and hope to inspire the PSM research community to broaden the variety of future case-based papers.

References

- Alvesson, M., Skoldberg, K., 2009. *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications.
- Ancarani, A., Kamann, D.J., 2010. Membership satisfaction and segmentation: the case of IPSERA. *J. Purch. Supply Manag.* 16 (2), 141–148.
- Andersen, P.H., Ellegaard, C., Kragh, H., 2016. I’m your man: how suppliers gain strategic status in buying companies. *J. Purch. Supply Manag.* 22, 72–81.
- Brinberg, D., McGrath, J.E., 1985. *Validity and the Research Process*. Sage Publications.
- Dubois, A., Gadde, L.-E., 2002. Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research. *J. Bus. Res.* 55 (7), 553–560.
- Dubois, A., Araujo, L., 2007. Case research in purchasing and supply management: opportunities and challenges. *J. Purch. Supply Manag.* 13 (3), 170–181.
- Easton, G., 2010. Critical realism in case study research. *Ind. Mark. Manag.* 39 (1), 118–128.
- Eisenhardt, K.M., 1989. Building theories from case study research. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* 14 (4), 532–550.
- Hultman, J., Johnsen, T., Johnsen, R., Hertz, S., 2012. An interaction approach to global sourcing: a case study of IKEA. *J. Purch. Supply Manag.* 18 (1), 9–21.
- Ketokivi, M., Choi, T., 2014. Renaissance of case research as a scientific method. *J. Oper. Manag.* 32 (5), 232–240.
- Merton, R.K., Barber, E., 2004. *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity: A Study in Sociological Semantics and the Sociology of Science*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Michailova, S., Piekari, R., Plakoyiannaki, E., Ritvala, T., Mihailova, I., Salmi, A., 2014. Breaking the silence about exiting fieldwork: a relational approach and its implications for theorizing. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* 39 (2), 138–161.
- Piekari, R., Plakoyiannaki, E., Welch, C., 2010. ‘Good’ case research in industrial marketing: insights from research practice. *Ind. Mark. Manag.* 39 (1), 109–117.
- Ragin, C.C., 1992. “Casing” and the process of social inquiry. In: Ragin, C.C., Becker, H.S. (Eds.), *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Cambridge University Press, 217–225.
- Roberts, R.M., 1989. *Serendipity: Accidental Discoveries in Science*. Wiley.
- Sandberg, J., Alvesson, M., 2011. Ways of constructing research questions: gap-spotting or problematization? *Organization* 18 (1), 23–44.
- Stake, R.E., 2005. *The Art of Case Study Research*. Sage Publications.
- Tchokogué, A., Nollet, J., Gobeil, K., 2011. Supply structure: the pendulum in action. *J. Purch. Supply Manag.* 17 (3), 148–157.

Van Maanen, J., Sørensen, J.B., Mitchell, T.R., 2007. The interplay between theory and method. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* 32 (4), 1145–1154.

Voss, C., Tsiriktsis, N., Frohlich, M., 2002. Case research in operations management. *Int. J. Oper. Prod. Manag.* 22 (2), 195–219.

Welch, C., Piekkari, R., Plakoyiannaki, E., Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011. Theorising from case studies: towards a pluralist future of international business research. *J. Int. Bus. Stud.* 42, 740–762.

Yin, R.K., 2013. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks.