

Editorial: the qualitative case study

IJLM receives many submissions based on case studies. That is positive as the journal is highly interested in empirical research not the least based on qualitative enquiry. However, in general there seems to be a lack of knowledge on what a qualitative case study is and how to conduct it in a way that makes a research manuscript suitable for a scientific journal. This editorial seeks to give the present *IJLM* community and future authors some guidelines on the requirements to a qualitative case study in order to pass the initial screening and eventually be accepted by the reviewers. The guidelines are formulated with initial “check questions” for you when you design and write up a qualitative case study.

Is your study really qualitative? Qualitative studies entail many research methods; this editorial focuses on the qualitative case study. First of all, the term qualitative needs to be defined as qualitative research is still struggling to find its way into scientific logistics and supply chain management (SCM) journals (e.g. Frankel *et al.*, 2005; Pedrosa *et al.*, 2012). Here, Ketokivi and Choi’s (2014) seminal article on the renaissance of case research as a scientific method is helpful. They state that the term qualitative in relation to research indicates an examination of concepts and their meaning and interpretations in specific contexts of enquiry (p. 233). In line with this statement, Fawcett *et al.* (2014, p. 6) say in their trail guide to success in publishing that “qualitative research as scientific inquiry relies on storytelling to make sense of real-world dilemmas.” The first issue in relation to qualitative research is to make sure that it is actually qualitative. With recent years’ intense focus on the quantification of study results and refinement of statistical methods and test, it is easy to forget about the qualities found in a study and then start quantifying the results on a wrong background (Ketokivi and Choi, 2014).

What is the aim of your case study? Case studies are often used for inductive exploration of yet unknown phenomena, i.e. theory generation. But also deductive theory testing by analytical generalization has been proposed, most prominently by Yin (2013). A third category of case study is proposed by Ketokivi and Choi (2014), suggesting that theory elaboration is also a valid purpose of case studies. This type of case studies uses both induction and deduction and to an equal extent. One important aspect, which qualifies for all three types of case studies, is what the two authors call the duality criterion. This means that while the case study context is always unique, the empirical examination must always be balanced with a more general theoretical examination. Depending on the aim of the case study, a different research design should be set up.

How did you select your cases? Accounting for selection of case(s) for a study, is necessary. While it is often a question of access – that may be hard to get – this account must always reflect on the appropriateness of the case(s) selected for a specific study. Flyvbjerg (2006) outlines a list of selection criteria for case studies in social science that is also useful for logistics and SCM case research. He emphasizes that cases in general should be selected for their expected information thickness rather than generalization properties. Firstly, there are extreme or deviant cases that highlight special circumstances that can point at special problems or the opposite. A single case study can be appropriate for this purpose. Next, a maximum variation case selection can be chosen for selection. For instance, if a study critically investigates a specific taken for granted concept in the discipline, a selection of cases covering big and small units of analysis, cases on developed and



emergent economics etc. could be a good selection strategy. The third strategy proposed is a selection of critical case(s). The argument here would be that if the expected findings are valid for these cases, logically they are valid for all other cases within a segment. Last but not least is the paradigmatic cases that seek to create new understandings of where the discipline is heading and to create new schools or lines of thought within the discipline. From this, it should be obvious, that it is not *per se* the number of cases that are important for a potential publication but the captured information and analysis of it. A further note is that it is important to make the case clear as a unit of analysis. A company's supply chain, for example, is not necessarily a case; here more information of what it is, more specifically, that the empirical study is focusing on is needed.

What is the quality of your case study research? Pedrosa *et al.* (2012) suggest that case-based research should be evaluated not only on results (validity and reliability) but on the entire research process that first and foremost must be transparent to the audience. The overall three criteria should, according to these authors, be fulfilled by case-based research, namely transferability, truth value and traceability. Transferability has to do with the general theoretical aim and interest of the study and that the study's result can be analytically generalized as also suggested by Ketokivi and Choi (2014) and Yin (2013) as mentioned above. Information about unit of analysis, case selection, and number of cases also belong into this criterion. Second, truth values are established by information about coding procedures, comparisons, iteration and refutation. Finally, traceability has to do with openness about research protocol and sometimes even data base, data-collection guidelines, informant selection and number of informants within the case study. In qualitative case studies, reliability in the original meaning of the term is not possible because new insights are often created through qualitative methods such as interviews (Kvale, 1983), openness about the research process is of utmost importance for quality assessment. Apart from taking these criteria into account, a good qualitative case study will furthermore reflect on its adherence to these criteria.

What is epistemological foundation of your case research? Aastrup and Halldórsson (2008) point to a lack of epistemological foundation and discussion of the case study in logistics and SCM. They find that strict cause-effect relations sought after in positivistic research are only possible in an understanding of logistics and SCM as closed systems. As very few supply chains these days are actually closed systems, an open system view is more appropriate. Applying this approach together with a critical realist epistemology, they find that not only can and should concrete logistics and SCM systems be investigated, they also include social and meaning structures that comprehend actors' intentionality. In this way, generative mechanisms underlying logistics and SCM performance are revealed.

Is an interpretivist or social constructivist approach suitable for your case research? In respect to Aastrup and Halldórsson's (2008) request for establishing an epistemological foundation for case studies, Gammelgaard (2004) goes one step further in suggesting that there may be more than one foundation represented by three different schools of logistics research. Here, she points to the case study as the most appropriate research method in logistics research taking a systems approach. However, a pure systems approach that considers identification and description of new system parts as well as identifying new system boundaries, theory; this is not very commonly seen in the discipline. Most often, research is drawn toward a more objective ontology and epistemology such as positivism. Only rarely, are interpretivist and social constructivist approaches applied openly in logistics and SCM. These approaches are, however, very well suited to qualitative case studies where meanings, interpretations, managerial dilemmas and storytelling play a pre-dominant role. Fawcett and Magnan's (2002) article on rhetoric and reality of supply chain integration is one good example of a case study that revealed that the interpretation of SCM differed depending on function and hierarchical level leading to difficulties in

implementation of SCM. More research of this kind and maybe even with a more critical (in the academic sense of the word) stance through social constructivism may enrich the discipline tremendously. Also worth noting is Storey's (2002) claims that from a general management perspective, the socially constructed nature of supply chain practices, processes and process innovations are under-researched. I think that this is still the case and sincerely hope that *IJLM* will break new grounds with research along these lines. See also Houé and Murphy's (2017) arguments for applying a social constructivist approach to studying logistics networks.

What is the story you want to tell? Last but not least, there is the question of storytelling. It is hard to write up qualitative case studies in a short and compelling way as such studies go into depth and details of a phenomenon. Fawcett *et al.* (2014) suggest that you should use interview quotes in the storytelling and recommend a balance between "power quotes" to emphasize parts of your analysis and "proof quotes" where a link between data and analysis should be clearly established. Åhlström (2007) also emphasizes the link between data and theory as mandatory to convince and persuade the general audience about the qualities of your case analysis but reviewers in particular. However, the individual researchers/research team's capacity of theoretical sensitivity will vary and a certain amount of "conceptual leap" in a qualitative analysis – highly depending on researchers' theoretical and research process capacities – will always be present; especially so where high levels of research expertise exist (Klag and Langley, 2013).

I sincerely hope that these guidelines are helpful for your case research. However, they are only overall guidelines and you will most likely need to study a good deal of the used references in detail. I strongly encourage you to do so not at least as it may open up a whole new perspective of scientific inquiry and an intensified conversation about viable research methods in logistics and SCM.

Good luck with your case research!

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