**Balancing acts for capturing process and ensuring quality in single case research**

**Abstract**

In this paper we discuss challenges for single case-based researchers in business marketing. We contrast variety and process based approaches to case research and identify three balancing acts that we believe are of particular importance in singe case research. The balancing acts all relate to the casing process - crafting the case, communicating the case and developing theory from the case. Based on these balancing acts we provide suggestions for how casing, as a single case method, can be conveyed to ensure quality to the readers and reviewers of single case based research.

**Key words**: single case research, process studies, quality criteria, casing, theory development

**1. Introduction**

As stated in the call for papers to the special issue, case-based research has become particularly influential in business marketing (Riege, 2003; Johnston et al 1999; Piekkari; Plakoyiannaki & Welch, 2010). According to Bonoma (1985, p.202) “certain areas of interest to marketers simply defy counting practices” as they are complex and sensitive to the context in which events unfold. Such areas include among others research on business networks, dyadic relationships, managerial decision-making, etc, where contextual sensitivity and a process focus is required (Easton, 1995; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Managers in B2B firms live with complexity, chaos, ambiguity, fuzzy boundaries and continuous change and research methodologies have to adjust to capture their reality (Gummesson, 2003).

This echo the American Market Association’s definition of marketing as “The activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (AMA, 2014). In this definition, both structures (in terms of institutions) and processes are important for marketing research. Although structure and process studies may provide complementary insights, they represent two different ways for looking and knowing about marketing phenomena (Kotler, 1972). Case studies are well suited for process studies. Compared to other, qualitative approaches, case-based research allows researchers to follow sequences of events and may include and combine multiple sources of evidence through the researchers’ active theoretical framing and boundary setting of reality. The versatility of case studies has undoubtedly contributed to making it the methodology of choice for many researchers in and beyond business marketing (Dubois & Araujo, 2004). However, case study conventions vary across research disciplines (Piekkari, Welch and Paavilainen, 2009). In general, there is a strong tendency to favor multiple case studies over single case studies in business research and marketing is no exception. Multiple case studies are recommended to reach “theoretical saturation” or “maximum variation” (Perry, 1998). According to influential writers on the case methodology in business research (Eisenhardt, 1989, Yin, 2009) researchers who present qualitative papers based on studies with multiple cases warrant the rigor of case study strategy on multiple case studies. The underlying rationale is that case comparison help researchers detect commonalities and dependencies and aid in the process of decomposing case studies into causal relationship and bridge from these into deductive (quantitative) research (Eisenhardt & Grabhner, 2007). Larsson (1993) claims that the “case survey method” (defined as quantifying single case studies) “overcomes the major drawback of single case studies, namely their inability to examine cross-sectional patterns and to generalize to large populations” (cf. Larsson, 1993, p. 1517). The bias towards multiple case studies is also reflected in the comments received from journal reviewers, when these evaluate business marketing research based on single case studies. Here, comparative issues, sampling and other requests for making the case research more palatable for a quantitative approach are common (see also Pratt, 2008).

We think this development towards viewing qualitative research as merely a preamble to quantitative studies is a conundrum for case-based research in general and in studies concerned with understanding business marketing processes in particular. When the importance of comparative case studies is emphasized, the inherent qualities of sresearch are overlooked. We think that single base case te uniquebeing

The one-sided dominance of assumptions derived from a multiple case study approach favors a specific disciplinary convention for conducting and evaluating case-based research, which does not lend itself easily to single case studies (Pratt, 2009). Although a disciplinary convention both hones and furthers researchers’ ability to compare and judge each other’s findings on a set list parameters, it also limits methodological pluralism, by silencing alternative approaches. (Piekkari et al, 2009). We believe that multiple practices to case based research of marketing processes are a sign of vitality for an academic community. Hence, we set out to accomplish two aims with this paper: First, we argue for deploying “good” single case-based research strategies in business marketing and address the unique validity aspects of this approach. For this reason, it is not possible to reconcile around a set of shared evaluation criteria valid for both single and multiple case-based research. We do not argue that single case studies should be exempt from quality demands in order to be seen as useful for developing scientific insight. Indeed, we acknowledge, that poorly performed and communicated single case studies are needless, endless and groundless (Weick, 1979). Based on this we elaborate on three balancing acts that we believe are particularly important for ensuring validity in case-based research. Second, as implications of the balancing acts we suggest how method descriptions can be dealt with in single case based papers in order not to confuse the process logic with the variance logic. Hence, we provide guidance for how the casing process can be described in its own right instead of following traditional (multiple) case conventions. Our mission, however, is not to trade one convention for another. It is to accentuate the case for single case research as a distinct and alternative approach to study process events in business marketing- one which needs to be understood and evaluated on its own terms in terms of its contribution to marketing insight.

**2. Single case research and validity criteria in process research**

In our view, a case is actively co-constructed as the researcher interacts with the field, rather than a piece of information ready to be discovered and found by anyone looking for it. Easton (2010, p.119) defines case studies as “a research method that involves investigating one or a small number of social entities or situations about which data are collected using multiple sources of data an developing a holistic description through an interactive research process”. Case research entails the researcher’s active choice of what is to be studied and as such it is more accurately described as an active enactment of a researcher of a “chunk” of reality in the shape of a social phenomenon than a methodological choice (Stake, 2005). Therefore it has a holistic rather than an atomistic approach towards a phenomenon, as it tries to frame and set the boundaries of aspects relevant to the case and focus on both actors and the contexts they inhabit. A single case study is different from multiple case research in that it does not rely on comparing ‘the same’ phenomenon across a set of cases but that it permits inquiry into the nature of the phenomenon in a single case. During the study process, a single case approach therefore permits researchers to reconsider their initial assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon in a fashion that is not possible by using a multiple case approach, where cases are chosen to reflect a set of pre-specified conditions, deemed relevant. Comparisons across cases are, by definition, not an option when the aim is to not hold on to predetermined conceptualisations pertaining to the object of study, but to develop them.

The differences between single and multiple case studies in their focus and in the state of initial assumptions in the research process mirror the underlying divergence in the so-called variance-based and process-based approaches to the study of organizational transition processes (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). When the first definition is used, change concerns a dependent variable that is explained with a set of independent and clearly defined variables that explain variations in the dependent variable of change. This represents an approach to process research where process is captured as variation between comparative states – often following a predetermined trajectory. For instance, in business marketing an exchange relationship process may be understood based on the phase it finds itself in (Ford, 1980; Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987). In this case, the researcher enact that the relationship represents an entity. It is out there, ready to be compared and contrasted and classified as for instance emergent or mature. When change represents a variation in the state of things, research may focus around what caused that variation or more simply the sequence in which the changes of states occur. Multiple case studies are useful in this approach as they can help researchers in building a comparative logic and corrobate their findings (Yin, 2009).

In the process-based approach process is given primacy over steady states. In the strong approach to change, social objects, such as an exchange relationship in business marketing is an ongoing accomplishment rather than an object. The construction and re-creation, contingent on the acts and interacts of a changing flow of actors (see for instance Makkonen et al, 2012). In this case what and who makes up the exchange relationship changes over time. In a strong process view processes dominates matter, and accordingly, business relationships assumes a much more feeble existence, given that other acts and interacts of actors may change, counter or dissolve what we as researchers recognize as belonging to a relationship. In a strong process view, single case studies each provides unique possibilities for understanding on faculty of an underlying social reality, which – although it may or may not have an underlying and invariant “deep structure” is not discernable from multiple case comparisons. As the processes and their interplay are continually revolving and are not discernible to phases or causes in each, the rationale for seeing single case studies as inferior to multiple case studies therefore also vanes in the process-based optic.

The characteristics of single case studies in business marketing is not, however, echoed in equally strong rooting of practice into the conventions in methodological literature on case-based research (Piekkari et al., 2010). In several studies of case research practices in different disciplines a group of authors have established, that beyond quoting authorities on case based research, there is a striking lack of declaration in the methodological section with respect to explaining how case study processes are carried out and how researchers iterate between field based observations to data saturation and further into theorization processes (Piekkari et al, 2009; 2010). Moreover, the lack of a shared notion on research quality for evaluating the rigor of qualitative research is particularly challenging for single case researchers. Central to the issue of rigor is the notion of validity and we will therefore consider how this concept is understood and how it relates to single case research. Following the positivist research tradition, validity has come to mean the correspondence between empirical ‘facts’ (evidence) and theoretical constructs. Three forms of validity criteria are often used (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010): *Construct validity*, securing that correct operational measures have been established for the concepts in use. *Internal validity*, making sure that proper causal relationships have been established. *External validity*, proving that the domain to which a study’s findings belong can be generalised. However, the combination of these validity criteria has been found difficult (see e.g. Bonoma, 1985; Dubois and Gadde, 2014). For instance, Bonoma (1985), points at the trade-off that has to be made between internal validity, or “data integrity”, and external validity since the closer the researcher gets to the object of study the more difficult it becomes to compare data across categories.

For single case researchers these validity criteria, generated from positivist ideals, are problematic for other reasons. First, traditional validity criteria rely on that the meanings of theoretical constructs are kept constant during a study and that they are understood in a common, or the same, way by all researchers in the research community. Second, the empirical data to be ‘collected’ in a study are assumed to be pre-defined in relation to the study. Hence, the matching of theoretical constructs and empirical observations is, according to the positivist notion of validity, a static aspect of research, i.e. something that is not related to the process of study but only to the result of it. The result, in turn, assumes a direct relation to pre-determined decisions regarding what theory to match with what empirical data and the quality thus relate to how successful this match turns out to be. In contrast, the validity in single case studies, as the correspondence between theoretical constructs and empirical observations, is embedded in the research process and thus also subject to change during the whole process of study. Therefore, neither the set of constructs used (nor their exact meaning), nor the empirical data, based on which valid claims are to be made, are fixed or exactly defined before the ending of the study.

Validity claims are contingent on the conventions that define research traditions. We will simplify such conventions by referring to two basic categories; positivistic and interpretative (relating to single case research) in our continued discussion of how proponents of the two can interact. Next, we address three balancing acts that can be identified for single case research following from the process related validity aspects of single case studies.

**3. Balancing acts in ensuring quality in single case research**

Based on the notion that validity for single case research is about matching of theory and empirical data and that this matching is dynamic – given that processes evolves in unexpected ways and that researchers concerned with the process of research learn and discover new insights and useful theoretical aspects as they traverse into the case - we point at three issues that the single case researcher has to deal with, and suggest three balancing acts relating to these issues. We prefer the metaphor of a balancing act because they all contain an element of reconciling interests and priorities which opposes each other, and where researchers in each case must negotiate their own way between the Scylla of methodological objectivism and the Charybdis of subjectivist realism. We contend that single case study researchers will be challenged by these three dilemmas in some form at some point in their research. However, the manifestation of these issues and the dilemmas they present will take on different forms in each project and so will the strategies for dealing with these tensions. In our approach, we differ from for instance Riege (2003) and Yin (2009) in the search for a design or blueprint for conducting and writing up single case studies. We believe such a design is potentially constraining the research activities. Rather than a recipe, and more in alignment with the notion of a journey into an unknown territory, we would like to offer an operative overview of the dilemmas the researcher will face when conducting single case studies.

*3.1 Crafting the case – casing*

Single case research permits interaction between theory and empirical data. In 1992, Ragin introduced “casing” as the activity of transforming empirical material into a meaningful case, encouraging case researchers to constantly ask: what is the case a case of? Developing empirical data into a case is suggested to be a (casing) process and therefore cases “must be found because they cannot be specified beforehand” (Ragin, 1992, p. 220). Ragin (1992) is also clear on that the primary goal for researchers is to link the empirical and the theoretical, and that casing is essential in the process of forming meaningful descriptions of the empirical reality. In a similar vein, Dubois and Gadde (2002) suggest “systematic combining” as the process of interaction between theory and empirical data and describe it as nonlinear and path-dependent. Theory cannot be understood without empirical observations, and the empirical observations cannot be understood without theory. The goal is *matching* of theory and reality and matching is “about going back and forth between framework, data sources and analysis” (ibid, p. 556).

Systematic combining is described as a process involving a number of ‘directions’ and ‘redirections’, which are necessary to achieve matching between theory and empirical data. ‘Directions’ relate to phases in the process wherein the current theoretical ideas guide the data collection, while ‘redirections’ are spurred by changes of different kinds e.g. regarding the meaning and choice of theoretical concepts and what additional data is needed in adjusting to such modifications of theoretical ideas, or regarding effects of ‘following the data’, or story, if this takes ‘new’ directions. Most of these redirections require choices or decisions to be made, for example with regard to how to expand the empirical study in time and/or scope, and how to (re)focus with regard to theoretical framing. Some choices are always made *ex ante* – which may resemble other research approaches, while other choices come during the research process and are made based on the situation of the researcher and the case study at that time. In making those choices, the context of the researcher plays a role since the researcher interacts with other researchers in the casing process.

As a result, the research idea is subject to development throughout the study as an effect of learning and the emergent features of the case itself – both the empirical aspects of it and also how it evolves as a result from a growing understanding from the perspective of the researcher. Hence, the starting point, as articulated in the initial research ‘plan’ for a single case study, may not be of particular relevance at the end of the study.

Utilising the ‘flexibility’ of single case studies in this regard is in conflict with positivist research ideals. For instance, Yin (2011, p. 54) states that if the initial proposition must be revised it has to be ‘retested’ with another set of cases. In single case research based on ‘casing’ or ‘systematic combining’, the research idea is subject to development throughout the study as an effect of learning and the emergent features of the case itself – both the empirical aspects of it and also how it evolves as a result from a growing theoretical understanding of the research phenomenon from the perspective of the researcher. Hence, the starting point articulated as initial research ideas for a single case study may not be of any particular relevance for the reader of the eventual case. Single case studies can thus be seen as having an ‘arbitrary starting point’ in initial research ideas involving certain theoretical concepts and entry points in a case ‘to be’ (Dubois and Araujo, 2004).

Moreover, not just the beginning but also the ending of a case study can be considered as ‘arbitrary’ in some sense as a result from the redirections made in the casing process. Expanding the boundaries of a case in one or several directions, e.g. in time or scope of the network, always has consequences for the theory developed (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). How to ‘package’ the study in relation to *the issue of arbitrariness* is therefore something that the researcher has do deal with when publishing the result of single case research.

The balancing act when it comes to single case research in view of the nature of the casing process relates to how the issue of arbitrariness is handled by the researcher. In view of traditional positivistic research ideals it might be tempting not to deal with emergent needs for redirecting a case study but instead to ‘settle’ with current ‘findings’ although the researcher has come to realise that the initial assumptions and research ideas were all ‘wrong’. At the other end, the researcher may take the arbitrariness too far by not daring to suggest any conclusions but instead suggesting continued research and expansion of the study in every direction identified as potentially interesting. Hence, a balance must be found between what we may call ‘premature lock-in situations’ and ‘endless data rides’.

Single case researchers trying (or being forced) to follow conventions tend to deal with this balancing issue either by arguing for having achieved ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or by *ex post* rationalisations. Typically, when reviewers cannot find explicit accounts of clearly articulated (*ex ante*) research questions or propositions (e.g. Yin, 2009) they often ask for clarification. Some may see the lack of a precise research question as a clear sign of lacking rigor on behalf of the researcher, and warrant their rejection of the paper based on missing research questions. However, when reporting findings from an open-ended single case study, the interesting result to report back may in fact be the formulation of a specific and surprising research question that challenges conventional beliefs and denies assumptions of audiences (Davis, 1971).

*3.2 Communicating the case*

How to report the case is also an issue that require balancing. Pratt (2008 & 2009) makes the observation that qualitative researchers can pursue several strategies how to report results in order to be accepted by reviewers with a quantitative mind-set. The first strategy is to make the manuscript appear as a quantitative paper: mimic their structure, language and/or criteria, along the lines of what also Sutton (1997) alludes to when discussing ‘closet research’. Similarly, adopting wordings from quantitative research like sampling (assuming an underlying population) and the use of concepts such as “analytical” generalization are quite often seen in “Quant-qual” papers. For instance, sampling an “extreme” case suggests that something is an ‘outlier’, far away from an assumed mean, hence nodding to an underlying notion of an ontology where reality is describable through means of normal distributions. Gibbert & Ruigrok (2010) provides several examples.

The second strategy is to work for including more reviewers and editors trained in qualitative methods on the review and editorial boards of journals in the field. We suggest a third strategy, which concerns, in line with Starbuck (2003), to provide a primer to single case based researchers on how an *argumentative approach* when reporting the case. However, the journal format does not provide much room for detail. Most single case researchers feel restrained by the limited space available. This is an issue of selectivity and therefore as much a matter of structuring the selected parts of the case to make it accessible and convincing to the reader, while at the same time retain as much of the contextual reality of the case as possible. Single-case researchers must negotiate this dilemma in the best way possible. Strong-arming a case into the mould of a linear paper format can produce a different paper altogether, while disregarding the journal format may harm publication possibilities. Since single-case based papers primarily are read and remembered for their convincing stories, we probably lean more towards structuring around the story to be told than seeking to fit into a particular format.

Gummesson (2003) point out that all research has an element of interpretation and that this element assumes a researcher actively selecting and crafting a narrative from data, abductive researchers have coined a concept known as the inference to the best explanation (IBE). According to this idea, it is always the researcher who selects and presents the most convincing story line from competing explanations (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010; Morgan, 1983).

In single case studies, researchers need to explicate to reviewers and other readers how they ground their stories in observations made. Perhaps they need to do this in an even more detailed matter when submitting papers for review than what eventually will end up in the paper, since careful reviewers might call for the extra deep insight (Pratt, 2008; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010).

Single-based case researchers also run the risk of being case-borers. Case borers are researchers who think that their case is intrinsically interesting and the rest of the academic community will share their enthusiasm with respect to the details of a particular case. As a consequence they are unable to prioritize and versionalize their communication and address issues that concerns or interest the audience they seek to reach. The balancing point of communicating the case clearly has to do with relating the case insights to what researchers and practitioners find relevant and topical. This often must go beyond simply stating that one’s case present another example of what is talked about in the particular conversation and towards making a case for how the story broadens or changes the ongoing conversation.

Hence, reporting the case is an issue that require balancing. We refer to this balancing as an *issue of selectivity*. While richness and complexity are indeed virtues of single case research these features may also be a burden (Kvale 1997). On the one hand, including too much detail and context may obscure the theoretical suggestions. On the other hand, too far driven ‘streamlining’ of the case requires that contextual details are taken out of the case and may as a result entail a risk of over-simplifying the case.

*3.3. Developing theory from the case*

Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) stress the need for theories to demonstrate both novelty and continuity. Concepts may be given new meaning (inherent or contextual) but need at the same time to be connected to, or grounded in, ‘received’ literature so that they can be understood by other researchers. A single case study can be critically accused for being “just an example” and to some extent a case always is. The issue of relevance for the single case researcher therefore is “what the single case is a case of” referring back to the key question emphasised by Ragin (1992). The answer to this question, when the casing is ending, relates directly to the issue of theoretical/analytical generalisation.

Single case research is never generalizable to a population but it can develop theory that can be used and further developed in contexts beyond the empirical context of the single case. Easton (2010) uses critical realism as a philosophical foundation to explain how case research through the nature of the involved entities, how they act and the variety of mechanisms through which they utilize powers. However, as pointed out by several other authors, inability to generalize does not automatically mean inability to learn from single case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006; March, Sproull & Tamuz, 1991).

In single case studies bias or “contamination” should be embraced as this is the only way to gain the contextualist perspective ingrained in the study. Direct observation and interaction provides insights which are not possible from a distance. Rather than avoiding contamination and subjectivity, the point is to acknowledge and develop enough theoretical capacity to reflect upon it theoretically. Deep involvement combined with broad theoretical lenses breed diversity of insights and lead researchers to have a broader pool of convincing stories to select from when presenting findings (Andersen & Kragh, 2010). As pointed out by a quantitative researcher such as Campbell (1975): Case-based research may provide messy data, but it is a price that must be paid for deepness in observation (see Bansal & Corey 2012 for a similar point). Since no-one enters a research site without some ideas of what to find, there is no such thing as an objective mind, when conducting qualitative research and interaction with subjects are needed. Glaser and Strauss point this out well (1967, p. 253): “No sociologist can possibly erase from his mind all the theory he knows before he begins his research. Indeed the trick is to line up what one takes as theoretical possible”. In single case research, interaction often unfolds over time and as the researcher learns more about the actors and contexts they deliberately let themselves be influenced by the context they work with. This immersion in the field is part of the specific value attributed with single-case research. This also means that case selection criteria that may have been important in the initial stages of research are altered as the researcher untangles the case and a more profound understanding emerges. Clearly, based on their findings, researchers will therefore also “pick the cherries” that lend support to, and illustration of, their observations.

Based on the depth of a study of a phenomenon in a certain context a single case can capture and suggest explanations for interdependencies and interactions within the particular context by use of ‘received’ theory grounding the study theoretically. Single case researchers need to make use of this uniqueness by crafting the case and matching it with the emerging theoretical framework to make sense of the empirical data to develop theory. Developing theory based on single case research provides the researcher with rich opportunities to ground the meaning of concepts in the empirical data, but this strength is directly connected to the potential weakness of making the theory too case specific. The specificity in relation to the case and the analytical generalizability that can be achieved by relating the findings to received conceptual definitions and meanings therefore becomes a balancing act. This balancing act relates to *the issue of theoretical/analytical generalisation* andis thus a key aspect of the way theory can convincingly be developed based on single case research. The issue stems from the need to demonstrate how the developed theory is grounded both in empirical data and in ‘received’ theory. A challenge for the researcher may be to separate the ‘received’ from the novel meanings of the theory, since the researcher has been integrated in the process of theory development. Using colleagues and reviewers as ‘sparring partners’ to sort the novel from the ‘received’ and to link them is one way of dealing with this issue.

*3.4 Balancing the balancing acts*

The balancing acts all rely and depend on the process logic of casing. Therefore, the risks involved in the identified balancing acts relate to one another. Premature lock-in, streamlining of the case and ‘over-generalisations’ are all related risks. At the other end, endless data-rides, over-detailed cases, and too case specific generalisations, can be found.

Beginnings and endings of single case studies, i.e. to put boundaries around single case studies (as well as the single case), are problematic to combine with the casing logic since the processes subject to scrutiny do not have endings (Dubois and Gadde 2002, Halinen and Törnroos 2005). However, it should not be forgotten that this has to do with *complexity* (of the processes subject to study) and with *learning* (in the process of study) and that it therefore concern challenges that should not be ignored but embraced. Empirical *and* theoretical grounding is a salient feature of single case studies and should thus not be considered as a balancing issue. However, the matching of theory and empirical observation in the process, and at the end of a single case study, influence all three balancing issues. In view of these challenges an important question is: How can single case researchers account for the casing and theory development in the process of their studies? Others have pointed to strategies of going with the mysteries as they unravel or simply live with the messiness of being unable to match theory and cases ex ante (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). We concur with these viewpoints, but we think that they all are strategies which aim at coping with complexity as it emerges but less with understanding how the process of learning unfolds as the case researchers traverse and sometimes get lost or find themselves in a context which stubbornly defies their initial assumptions. In the next section we suggest that this requires process description and *ex post* argumentation for the rationales involved in how the study was carried out and thus that the case and the theory developed based on the single case is grounded, “credible” and convincing.

**4. Implications – How to account for the single casing**

It is a challenge to convey the casing process to the readers of case based journal papers. In order to make justice to the process of single case research the method needs description in its own right. As discussed in 3.1, the starting point articulated as initial research ideas for a single case study may not be of particular relevance for the reader of the eventual case although the description of the research process as such is of importance. Identifying and explaining crucial choices made during the research process is one way of ensuring transparency of the research (Dubois and Gibbert, 2010; Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010). This has to do with “openness” (Dubois and Araujo, 2007) with regard to the interaction between theory and empirical data: “the intellectual journey needs description and reflection” (ibid., p. 178) in order to convince the reader of the theoretical and empirical grounding of the case study. This kind of reflexivity with regard to reporting the methodological aspects of a case study is also emphasised by Piekkari et al. (2010).

Piekkari et al. point at the problem of conventions when case based research is concerned, and how these conventions do not fit with casing processes in single case studies. For instance, the number of interviews and interviewees are often described in detailed while the process of ‘finding’ them is not accounted for. In case-based research, published in top-tier marketing journals, it is not uncommon to find data accounts, which in number of interviews or observations can measure themselves with the sample sizes found in quantitative studies (Penaloza, 2000). This focus on the size of the data pile links back to quantitative research norms, where tests of significance call for some amount of data. However, one has to keep in mind that the intended product of research is to develop new insights, not to provide a test of these insights. While rigor in research and data richness also can be an important provider of detail and can be a source of inspiration, data amounts are not in themselves providing better insights (Sutton, 1997). The quality of insights depend less on data heaps than on the rigor of the analytical process carried out by the researcher (Weick, 1989). Therefore, the ‘analytical journey’ of the researcher in the process of matching empirical data with theoretical ideas is of greater importance than the amount of data itself. Developing accounts for that process is a key issue to deal with for the single case researcher.

How to handle great amounts of qualitative data (see for instance Kvale 1997) and what parts to choose, and how to frame it theoretically, are related key issues. Also, genuinely surprising and inspiring insights might come to the fore when researchers are not actively searching for data. Hence, detailed and meticulous scrutiny (March, Sproull & Tamuz, 1991) may be combined with ‘sidekicks’ when engaging in informal conversation or doing something else perhaps in the vicinity of but not directly related to the case study (Sutton, 1997). Hence, the number of interviews or interviewees says very little about what data that was used, how it was gained and how it was processed. How the interviewees were found and how the input from each interview led to the next are of greater importance when conveying the casing process to an audience. In addition, how theoretical ideas evolved during these processes need integration into the account to explicate how theory played a role as input to and output of the casing process.

However, the *issue* *of selectivity* not just concerns the communication of the case, as we discuss in 3.2, but also the communication of the casing process. When the casing process is concerned the balancing is a matter of how detailed the ‘dwindling road’ should be accounted for: How much context of the process should be included and how? In reality, we suspect that ‘streamlined process accounts’ given by some researchers as if they ‘managed’ to hold on to the initial research ideas is more of an abdication to mainstream research traditions than ‘true’ accounts of how the research was actually carried out. On the other hand, too much detail including all kinds of fruitless efforts and not so useful data, which are natural parts of the ‘actual’ casing process and that the researcher has left behind, may not contribute to convince any reader of the ‘validity’ of the results of the research.

**5. Concluding discussion**

We have argued for the quality of single case research in marketing and particular process issues with respect to producing “good” single case research. Validity claims could either be ignored on the basis of that the validity concept is inherited from traditional positivistic research ideals or be used as a term for how well a study has coped with the matching of theory with empirical data. This matching and the process, through which it is achieved, however, are associated with particular challenges for single case researchers. We have identified three issues that have to be dealt with; the issue of arbitrariness, the issue of selectivity and the issue of theoretical generalisation. We furthermore suggest that these issues present the single case researcher with three related balancing acts among contradicting forces that are emanating from the process features of making a single case study, i.e. the actual casing. While this process is characterised by the researcher’s interaction with theory and empirical ‘subjects’, the interaction between the researchers, including reviewers, takes on other challenges. We conclude that this interaction may contribute to improvements in research quality since the single case researcher’s understanding of its research subject and of theory, used as sense-making devices during the process, is never constant during the casing. The researcher may thus lack ‘the distance’ required to single out and present the novel theoretical ideas including how much and which data to select to convey them. However, we also see potentials in advancing the method semantics and general understanding of the different ways to conduct single case research. Great numbers of data, interviews or cases do not guarantee great research; neither do *ex post* rationalisations or linear accounts of messy processes.

Ideally, the quality of single case studies is the ability of an unfolding reality to shape research designs rather than the other way around, as the case researcher traverses the reality and learns from the process. Never to miss a beat, not to hesitate or stop the process of understanding what is really going on, because reality escapes predefined theoretical frameworks or data collection designs. Case studies must allow researchers to grasp and convey central elements of the meaning-creating activities of actors in context and help us understand the world from the perspective of those living in it. In our view, a unique quality of in-depth single case studies is precisely the ability to follow suit to the beats of reality. This is a quality that they do not share with any other research strategy, including multiple case designs, which have comparability of a predefined issue as a priority. Such case studies do not surface and present themselves to researchers in a cut-and-dried fashion. Rather, they are actively recognized and theoretically framed by researchers. However, they are also hard to bring into the light and attention of a research community. They may lead to endless data rides and are frustrating in their unwillingness to bend into prior made decisions concerning relevant theoretical perspectives, data collection, etc.. The balancing acts suggested in this paper may be helpful for single case researchers as they engage with the reality they study, as well as for reviewers seeking also to avoid missing out on truly insightful case stories.

We have drawn on our own experience as authors of case based research and we believe that our findings can be transferred to other specialisations in business research. Although marketing research has a distinct history and has co-evolved with the marketing field, we anticipate that others fields within strategy, management and organisation share evolutionary traits as well as theoretical influences and, not least, methodological challenges.

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