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A framework and guideline for research and analysis

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Gauging the Rigor of Qualitative Case Studies in Comparative Lobbying Research. A Framework and Guideline for Research and Analysis

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Engaging in comparative lobbying research is a challenging task, because public affairs is complex and highly context-dependent. Thus, qualitative case studies have been researchers' primary choice. However, the case method has been subject to much debate surrounding its rigor, in terms of reliability, internal validity, and generalizability, and particularly its potential for theory building. To propose a framework for researchers conducting lobbying case studies as well as for reviewers receiving such work, we apply a positivistic approach on case study rigor from management studies and expand the framework to tackle the specific challenges of comparative qualitative lobbying research. Thus, we expand the research framework by a set of variables specific to public affairs: We add enrichment for internal validity, contextuality, and comparability for external validity, interdisciplinarity for construct validity, and hypertext-searchable databases for reliability. Thereby, we aim to transfer the lessons learned from management studies in terms of rigorous qualitative case studies to public affairs to help build novel and explanatory theory in the field and to provide guidance to researchers how to design a rigorous case study.

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CASE STUDIES FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

Research in public affairs covers a diversity of issues and contexts, such as public sector advocacy in Kenya (Irwin & Waweru, 2017), issues management in the U.S. forest industry (Panwar & Hansen, 2009), political marketing in the United Kingdom (Ormrod, Henneberg, Forward, Miller, & Tymms, 2007), or the corporate fight against regulation at the European Union level (Lock & Seele, 2017a). Thus, knowledge generation is influenced by various contexts and research disciplines, and theory is often built from single cases. Generating insights on an aggregate level, say public affairs in companies, in general, thus remains difficult, because research must account for political systems, current developments, and contingent contextual factors that influence each case.

Therefore, past public affairs research has very much relied on case studies "that illustrate the broad scope of contemporary public affairs practice" (Moss & Tonge, 2009, p. 166) to understand and describe the corporate policy cycle (Schuler, 2001). Although such illustrative cases often provide a convincing narrative for examples of public affairs (see, e.g., the special issue on case studies in this journal, 2009, Volume 9, Issue 3 or Moss, 2017) and set the stage for empirical research in terms of surveys (e.g., Murphy, Hogan, & Chari, 2011), interviews (e.g., Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007), content analyses (e.g., Olatunji & Adekunle Akinjogbin, 2011), focus groups (e.g., Heinze, Schneider, & Ferié, 2013), or mixed approaches (Marland & Giasson, 2013), they are not apt to build theory. Instead, to generate theory, an empirical case study approach is needed (Yin, 2013) that draws from different empirical data sources and analyses.

Although public affairs studies have concentrated on illustrative case studies, the field of business management has witnessed a discussion on the rigor of qualitative case studies to build theory (e.g., Gibbert, Wicki, & Ruigrok, 2008). In this article, we aim to transfer the lessons learned from management studies in terms of rigorous qualitative case studies to public affairs to help build novel and explanatory theory in the field and to provide guidance to researchers how to design a rigorous case study and to authors and reviewers how to report case study results.

To do so, we provide a framework for an investigation of the methodological rigor of public affairs case studies that is based on the work by management scholars (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010) and extend it to fit to the peculiarities of public affairs, accounting for the institutional context of the cases and eventually rendering them comparable across institutional settings.

In doing so, we aim to advance the field of public affairs methodologically, not by adding a new method (Hillman, 2001) but by sophisticating a core method of the field in terms of rigor and potential for theory building.

2 | RIGOR IN CASE STUDY RESEARCH

Qualitative research and the case study method in particular have been a much used research methodology in public affairs (e.g., Panwar & Hansen, 2009; Terry, 2001; Ormrod et al., 2007). Despite this, the case method has been subject to much debate surrounding its rigor, in particular in terms of its reliability, internal validity, and generalizability (e.g., Yin, 2013; Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 1991). Recently, reviews of the methodological rigor of case studies in business management have shown that perhaps due to these debates, the reporting conventions for published case studies have not been codified to the same extent as other (quantitative) methods such as surveys and laboratory studies (e.g., Gibbert et al., 2008). For instance, when reporting experimental studies, there is a clear and generally accepted structure or "template," how the procedures, materials, and general research design are to be relayed (APA, 2018). There is no such guidance for the write-up of case studies. In fact, qualitative research in general and case study research in particular has seen the release of myriad textbooks over the last 5 years, with often competing advice (e.g., Blatter & Haverland, 2012, for a review). This is counterproductive, as it leaves authors (as well as reviewers) at a loss when it comes to "what" to report and "how" to report it (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). Additionally, authors in business management seem to be preoccupied with the generalizability of their research findings, discuss this criterion prominently both in the methods as well as the limitations sections of the paper, whereas at the same time, all but ignoring the much more fundamental criteria reliability and internal validity (Gibbert et al., 2008).

How does this "rigor problem" play out in public affairs? The lack of methodological reflection on case studies in public affairs poses an issue in terms of the explanatory power and potential for theory building of public affairs case studies. Their exploratory and illustrative nature are suitable for critical early phase research (Yin, 2013; Hillman, 2001), but in a maturing field (Moss & Tonge, 2009), theory generation is on the agenda.

As the discourse in management studies shows, without rigor, we cannot claim relevance of the research findings (Scandura & Williams, 2000, p. 1263). With regard to rigor in case studies, we find that (particularly single) case studies lack rigor (Barzelay, 1993). Additionally, Gibbert et al. (2008, p. 1465) find two reasons why a lack of rigor is "problematic:" As case studies are particularly popular at early stages of theory development, research causes "ripple effects throughout later stages." Second, case studies are often conducted in collaboration with practitioners and thus contribute to practical knowledge, making case studies particularly "relevant" practically (Amabile et al., 2001; Gibbert et al., 2008). Taken together, lacking rigor of case studies is therefore harmful both in terms of theory development as well as for practically informing decision makers in industry and public policy.

To propose a framework for researchers conducting public affairs case studies as well as for reviewers receiving such work, we build on the following positivistic approach from an existing study on case study rigor in management studies (Gibbert et al., 2008, see Table 1). Their conceptualization of rigor is a self-consciously positivist one[1] involving the usual criteria for assessing the rigor of empirical research findings, namely, construct validity, internal and external validity, and reliability (see below). We adapted these parameters to public affairs. In particular, we pay heed to the reality of public affairs, where the institutional context is diverse and at the same time decisive for analysis. Therefore, we expand the research framework by a set of variables specific to public affairs: We add enrichment for internal validity, contextuality and comparability for external validity, interdisciplinarity for construct validity, and hypertext-searchable databases for reliability (see Table 1).

2.1 | Internal validity

Internal validity or logical validity refers to the internal consistency of the research design. In internal validity, we test if the researchers made use of a theory-derived research framework, if they provide an explanatory research design, preferably also visualized with a graph or model, and if the researcher applied well motivated theoretical sampling. These criteria have been applied in other studies as well and go back to Yin (2013, p. 105), who addresses internal validity for the data gathering and analysis phase. To increase internal validity of public affairs case studies, we propose enrichment.

Enrichment: Public affairs practice is at its core about managing relationships (Fleisher, 1994) that are composed of various sequences of interpersonal, interorganizational, and organization-public communication (Ledingham, 2006). Actors in public affairs such as lobbyists have a strategic goal they try to pursue through communication (Lock & Seele, 2017b). Thus, it is only consistent to study public affairs cases also based on theoretical findings and perspectives from strategic communication research, or, more broadly, communication science, because public affairs relies on effective communication (Harris & Fleisher, 2017). Well-established theoretical perspectives such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), media agenda-setting (Rogers, Dearing, & Bregman, 1993), news values theory (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), or framing theory (Entman, 1993) not only offer

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[1]As there are different models to examine case studies, we here adopt a positivist model in line with Yin (2013), because it is the most prominent way of conducting case study research. This does not disdain any other nonpositivist approaches of case study research and may be seen as broadening our understanding of case study research also in the context of public affairs.

valuable theoretical outsets for designing a case study but also deliver advanced and established techniques for data analysis.

2.2 | Construct validity

Construct validity refers to the triangulation of theory and data. Construct validity is reached if different sources of data such as archival data, interview data, or participatory data are triangulated (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Yin, 2013). Construct validity refers not only to the data gathering but also to the review of data by peers and by key informants of the conducted case study. Finally, for a rigorous case study with regard to construct validity, the researchers need to indicate the data collection circumstances, explain changes in data collection procedures, and provide an explanation of the data analysis in detail. Strengthening construct validity, we suggest interdisciplinarity as another criterion.

Interdisciplinarity: To ensure objectivity in the interpretation of the data and analyses, a public affairs case study benefits from researchers with different perspectives and backgrounds. Thus, when designing a case study, public affairs researchers should possibly include in their team, or, if not feasible, seek advice from, a researcher not familiar with this specific case and research field, for instance, from neighboring disciplines such as management studies or political science.

2.3 | External validity

External validity asks whether phenomena can be transferred to other fields, are thus generalizable and allow for more wide-ranging findings (Brigley, 1995; Flyvbjerg, 2006). We are in line with Gibbert et al. (2008, p. 1468) when distinguishing between statistical and analytical generalization: "Analytical generalization is a process separate from statistical generalization in that it refers to the generalization from empirical observations to theory, rather than a population." To analyze external validity in public affairs case studies it is suggested to aim for cross-case analyses to arrive at generalization. Thus, cross-cultural or cross-institutional comparative research facilitates external validity. Second, authors should provide in-depth information on the case study's context, that is, political system, main institutions, and media system, to understand the circumstances of the case(s) and to render them apt for generalizations also with regard to the context.

To improve external validity, we add contextuality and comparability to the framework.

Contextuality: Given the peculiarities of public affairs research, we propose to incorporate some common contextual factors into every public affairs case study that can be compared across different institutional settings and political systems. First, a public affairs case study should draw on data from different actors that are identifiable in most political systems even if they might go under slightly different labels, such as nongovernmental organizations, mainstream quality and broadsheet news media, and political party officials such as party secretaries, courts, and public administration organizations such as tax authorities. Second, materials such as press releases, laws, directives, press articles, public statements, and announcements that are issued by these actors in the public policy arena context need to be included. Third, we propose to cover multiple communication channels, such as social media, print or online news media, television, radio, and posters to cover the widest spectrum of the public debate surrounding a case.

Comparability: Furthermore, although case studies are not meant to lead to generalizations directly (Yin, 2013), a suggestion of how the particular case offers structural analogies potentially to be found in different contexts should be provided. Analogies are key parts of theoretical explanations and arguments and can be used to illustrate a core argument in relation to another context (Ketokivi, Mantere, & Cornelissen, 2017), which makes this technique highly suitable for the study of public affairs.

2.4 | Reliability

Reliability refers to the measures undertaken to provide information about the trustworthiness and absence of random error of the case study research. This trust can be achieved by creating "transparency and replication" (Gibbert et al., 2008, p. 1468; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Notably, reliability and validity are not independent. In fact, reliability constitutes a precondition for validity (e.g., Cook & Campbell, 1979; Yin, 2013). "Reliability" denotes an absence of random error. This, at least in theory, would enable subsequent researchers to arrive at the same insights if they conducted the study along the same steps again (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Without reliability, there can be no validity: a measurement instrument can reliably give invalid measurements (e.g., a digital clock may always be 5 min fast, resulting in a reliable but invalid measurement), but not the other way round (we are never quite sure if the time given by an unreliable clock is valid). Due to its fundamental position in ensuring rigor, replication is commonly accepted as a cornerstone of science, in particular natural science (e.g., Madden, Easley, & Dunn, 1995; Tsang & Kwan, 1999). This preoccupation with consistency across measurements is also echoed by more interpretivist authors. For instance, Silverman defines reliability as "the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or different occasions" (Silverman, 2005, p. 210).

Criteria that have been identified to signal reliability and exclude random error (Gibbert et al., 2008) are the production of a case study protocol and the creation of a case study database for research transparency. Further, revealing the actual names of organizations in the case study such as political parties, institutions, or companies is vital to understand the context properly. Additionally, reliability could be increased if these measures were made accessible via a link or a footnote stating that the protocol can be obtained from the corresponding author.

For increased reliability, we suggest incorporating the case study database in *data repositories* that allow for *hypertext search* to facilitate the search for single data entries. To do so, files in the case study database need to be tagged with appropriate keywords and the original date. Thereby, the search in large amounts and for different types of data and allows to find the "needle in the haystack." Furthermore, a guideline for access to the database that regulates who can access the data under which conditions facilitates reuse of primary data by other researchers and fosters research transparency for editors and reviewers.

TABLE 1 Framework for an investigation of the methodological rigor of public affairs case studies

Internal validity	Construct validity	External validity	Reliability
Research framework derived from literature	*Data triangulation* • Archival data • Interview data • Participatory observation derived data • Direct observation derived data	*Cross case analysis* *Details on case study context*	*Case study protocol* *Case study database*
Explanatory research design	*Data review* • Review of transcripts and draft by peers • Review of transcripts and draft by key informants		*Companies mentioned by own name*
Theoretical sampling, well-motivated	*Clear chain of evidence...* • Indication of data collection circumstances • Explanation of changes in data collection procedures • Explanation of data analysis		
Criteria specific to public affairs			
Enrichment: Including communication perspectives	*Interdisciplinarity:* Review analyses by researcher from different context	*Contextuality:* Including contextual factors common and to most political systems: • Actors • Materials • Channels *Comparability:* Offer structural analogies	*Hypertext-searchable data repositories* Tag data points with keywords and include case study database in hypertext-searchable data repository. Guideline for data access

2.5 | A framework for designing and reporting public affairs case studies

To tackle the specific challenges for comparative qualitative public affairs research, we propose an extended framework for the design and reporting of qualitative case studies in public affairs (see Table 1). The four categories for ensuring rigor include general rigor criteria as well as public affairs-specific criteria to allow for comparisons across contexts, to account for the interdisciplinary nature of the researchers and the data studied, and to add insights from a core discipline. Table 1 provides an overview of the framework proposed by Gibbert and Ruigrok (2010) combined with our public affairs-specific criteria.

3 | CONCLUSIONS

As public affairs practice continues to advance in light of stakeholder engagement, increased public scrutiny in digital environments, and the regaining strength of states as regulators (Harris & Fleisher, 2017), so is the academic field in need of theories to describe and understand these phenomena. With the lack of a grand theory (Schuler, 2001), public affairs welcomes research from a wide variety of theoretical angles, and methodologically draws from different social science disciplines, thus having not (yet) reached maturation. To help advance theory building in this rich tradition, we propose a framework

for designing, reporting, and reviewing empirical case studies in public affairs. Against the habit of using cases as mere illustrations of an argument or as setting the context for testing a theory, we suggest using rigorous qualitative case studies as witnessed in business management as a method for generating theory to make sense of the continuously changing and evolving public affairs practice.

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