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BETTER STORIES, NOT BETTER CONSTRUCTS, TO GENERATE BETTER THEORY: A REJOINDER TO EISENHARDT

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In the October 1989 issue of *Academy of Management Review*, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt presented an approach to building theory using case studies, which summarized a hybrid form of case research that has received increased attention in recent years (Eisenhardt, 1989). For us this approach is paradoxical because although its purported purpose is theory generation, it includes many of the attributes of hypothesis-testing research (e.g., sampling, controls). Indeed, we believe its very strengths mask some important weaknesses. For example, it delivers almost ready-to-test hypotheses based on rich qualitative insights about the cases, but it focuses so much on the constructs developed and their measurability that we often miss the context, the rich background of each case. As a result, we fear that this form of case research will not create an exemplar, that is, a story against which researchers can compare their experiences and gain rich theoretical insights.

The approach outlined by Eisenhardt is a response to a decade of strong and repeated calls for more qualitative, contextual, and interesting research (e.g., Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Evered & Louis, 1981; Morgan, Frost, & Pondy, 1983; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985; Sanday, 1979; Schein, 1988; Smircich, 1983; Van Maanen, 1979a, 1988). What worries us is that this approach is not likely to evoke as much new and better theoretical insights as have the "classic" case studies. Even though this approach is not wrong, it is limited in important ways. If this hybrid approach becomes the standard, the theoretical progress of the field of management may suffer.

We have chosen to frame our concerns by offering a brief comparison between this approach and classic case studies (see our somewhat arbitrary list of classic studies in the following section). We believe that Eisenhardt's approach neglects some of the strengths of the classic case study method. Our comparisons highlight what is missed if Eisenhardt's suggestions are followed exclusively and encourage the kind of approach to research that has made the classic case studies useful in theory generation. We have organized our comparison of the methods into three critical areas: (a) the in-depth study of a single case (context) versus the study of multiple cases (contexts), (b) deep versus surface description, and (c) the telling of good stories versus the creating of good constructs.

Case(s) Versus Case Study Research

Calling Eisenhardt's method "case study" research is something of a misnomer; "cases study" research seems to describe more accurately what she is advocating. Her approach to case study research argues for the use of more than a single case. She concludes that "between 4 and 10 cases usually works well. With fewer than 4 cases, it is often difficult to generate theory with much complexity, and its empirical grounding is likely to be unconvincing, unless the case has several mini-cases within it" (1989: 545).

Such a view is clearly at odds with what most social scientists would consider classic case studies in the field. For example, some of the more important studies that have advanced the knowledge of organizations and social systems might include Selznick (1949 1 case); Blau (1955 2 cases); Becker, Geer, Strauss, and Hughes (1961 1 case); Dalton (1959 4 cases, although only 1 case, the Milo plant, was studied in depth); Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956 1 case); Crozier (1964 2 cases); Whyte (1943 1 case); Michels (1949 1 case); Gouldner (1954 1 case); and Kanter (1977 1 case). Indeed, these classic studies greatly advanced the theorizing of social scientists at the time they were published and continue to have an impact on the field of management even today. Thus, in our opinion, to assume that a single case cannot be a useful unit of analysis for theory building ignores important exceptions.

Moreover, because Eisenhardt argues that the more cases a researcher studies, the better (within certain limits) for generating theory, she seems to lose the essence of case study research: the careful study of a single case that leads researchers to see new theoretical relationships and question old ones. We endorse the comparative method in developing theory and agree with Eisenhardt's view that using mini-cases is useful. But unlike Eisenhardt, who primarily argues for comparisons across organizational contexts, the classic case study researchers tend to focus on comparisons *within* the same organizational context. The most critical trade-off facing the researcher in this regard is between the deep understanding of a particular social setting and the benefits of comparative insights. Thus, the more contexts a researcher investigates, the less contextual insight he or she can communicate. The implications that this trade-off has for theory generation are considered in the following section.

Deep Case Studies Versus Surface Case Studies

Eisenhardt emphasizes the use of contrasting observations from multiple cases to create and highlight theoretical constructs. In so doing, she focuses attention on general constructs, not the context of the constructs and the role these constructs play in a particular setting. By contrast, in a classic case study:

The aim [of the researcher] is to get as close as possible to the world of managers [the focus of Dalton's study] and to interpret this world and its problems from the inside . . . we wish to de-

scribe both unique and typical experiences and events as bases for theory that is developed and related to other studies. (Dalton, 1959: 1–2)

This approach to case study research is true of those researchers who use an interpretive paradigm, as Dalton did, as well as those who have a more positivist orientation, for example, Blau (1955) and Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956). The ultimate goals are generally to provide a rich description of the social scene, to describe the context in which events occur, and to reveal what Light (1979) referred to as the *deep structure* of social behavior.

Theory that is born of such deep insights will be both more accurate and more appropriately tentative because the researcher must take into account the intricacies and qualifications of a particular context (Van Maanen, 1979b). Those who would attempt to use Eisenhardt's method are necessarily constrained by the number of cases that will be studied, and descriptions will be rather "thin," focusing on surface data rather than deeper social dynamics. Although such studies can provide certain flashes of insight and can raise important issues and questions, they tend to neglect the more tacit and less obvious aspects of the setting under investigation. They are more likely to provide a rather distorted picture, or no picture at all, of the underlying dynamics of the case.

For example, in Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988), one of the primary examples Eisenhardt uses to illustrate her approach, the authors pick examples from several cases to highlight the theoretical construct they are developing. We do not understand much of the context in each case that gives rise to "political behavior." The focus is on the construct, and examples have been chosen carefully to illustrate the point being made rather than to help understand the social setting. It is quite possible that "politics" would be different in each case. It is also possible that the particular decisions chosen for focus in each case (name changes, new products, whether to form a new alliance) were not all seen as strategic in the same way nor to the same extent in each organization. The lack of insight about context in each case comes in part from the definition of political behavior that is used in their study. Eisenhardt and Bourgeois note that the definition of *politics* used in the study focused only on activities such as behind-the-scenes coalition formation, off-line lobbying and co-optation attempts, withholding information, and controlling agendas. They argue that although this definition is narrower than some, it has advantages because it "captures the meaning of politics common in organizations," "makes no empirically unobservable assumptions about the intentions of actors," and "captures meaningful differences in strategic decision-making behavior across executive groups" (1988: 738).

How much deep structure have we seen if we look only at what is common about politics across organizations? Wouldn't the differences in how politics occur across organizations be potentially interesting and challenging to current conceptions? Indeed, how do we know what is common to organizations without in-depth studies to find out what politics is about in

different settings? And unless we understand something about intentions of actors, how can we understand the play of "interest" that most treatments of politics highlight?

Another reason for lack of understanding of context is the medium, that is, a journal article versus a book (the more common treatment for the classic cases we have cited). Certainly, we cannot expect as much insight about a particular case when 4 to 10 cases are considered in a journal-length article. However, the key issue is not page length, or the number of cases, or even the length of the researcher's stay in the field per se. The central issue is whether the researcher is able to understand and describe the context of the social dynamics of the scene in question to such a degree as to make the context intelligible to the reader and to generate theory in relationship to that context.

Dalton's (1959) rigorous study provides us with an example of a researcher who has developed an understanding of the deep structure of a single case. Dalton spent over one year in the Milo plant. During that time he developed 81 "intimates": individuals with whom he had developed a personal relationship and from whom he could glean information on a more-or-less regular basis. In addition, he "formally or informally" interviewed 113 other employees. He participated in the activities of the organization as a member (most employees did not know he was a researcher, which does create ethical concerns) and developed extensive work diaries to record common events. Moreover, he gained access to key personnel and administrative records to corroborate the interview data. He also participated in the social activities of the community where the plant was located in order to "develop closer relations with the managers during their periods of relaxation" (Dalton, 1959: 281). Given the depth of Dalton's understanding of behavior in the Milo plant, it is no wonder that much of the research that followed concerning informal power relations, organizational cliques, line-staff relationships, and the management of ambiguity was built on the insights that emerged from the case study. Even though Dalton, to a large degree, "went native" to gather his data, other case study researchers that we have cited did not need to take this approach to gather data and build theory. They did, however, get as close as possible to the phenomena they were investigating.

Although it is difficult to determine how deep a researcher must go to generate good theory, the classic case study researchers certainly went deeper into the dynamics of a single case than Eisenhardt advocates. The emphasis of Eisenhardt's approach favors most strongly the development of clear constructs and testable propositions. The emphasis of the classic case study approach is to highlight a construct by showing its operation in an ongoing social context. The result is that the classic case study becomes a much more coherent, credible, and memorable story. And we argue that good storytelling is what makes the most difference in the generative capacity of the classic studies we cite.

Telling Good Stories Versus Creating Good Constructs

Eisenhardt notes that many of the researchers who have used her method have only been able to claim *modest* advancements of theory. This is in contrast to what are often seen as paradigm-challenging or paradigm-creating theoretical advancements that follow the efforts of traditional case study researchers. One reason for this discrepancy is the tendency, already noted, in Eisenhardt's approach to start with a clear research focus, even with constructs and measurement instruments. Such an approach leads the case researcher to confirm, disconfirm, or build upon existing theories. Although the more traditional case study researchers did not begin with a *tabula rasa*, they tended to let their analyses emerge over time. Perhaps many of them spent more time in the field, which allowed for theoretical emergence. However, we believe the more important difference is that they chose to focus on contexts and on describing the phenomena and the contexts richly.

We argue that the classic case study approach has been extremely powerful because these authors have described general phenomena so well that others have little difficulty seeing the same phenomena in their own experience and research. We return to the classics because they are good stories, not because they are merely clear statements of a construct. Indeed, the very clarity of the constructs stems from the story that supports and demonstrates them. For example, it is the demonstration of informal status in the bowling matches and the personal feelings described by Whyte (1943) as much as the theoretical statement of informal status that creates the impact. It is the drama of showing the complex social dynamics necessary to violate the iron law of oligarchy in the International Typesetters Union that makes the law seem even more powerful (Lipset et al., 1956). The fact that we also get a description of what organizational democracy might look like makes this study a good story with the theory as plot. It is the concrete demonstration of how and why the rules of the gypsum plant create minimum standards contrary to the intentions of management as much as theoretical clarity that makes Gouldner's (1954) discussion of the consequences of bureaucracy compelling. More than once we have had an "aha" experience when reading such studies because the rich descriptions have unveiled the dynamics of the phenomena and have helped us identify similar dynamics in our own research or in our daily lives.

In this regard, such descriptions are like exemplars of a new paradigm in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1970). They act as clear examples of new relationships, new orientations, or new phenomena that current theory and theoretical perspectives have not captured. As Martin and Powers (1983) demonstrated experimentally, stories are often more persuasive and memorable than statistical demonstrations of ideas and claims. The classics we cite are, in every case, good stories more than testable theory. We can experience vicariously the relationships and ideas presented. We therefore

remember them longer and understand them more complexly than had they been presented as a thin description of a construct or as a statistical table.

Summary Comments

We nevertheless applaud the efforts of Eisenhardt and those whom she cites as examples of an emerging form of "case(s) study" research. Their work is highly readable (frequent examples, quotations). They have contributed some very interesting new twists to current literature, and they have been able to do so through journal articles, which is much more difficult to do because of the page constraint. Our goal has not been to discourage such efforts but rather to point out what researchers miss if they overlook the advantages of the classic case study.

We believe that the more traditional case studies have helped to change substantially our views of organizations. It isn't that the classic studies can't be improved upon. In some cases, we could ask for more personal disclosure of the authors' biases and involvement with a particular setting. We might also ask for even more of the context from which the case study was derived. And of course, studying a single case in detail doesn't guarantee that rich theoretical insights will be the harvest. Of course, using multiple cases won't guarantee insight either. However, we hope that many scholars will continue to try to tell good stories that have theoretical import. If researchers apply the paradigm of hypothesis testing to case study work without the goal of telling good stories, they are likely to miss both the caliber and the quantity of theory we have seen result from classic storytelling through case studies of the past.

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