A serialisation approach to a research study

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Introduction

This development paper provides the start of a case study of the social construction of knowledge that has as its focus a parallel study about the social construction of expertise of chefs. In providing an account from the start of the research, we engage in an experiment with a real-time serialisation approach to research, in contrast to the more common provision of a post hoc narrative in published research. Our account of our experiment is suitable at a conference that has a theme addressed to innovation. Case studies are common place in the management disciplines. Unfortunately, they are often presented as a highly prescriptive linear process. Such accounts – see, for example, Yin (2018) – embody implicit assumptions about how the researcher may exercise control at different stages of the research process when seeking to execute a pre-defined research strategy to generate analytical generalizations. Other approaches have always been known, such as detailed ethnographical case studies conducted in cognate disciplines such as anthropology. These approaches may simply involve the researcher going into the field to discover what is there. As Pletsch (1981, p. 580) has said "anthropology is the idiographic science par excellence". In the management literature, awareness of idiographic research has been used in a recent systematic methodological challenge to the idea that mechanical execution of a preconceived linear plan provides the only possible way of conducting case studies. Describing such approaches as orthodox, Lee and Saunders (2017; 2019) utilise Buchannan's (2012) use of the term emergent to describe emergent case studies that entail a series of strategic choices made in the course of the research project, shaped by initial opportunities and access for conducting research, difficulties and problems encountered during the research process and factors extraneous to the research affecting the researchers. Others (e.g., Kuppuru, Milne and Tilt, 2019; Lee and Carlisle, 2020; Scobie, Milne and Love, *forthcoming*) now acknowledge that their published case studies are emergent. While such retrospective accounts may report accurately what people did, they may fail to recount why researchers changed direction in their research especially as the idea of piloting provides a quasi-scientific cloak to excuse such absence.

A unique contribution of this development paper is to document an episode at the commencement of the serialisation of an emergent case study as it unfolds, by reporting the initial stages of our investigation into the social construction of expertise of chefs. This exercise has the potential to provide important insights into how academic knowledge is constructed. To elaborate on both the research practice of composing this serialisation of an emergent case and the details of the research that we are conducting, we organize the remainder of this discussion as follows. The next section highlights the different notions of sequencing in orthodox and emergent case studies and it extends the concept of emergent to explain our objective in understanding the social

construction of knowledge. The following section provides elaboration of our research project exploring the social construction of chef's expertise and the prospective emergent issues affecting subsequent steps in our substantive study and episodes in our serialisation of the social construction of knowledge. We conclude by articulating what we will seek to achieve before the conference and, what we hope to get from participation in the conference.

Orthodox and emergent cases

Figure 1 provides a representation of Yin's (2018) sequencing of stages in case studies. After literature has been reviewed and research questions generated, the original plan provides the clear starting point of a process that has a clear end point. Although Yin's account provides some suggestions of iterations between stages of prepare, collect and analyse data, then back to design, these may be simple modifications required because of errors in the original plan. There is, thus, an underlying linear process. Significantly, knowledge of method precedes knowledge of the substantive research topic, so as long as literature is used to articulate research questions to fill gaps in our understanding, our knowledge of methods will make it possible to design research at the outset, to identify from where evidence will be collected, the type of evidence required and how it will be analysed, to generate and write up findings to answer the research questions.

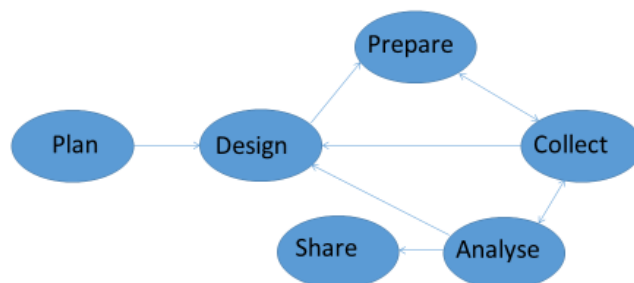Figure 1: Yin's variant of an orthodox approach to case studies.

Figure 2 shows the emergent approach articulated by Lee and Saunders (2017). The finishing point when researchers report their findings remains, but there is no predetermined starting point. While not ruling out the possibility that the research starts with planning after a

Figure 2: An emergent approach to case studies
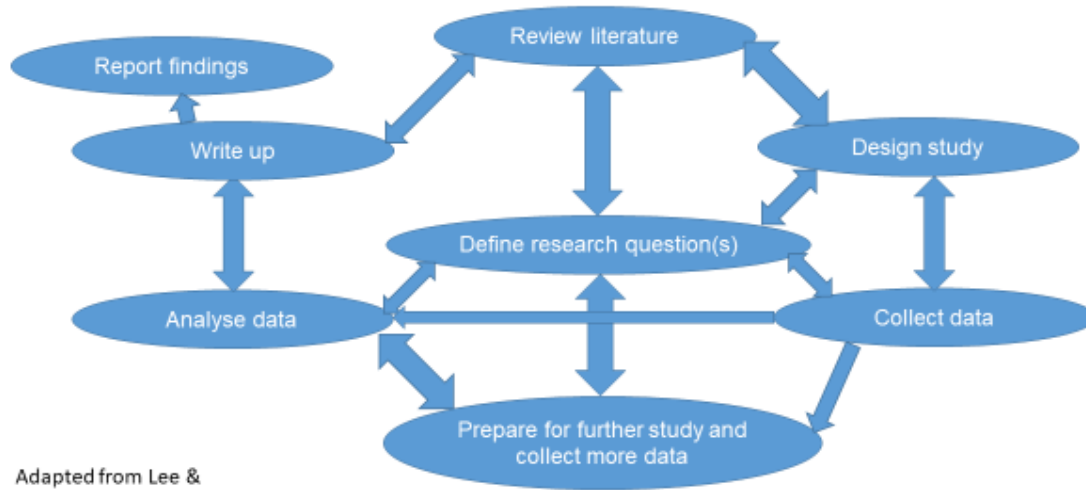
Adapted from Lee & Saunders (2017, p. 7).

literature review, other possibilities include researchers starting with a research question because they have either been troubled by an issue from their earlier research, or they have noticed an event through a news story and wish to explain it. Alternatively, a research project could start with collection of empirical evidence because an organization is considering implementing a new policy and the academics are invited to act as "critical friends" in evaluating the implementation of the policy. Wherever the study starts, it could proceed through different stages a number of times as the researchers progressively refine their research question after reviewing new literature, discover more appropriate techniques for collecting evidence, collect additional evidence and conduct some interim analysis. Such stages are not produced by errors, or violations of proper research practices. Instead, they are a product of an inability to always define exactly what needs to be known and what are the essential elements of the phenomenon being investigated, coupled with an intellectual curiosity and resolve to address those issues properly.

Lee and Saunders may not have extended the idea of emergent sufficiently. Case studies are often seen as suitable for use when the phenomenon under investigation cannot be separated easily from its context. A logical corollary is that the method used to generate the evidence cannot be separated from the context. If understanding of the phenomenon and the context proceeds through different stages several times as the researcher progressively refines the research questions and collects more evidence as suggested by Lee and Saunders' emergent approach, it would be wrong to assume that the exact methods and how they are operationalised may be stated before the start of a study. The method has to be adapted to the context and operationalised in that setting. Unlike in orthodox case studies, knowledge of the method may accompany development of knowledge of the substantive topic. This is highlighted by reflections on the early stages of the emergent case that we describe next.

The research project and the emergent issues

The plan for the research that provides the empirical context for this discussion was formulated in a two-day meeting between the two authors on November 19th-20th, 2019. We had not conducted a literature review, although during that meeting, we identified relevant work which might inform our research. We started with one broad research question of how was the concept of excellence socially constructed in its application to Michelin-starred restaurants? At our meeting, we used our broad research question to conceive a provisional design of the study. This entailed the steps of: (i) Seeking to obtain Michelin Guides for one or more countries – of the UK, Germany and Switzerland – over the same ten-year period; (ii) Plotting out the trajectory of restaurants in terms of stars awarded over that period; (iii) Selecting a number of restaurants in one country that had gained, retained or lost stars over that period and whose pattern was comparable with restaurants in another country which we would select for internationally comparative case studies; (iv) Compose definitions of excellence from the criteria used in the Michelin star rating, linking those definitions to different numbers of stars and mapping out any changes over the time period that we studied. At this stage, we also planned to interview someone at Michelin for details about their view of how the criteria are applied; (v) Collect evidence of the cases identified in (iii) above and compose those cases through collection of Michelin and other fine dining guides' descriptions of the restaurants, each restaurant's own advertisements, publicity, menu cards from across the period if still available, reviews and letters in newspapers and other media, interviews with assessors and interviews with each restaurant's personnel including managers, head chefs and other kitchen and front-of-house personnel.

We postponed consideration of how we might analyse the evidence because we had no clear idea of what evidence we might generate. We did, however, build in a timeline for progress – including preparation of this methods paper – to provide a source of discipline and reflection at critical junctures. Thus, although we had a provisional plan, we anticipated that we would change, adapt and modify it as we learned not simply about the substantive focus of the social construction of chef's expertise, but also about the most appropriate way of generating evidence about that substantive focus. We were aware of a range of issues in our plan that could affect our ability to generate evidence. We knew that we were not certain whether there was an archive of Michelin Star guides anywhere, or whether we would have to limit the time range for our study, which would affect the logic for selecting cases to research and by corollary, the cases that we would select. We anticipated that the lack of knowledge about which cases we could investigate would affect the research participants that we might interview. We also knew that we were not in a position to define the detail of our interview schedule, or assess whether a range of other helpful information would be available. Every one of our initial intentions had corresponding absences of guarantees of what we could achieve and thus might require our reconsideration of our methods subsequently as our research progressed. Given the early stages of our research, we can only report here on how the initial issues have been resolved. In December 2019, we received lists of starred restaurants from Michelin for a number of years within our designated ten-year period for Britain, Germany and Switzerland. We have agreed a date by which we will each have plotted out the trajectory of the different restaurants in one country to enable us to make our initial selection of restaurants for our comparative case studies.

Conclusion

Having outlined how Lee and Saunders' (2017) idea of emergent case studies challenges the underlying preconceived linear sequencing of stages in orthodox cases studies, this development paper has extended Lee and Saunders' account by highlighting that, if a study starts at different

stages and knowledge is cumulative through different cycles of those stages, choices of methods and ways of their operationalisation will develop in tandem with – rather than before –collection of evidence. This development paper's unique contribution is to operationalize – publicly – an implication of emergent case studies by documenting initial episodes in a serialisation of how a research project is being conducted as a stage in developing understanding around the social construction of knowledge. We hope that by the time of the conference, we will have progressed further in our research study, so that we can report any problems encountered by then and how we responded with new actions to realise our goals. We hope that our participation in the Research Methodology track at the conference will provide useful feedback on the merits of composing a serialisation of a current emergent case study to add to our understanding of the social construction of knowledge. We anticipate that some might argue that we are simply documenting publicly what researchers record privately in field notes. That claim may have some validity, although researchers' interpretations of their own notes may alter over time while recording them systematically in a paper for public scrutiny reduces the likelihood of that and our open record is novel *per se*. The BAM Research Methodology track – with its capacity for development papers – provides an ideal forum to develop this distinctive simultaneous serialisation approach to describing research.

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