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# Learning by doing: Designing case study research for the exploration of strategy formation in hubs

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Territorial Hubs, Strategy Formation, Case Studies, Grounded Theory, Set Theoretic Approach

## Abstract

This contribution sets out to develop a valid research design which accommodates the development of a theory in practice (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) about the process of strategy development in evolving territorial forms of organising called hubs. Hubs are thick, polymorph and polycentric networks driven by practitioners, shaped around multiple, wicked and interlinked problems, shared interests, and shared principles (Kamm, Faber, & Jonker, 2016). Throughout Europe we observe an increasing involvement of a broad range of constituents including civilians in these emerging networking forms of organizing, enabling multiple value creation in a cooperative manner while aiming for sustainable transitions on a regional scale.

Constituents invest in hubs through various means such as time, energy, money, and other resources that contribute to addressing collaborative solutions for multi-faceted, 'wicked' problems (Faber & Jonker, 2015; Weber & Khademian, 2008). They commonly benefit from the results generated by processes of multiple, collective, and shared value creation (Faber & Jonker, 2015). Our objective is to develop a valid methodological framework which accommodates the building of a general explanation (Yin, 2009) about the process of strategy development in hubs. It is argued that multiple longitudinal, retrospective case studies are obligatory in order to understand how the process of crafting a strategy emerges in individual hubs. We will test and adjust our methodological framework by conducting three case studies in the spring of 2017. Preliminary findings on both the methodological framework and the results of the case studies will be presented.

Constituents in hubs engage intentionally and implicitly in a process of shaping a strategy in order to realize diverse goals via diverse means. How this process of strategy formation takes place in hubs and under which conditions remains an open question. Hubs are a new and recent (<10 years) phenomenon that has not been researched previously. Our challenge is to accommodate a valid case study research, which enables the exploration of three interrelated and simultaneous developments that can be observed in emerging hubs: i). organisational development, ii). strategy development, and iii). development of multiple value creating goals and activities. Gaining substantial (Fiss, 2011) context-related (Flyvbjerg, 2006) knowledge about the evolvement of these three developments across various hubs is an important step in our research. To investigate this, a case study approach that accommodates the exploration of the strategizing process in European hubs is being developed. The methodological design of the case studies is grounded in an epistemological framework that deliberately combines two different approaches by starting with an interpretive approach (Avenier & Thomas, 2015) of the case studies and a configurative approach (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012) of the analysis of the cases, aiming to unravel causal relations between organisational, strategic and value creating processes in hubs, and providing foundations for a grounded theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) based on the case studies. This design is chosen to enable the combination of within-case knowledge about hubs as social constructs (Avenier & Thomas, 2015) with cross-case comparison by transforming cases into configurations of conditions for the occurrence (Berg-Schlosser, De Meur, Rihoux, & Ragin, 2009) of strategizing and value creating processes.

Hubs can be recognized by seven general properties (Faber & Jonker, 2015, Kamm et al., 2016). These are: (i). Operating in a local or regional setting; (ii). addressing wicked problems; (iii). leading to a broad configuration of constituents; (iv). engaging in multiple value creating activities which facilitate the cooperative crossover between the social and the economic domain; (v). open, dynamic, often unconventional, organizational structure in which constituents participate on the basis of equality; (vi). issue related approach; (vii). leading to a transition over time. Based on these properties an information oriented selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of cases (N = 6) will be established in order to enable longitudinal case studies of hubs that furthermore (i). have an addressable organizational level, (ii). have information available about their choice directing, decision making, and strategy developing activities, and (iii). are involved in multiple value creating projects. Acknowledging the possible significance of different circumstances under which hubs form, the research focuses on diverse (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) cases which encompass maximum variation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). We aim to do so by selecting hubs that are (i) initiated by different actors (e.g. entrepreneurs, governmental bodies, and civil society initiatives), (ii) have different organisational structures (e.g. coop, foundation, association), and (iii) are located in different European countries.

A methodological framework is being developed for the collection and analysis of data from the selected cases, starting with a historical process reconstruction (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998). It will be based on multiple sources including but not limited to notes, policy documents, newsletters and social media. Based on content analysis a historical reconstruction of the development of each hub will be constructed and key participants will be selected for group meetings per hub. During these group meetings key participants of the hub will be invited to discuss the historical reconstruction and to signal and explicate critical (i.e. important organizational, strategic and value creating) events in the development of the hub. Interviews (semi structured and open) will subsequently be conducted with selected respondents who have been identified as being involved with goal setting and decision-making processes related to the identified critical events. In order to enable the determination of causal relations between organizational, strategic and value creating processes related to critical events in hubs a set theoretic approach (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012) will be applied for data analysis based on the information gathered during group sessions and interviews. During the spring and early summer of 2017 we will conduct three consecutive case studies in the Netherlands to test and adjust our methodological framework.

Information from the Dutch cases and further case studies in other European countries will eventually lead to a framework for theory building on the strategizing process in hubs based on comparative case studies and set theoretic data interpretation. This framework will ultimately be used for the development of a model of the strategizing process(es) in hubs which will be elaborated, tested, and analysed through process simulation.

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