The Archaeology of Business Networks: The Use of Archival Records in Case Study Research

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Abstract

The case study tradition in IMP relies almost exclusively on in-depth interviews as the main source of data. This paper discusses the use of another strategy: archival research. It examines the contribution which archival sources can make to case studies of business networks, and outlines the process of collecting archival data.

Introduction

The use of qualitative case studies is a well-established approach in the IMP tradition. Case studies have been successfully applied to develop new theories in a wide range of areas: marketing (industrial purchasing, distribution channels, product development, project marketing), strategic management, internationalisation and multinational management. The same diversity has not, however, been seen in methodological approaches to case studies, since the majority of research relies on interviews as the main source of data. This is despite the fact that the most popular guide to case study research, Yin (1984), recommends the use of multiple sources of evidence. Yin identifies five possible sources apart from interviews: documentation, archival records, direct observation, participant-observation and physical artifacts. This paper discusses the use of one of these additional sources of evidence identified by Yin: archival records. It argues that the use of multiple research strategies has the potential to improve the 'trustworthiness' of qualitative data, as well as to provide new insights into the development of interfirm relationships.

A wide variety of archival sources is relevant to network analysis: personal records of key individuals; the documentation of private companies; and the archives of industry associations, governments and other 'non-business' organisations which often form part of an industrial network. In a survey on research strategies for business networks, Easton (1995) concludes that archival studies of networks 'not only are possible, but would also need to form an element of most research of this kind.' (p. 465; see also Möller 1993) The first section of this paper examines the contribution which archival sources can make to case studies of business networks; while the second outlines the process of collecting archival data. The discussion draws on the experience of a current project to elaborate on these issues and provide practical illustrations of the process of managing archival research. This project, a longitudinal study of the relationships maintained by a focal company over a thirty-year period, has involved interviews with key participants in an industrial network, as well as the extensive use of archives in five collections located in both Australia and the UK. The research strategy used therefore

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required familiarisation with a range of archival settings, as well as a comparison between data gathered through interviews and archives.

Why archival research?

Archives have been defined as ‘documents made or received and accumulated by a person or organisation in the course of the conduct of affairs and preserved because of their continuing value.’ (Ellis 1993, p. 2) The archives of a business potentially include a wide range of documents generated for various purposes by different individuals, departments and levels of the organisation. The types of archival documentation commonly used by business researchers include board minutes and papers; annual general meeting minutes; chairmen’s statements and public speeches; memos, briefing and policy papers; correspondence files; appointment diaries and personal files, staff records; financial statements; copies of dealer agreements and licences; order forms and invoices (Armstrong & Jones 1987; Cole n.d.). Archival research is most commonly used in connection with business and economic history rather than disciplines such as marketing, which are much more focused on contemporary problems and development. Yet archival material, although historical in content, need not be used exclusively for research into historical topics, or in other words, ‘the study of the past qua past’ (Easton 1995, p. 481). As Layder (1993) argues, it also has a place in ‘contemporary, theory-generating research’ (p. 172). It can be argued that the role which archival data may play in such contemporary-oriented research is threefold (see figure 1): 1.) archival data can be used to add ‘empirical depth’ to a project by generating new sorts of data and enabling verification of theoretical explanations based on other data sources; 2.) archival data is particularly suited to generating developmental explanations, in other words, explaining processes of change and evolution; 3.) archival data can be used to challenge existing theories and build new theoretical models. Each of these uses for archival research will be examined in turn.

![Figure 1: Role of archival research](image)

**a) data verification**

Although tests of reliability, validity and objectivity may not be easily transferred to qualitative data, data verification (or determining ‘trustworthiness’, to use a term coined by Guba & Lincoln 1985) is no less feasible than in quantitative analysis. Perhaps the most widely recommended method of data verification is that of triangulation, ‘the act...
of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point (Marshall & Rossman 1989). In a detailed discussion, Denzin (1989) categorises triangulation strategies into four basic types: data triangulation, or comparison across data sources; investigation triangulation, the use of multiple researchers; theoretical triangulation, the evaluation of different theoretical explanations for the same data set; and methodological triangulation, the use of different research strategies. Using archival sources alongside interview data is an example of this fourth type of triangulation. Combining different research strategies is a powerful form of triangulation because, as Denzin (1989) outlines, 'the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another; and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each while overcoming their unique deficiencies.' (p. 244)

As Denzin suggests, archival sources have the potential to compensate for some of the limitations of interview data. Archival sources generally have three advantages over interview data: they are more detailed, less obtrusive, and less contingent. To turn to the first characteristic, archival material, unlike interviews which rely heavily on faulty human memory, often provide a very precise record of the interfirm interactions being studied. The use of company documentation has in fact been recommended by Forster (1994) for precisely this reason: 'these data are often more comprehensive than the kind of material which a researcher . . . could obtain from either interviews or questionnaires.' (p. 148) At their best, archives can yield the 'thick description' which is so important to case study research. This does not mean that archival documents are necessarily more 'objective' or 'factual' than personal accounts, simply because they are in written form: such documents, no less than interviews, lend insight into the perspectives, assumptions, concerns, and activities of those who produce[d] them.’ (Bogdan & Taylor 1998) Instead, the data from archives are likely to yield a different view of networks. The researcher found in the course of her current project that while interviews were important in understanding the ‘atmosphere’ of business relationships, detailed knowledge of how and how often actors were in contact was more likely to be found in the relevant archival data. It was rare for the two data sets to contradict each other, but each provided insight into topics not raised by the other.

The second advantage is that archival research is unobtrusive and non-reactive, especially when compared with the social interaction which is a necessary part of conducting an interview. Guba and Lincoln (1988) list the numerous ways in which the interview situation may distort informants’ responses: the ‘guinea-pig’ effect (‘the sensitivity of people who know they are being measured’), the ‘role selection’ effect (‘determination of the respondent of what role he should play in responding to the measurement’) and the ‘response sets’ effect (tendencies to respond in particular ways) (p. 264-265). Perhaps the best known effect of interviews is their potential to produce what Layder (1993) has dubbed ‘ego protection’ (p. 193): the tendency of interviewees to report on their experiences in a way which rationalises their decisions and presents their actions in the most favourable light possible. The effects of the interview situation are not limited to the interviewee, however. Rather, the interview process also places powerful social pressures on the researcher, as one veteran of an interview-based study recounts. Reporting on her study of personnel in three London merchant banks, McDowell reflects that she tended to respond to informants differently: with some, she ‘seemed to fall into the classic male-female pattern’; with some women she was
'sisterly'; with younger men she was often 'superfast, well-informed, and definitely not to be patronised.' Her different responses, she suggests, had a bearing on the type of data she collected in each interview situation (McDowell 1998, p. 2138).

The third advantage of archival research is that it is often less contingent than an interview, which can be affected by time constraints and interruptions, the rapport between researcher and informant, the presence of others monitoring the discussion, the potential for misunderstandings to arise, and so on. In comparison, the examination of archival records is methodical and iterative: the researcher may, in the course of a project, return to a particular collection on several occasions to reassess the material. The data can be reviewed in a systematic way, and its quality is therefore less dependent on the circumstances under which it was collected. In the course of the current project, the researcher found that her readings of particular collections changed and deepened as the research progressed. Documents which were initially difficult to understand, seemingly peripheral to the research question at hand, or suggestive of a different theoretical interpretation could be re-evaluated later in the light of emerging themes. Data collection and theoretical development could therefore be very closely intertwined.

b) developmental explanation
For Easton (1995), the uniqueness of longitudinal research lies in the fact that it 'involves the collection of data that refer to different points in time.' (p. 480) Numerous scholars — both within the IMP and relationship marketing 'traditions' -- have called for more longitudinal studies of interfirm relationships. Thus in a study of stability and change in industrial networks, Gadde and Mattson (1987) conclude by emphasising 'the importance of taking a long-term perspective when analyzing stability in buyer-seller relationships.' (p. 39) Tracing the dynamics of a network over time is regarded as central to the IMP approach, yet longitudinal research is still relatively uncommon (for exceptions see Gadde & Mattsson 1984; Dubois et al 1990; Kinch 1987, 1993; Anderson 1994).

The distinctiveness of longitudinal research is that it 'permit[s] the observation, description and/or classification of... phenomena in such a way that process can be identified and empirically documented.' (Kimberly, quoted in Miller & Friesen 1982, pp. 1013-4; see also Dunkerley 1988) In other words, longitudinal research enables 'developmental explanation' (Mason 1996). Longitudinal research can in practice vary considerably: it can rely on statistical analysis, secondary sources, repeated studies, event-sampling, historical material from archives or oral history. (Easton 1995). Melin (1992) notes that longitudinal approaches also differ in their approach towards temporality. He contrasts research according to whether it is based on a time series of events, short episodes, longer epochs or biographic history. The advantage of archival research, according to this distinction, is that it allows for longitudinal research which covers longer epochs and biographic histories rather than shorter episodes. Although the use of archival research to study processes of change and development is virtually unknown in studies of business relationships, it has been successfully applied in the organisational field (for a review, see Bryman 1989). For example, in a well-known article proposing the concept of 'emergent strategies' Mintzberg and McHugh (1985) use archival research, supplemented by interviews, in order to trace the development of organisational strategies over time. Taking a similarly
processual view. Pettigrew (1985), in a well-known study, assesses strategic change in the British company ICI over a 23 year period by combining archival research with interview and observational data.

Processes of change may not even be visible except from a longitudinal perspective. This is hypothesised by Gadde and Mattsson (1987), who observe that because "[t]he changes in the supplier structure from year to year are fairly few", as a result studies of buyer-seller relationships are likely to 'overemphasize the stability over time if not undertaken in a longitudinal perspective.' (p. 39) In the course of the current project, the researcher found that contrasting perspectives on network development were gained from archival research and interviews. In the interviews informants emphasised the stability and cooperation which existed in the network; when disputes arose, they were characterised as mere storms in a teacup. Their strongest impression was one of continuity: year after year, they followed the same rituals and renewed old acquaintances. Yet the archives reveal a different set of processes. In fact, the network rules were under constant pressure from various network actors and although the network agreement endured for 23 years, it was only in its form and not in substance. The story here is not one of continuity but of relentless change to the conditions under which cooperation took place.

c) challenging existing theories
The potential of archival and other forms of historical research to provide data that challenge existing theories and develop new models is dramatically shown in Fullerton's (1988) study, which exposes what he characterises the 'myth' of the 'Production Era' in marketing theory. Fullerton's meticulous historical research shows that the common classification of marketing history into three periods — commonly known as the Production, Sales and Marketing Eras — is a misleading simplification, and he is able to propose an alternative model for understanding the development of marketing in the modern period. Fullerton's research into the 'Production Era myth' is therefore not just a contribution to marketing theory; it is also a piece of intellectual history, in that he traces how the academic community can come to take certain theoretical propositions for granted.

This does not mean that archival research is better suited to theoretical development than interview data. However, because archival research allows for an added level of analysis — the temporal dimension — it can yield new insights into such issues as antecedent conditions, the role of history, the evolution of network structure and processes, and relationship 'life cycles'. By taking a step back in time. archival research can highlight what may be taken for granted and go unquestioned in a particular time period. The current study, by examining the evolution of network relationships over a thirty-year period, was able to show the impact of longer term trends in the wider environment. For example, the focal company's reassessment of its role in an international organisation was contemporaneous with the influence of New Right philosophies. While the company had previously regarded intergovernmental agreements as vital in ensuring the stability of the world market, new views favouring market liberalisation caused management to repudiate the need for government intervention.


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Archival research is therefore a useful way of complementing, strengthening and even challenging data gained from interviews. The main similarities and differences between interview and archival methods are summarised in Table 1. However, as the next section will show, realising the potential of archival research is by no means easy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archival</th>
<th>Interview</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporal focus</td>
<td>longitudinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>unobtrusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingency</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iteration</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical generalisability</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1: comparison between interview and archival methods

Collecting and using archival data: problems and approaches

Collecting and using archives and company documentation can be discussed in terms of a five-stage process which is summarised in Table 1: discovery, access, assessment, sifting and cross-checking (this modifies the discussion in Hill 1993; see also Forster 1994). Each stage presents a different set of challenges, some of which can seriously delay and even jeopardise a project, and can be addressed by a series of research strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Potential challenges</th>
<th>Possible strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discovery</td>
<td>Company unaware archive exists; records in another repository</td>
<td>Information from former employees; national registers and other finding aids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Access</td>
<td>Rules/company sensitivity deny access</td>
<td>Obtain project ‘sponsor’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Assessment</td>
<td>Records incomplete/difficult to understand</td>
<td>Apply measures of quality: authenticity, credibility, representativeness, meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sifting</td>
<td>Volume of data</td>
<td>Data reduction: sequencing, patterning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cross-checking</td>
<td>Data verification</td>
<td>Triangulation: interviews and other research strategies; multiple data sources</td>
</tr>
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Table 2: Stages of archival research

a) discovery
Discovery, or establishing the existence and whereabouts of a collection, is not always a straightforward task. The first port of call, the company or companies under study, is not always reliable sources of information. Some companies employ professional archivists...
and implement consistent policies about the preservation of documents, but they are in a minority. Even if company documents have been preserved, high turnover of staff and the loss of corporate memory may mean that current employees of the company are not aware of their existence. This means that applying to the company itself for information about its records may not yield a correct answer. In the case of the present study, former employees proved overall to be more reliable informants about the existence of relevant records than their successors. One key informant for the project was the person responsible for having donated the records to a public repository for preservation, while another was the manager whose personal papers made up a significant proportion of the documents in the archival collection.

A second complicating factor is that a company’s records may not be in its keeping, but are held either by another private collection, or by a public repository (such as local and central government record offices, museums and specialised university collections). It is therefore advisable to undertake a search of national archives in order to establish whether a company’s records can be found in a different location. National policies on archives, however, vary widely. Some countries have established independent bodies which maintain a catalogue of all national archives. In such cases, a thorough search of national archives is relatively simple. In countries where a central register of archives is lacking, however, a systematic search may prove time-consuming. This project used archives in both Britain and Australia, which are very different in terms of their national organisation of archives. Britain is highly centralised, with two organisations keeping track of business archives: the National Register of Archives (NRA), which maintains a business database, and the Business Archives Council (BAC), which regularly updates its list of company archives. In Australia, the main directory on archives has been described as ‘patchy’ (Powell 1995) and no equivalent bodies to the NRA or BAC exist. The researcher is dependent on the existence of other finding aids, such as published surveys of particular industries and directories of archives at a regional or national level (for example, a directory listing archives in Australia is now available on-line). There is therefore a contrast between those countries which follow a centralised, NRA-type approach, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, and countries which, like Australia and the United States, lack a single comprehensive register (Historical Research 1995).

b) access
The second stage, that of access, may be no less time-consuming than the first. The availability of archival records can make or break a study. A potential drawback of archival research is that if data cannot be accessed, the quality of the project’s findings may be seriously compromised. Bryman (1989) voices the fears of many: ‘because the researcher has little control over what data are available in archival investigations, information on critical variables may not be possible; researchers have to make do with what they have.’ (p. 199) A rejection from one archive need not always condemn a project, however. Even if access to a company’s material is refused, relevant information may be available elsewhere: in the records of its former managers, suppliers, customers and intermediaries, the trade association or Chamber of Commerce of which it was a member, government departments, specialist institutions (eg. university libraries) or local history collections (Orbell 1987).

2 http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/asa/directory
All the archives used for the present study imposed conditions of access which were at times arbitrary and inconsistent. Government archives have the advantage of being regulated by uniform and transparent access provisions, but are restricted by the application of the thirty-year rule. Private companies, in contrast, have no obligation to make their records publicly accessible. Even if a collection is held in a public repository, such as a university library, this does not mean that access to a collection is an automatic right. Some organisations retain control over their collections despite having deposited them elsewhere, so researchers must seek their written permission to use the material and satisfy certain conditions of access. The current project was only possible because a former senior manager in the case company being studied agreed to act as a ‘sponsor’ by negotiating access on the researcher’s behalf. Because of high turnover, company management was no longer sufficiently familiar with the archival material in order to be confident that its availability to the public would not result in researchers revealing unpleasant and unexpected skeletons in the closet. For this reason, only reassurance from the former manager proved effective in allaying these concerns.

The initial approval stage is not the only problem. Researchers cannot always be assured of maintaining their access once consent has been granted: in the case of one archive used in this project, access was granted one year only to be withdrawn the next. A further complication is that although the public may formally have access to certain material, in practice the documents cannot be viewed because they are still being processed or transferred between institutions (in the case of some government departments, the release of documents can take years rather than months). Nor is negotiation over once the data collection has been collected. In many cases, the researcher must guarantee, as a condition of access, that the final report based on the archival data be submitted for approval for publication. Access is therefore an ongoing issue throughout the duration of the project.

c) assessment
Assessment is the next task once access is secured. Assessment entails an evaluation of the quality of the archival source and its relevance to the study being conducted. Some archives are not fully catalogued, in which case assessing their contents can be a lengthy procedure. Scott (1990) suggests applying four criteria for evaluating documentary evidence: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Judging authenticity means confirming the document’s authorship and whether the document is an original or a copy. Credibility requires an evaluation of the author’s objectivity and reliability. Different types of archival records may be more informative and candid about events than others: in general, documents produced strictly for internal purposes, such as policy papers and memos, are likely to be far more revealing than those produced for external consumption, for example annual reports and chairmen’s statements (Armstrong & Jones 1987). Assessing representativeness involves judging ‘whether the documents consulted are representative of the totality of relevant documents.’ (Scott 1990, p. 24) Archival collections are rarely complete: there may be chronological gaps, highly sensitive documents may have been removed, and only records of a single type (for example, records from a particular department or subsidiary) may have been preserved. Armstrong and Jones (1987) point out that some types of documents are much more likely to have been preserved than others: ‘key documents in the life of a firm’ (p. 48), such as board minutes, are more likely to survive than files of correspondence, whose

in McLoughlin, Damien. and C. Horan (eds.). Proceedings of The 15th Annual IMP Conference, University College, Dublin 1999

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chances of survival ‘are not good’ (p. 61). The frustration of archival research therefore lies in the knowledge that, very often, the least interesting documents are the ones which are most likely to have been preserved.

Constructing the meaning of documents, as Scott argues, involves far more than the literal interpretation of unfamiliar words. Rather, it is a hermeneutical process involving a dialogue between reader and text. Interpretation is a process of mediation between the ‘horizon’, or frame of reference, of the reader, and the context in which the text was produced. In other words, the reader uses his or her own understanding in order to make sense of the document’s meaning (Gadamer 1972). The researcher found that in the case of all the archival collections used for the present study, the process of understanding documents involved mapping the network and its processes: in other words, learning about the structures, people and processes that generated the archival documents. It was not possible to understand the content and significance of a document without understanding its organisational and temporal context. Often the sender and recipient of a letter would not be fully identified, an organisation would be mentioned simply by its acronym, a document would be referred to by a number and not by the name of the committee which had produced it, and issues would be couched in technical language which had a very precise meaning in that particular context. It was also necessary to be aware of changes which happened over time: key individuals changed jobs or were replaced, departments were merged and dissolved, new issues emerged, and goals changed over time. Reading the archives was therefore a form of cultural immersion into the practices and discourses of the networks being studied.

d) sifting

The fourth process, that of sifting, involves sorting the archival material into some meaningful and systematic order to assist analysis of the data. The process of sifting is early analysis of the archival material through ‘data reduction’: ‘the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data...’ (Miles & Huberman, p. 10). Sifting is often a daunting task due to the sheer volume of archival material: substantial collections often run into many metres of shelf space. Sorting and prioritising the documents in a collection is an iterative process, since material which upon first reading seems of marginal interest later may prove significant. Researchers who are experienced in historical research have put forward a variety of techniques in order to manage and analyse the many thousands of pages of text which such research typically generates. The first set of techniques involve ‘sequencing’: putting events into a meaningful order. A simple form of sequencing consists of compiling a chronological listing of events (Van de Ven 1988). Even this task is not as straightforward as it might seem, as gaps in records make ordering difficult. Chronological listing often requires the use of ‘retrodiction’, in other words, a backward prediction in order ‘to work out what might have happened in the past’ (Savitt 1980, p. 53). A more abstract ordering of sequencing is ‘periodization’, in other words, differentiating periods according to key concepts and turning points (Layder 1993; for an example. see Kinch 1990).

A second set of techniques might be termed ‘patterning’. This involves extracting and synthesising data according to theoretical categories rather than chronological ones. According to Pettigrew (1985) this entails examining the data for variability or consistency in processes at different levels of analysis. It also requires a clear
delineation of the different processes which may operate in the network: as Van de Ven (1988) shows, concurrent processes can be tracked using a technique of 'multiple tracking': of separating activities into distinct streams according to different conceptual categories. Patterning can also be used to hypothesise causal relationships, by connecting processes with outcomes. In this way the task of sifting can be used to develop theoretical propositions about the data, and is useful preparation for more detailed coding.

e) cross-checking
The final process of cross-checking is essential in verifying the data collected from archival sources. It has been seen that, like any other source, documents are not neutral records of events. However, a number of cross-checking procedures are available. One is to gather archives from more than one collection. In the current project, it was possible to compare the records of the case company with those of other organisations in the network. This means that many of the interactions which took place could be studied from both sides. A second strategy is to conduct interviews with key network participants. This strategy was also pursued in the current study. Interviews were found to be valuable, not simply because it was possible for the researcher to check her interpretation of the records against the recollections of the key actors; an additional advantage was that some of the informants had personal documentation of their own — such as appointment diaries and speaking notes — which they made available to the researcher and which supplemented the records available in archival collections. However, despite the rigour of cross-checking and the collection of additional data, gaps and uncertainties inevitably remained; as Hill (1993) warns, '[f]indings in the field of sociohistorical investigation are always tentative and subject to constant reinterpretation.' (p. 69) This point has been demonstrated by Gadde and Mattson’s research on buyer-supplier relationships in industrial networks. When, together with another colleague, they revisited their longitudinal study to extend the time period by five years, they found they had to revise one of the three main conclusions from their earlier 1984 study (Dubois et al 1990). In doing so, they also provided a third strategy for cross-checking: repeating the study in order to test the preliminary conclusions on a different time frame.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed three ways in which archival research can be used to strengthen contemporary theory about business networks. Using archival material provides longitudinal data, generates new theories about business networks and improves the validity and reliability of case study research. The usefulness of archival research therefore extends beyond its traditional role as a basis for historical studies in business and economic history. Drawing on archival material could address some of the gaps which have been identified in IMP theories on business networks, particularly their lack of dynamic theories of change.

Despite this potential, archival research is rare in studies of business relationships, whether in relationship marketing or IMP. Even a recent article in The Journal of Marketing (Keep et al. 1998), which breaks new ground in relationship marketing by examining the history of business relationships in four industry case studies draws its

sources largely from secondary research such as business histories. Yet the ‘thick
description’ of the everyday operation of business relationships is to be found
elsewhere, often in the depths of business archives.

Although archival research is time-consuming, a set of strategies has been suggested in
this paper which can make the process manageable and systematic. In common with
ancient civilisations networks often leave traces, fragmentary though these may
sometimes be. Archival research, at its best, can generate similar levels of excitement
and degrees of revelation as an archaeological dig which uncovers the remnants of an
ancient civilisation. In both cases, researchers locate, uncover and interpret the artefacts,
and reconstruct the language and practices, of a social system which they are viewing
from a standpoint in the future.

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