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Designing Case Studies

Malcolm Tight

Introduction

This chapter considers case study as a basic research design for qualitative research. Case study may also be used as a research design for quantitative or mixed-methods research (see the Chapters in Part V, this *Handbook*), but the focus here, as in the rest of this book, is on qualitative research.

Case studies, like comparative and longitudinal studies (see Henwood and Shirani, Chapter 25, this *Handbook*), are endemic to research, and not just in the social sciences but in all disciplines. They take particular forms in some disciplines – for example, business, law, medicine – where the design is widely used for teaching as well as research purposes, but the basics of the research design remain fairly common throughout.

The chapter starts by considering the meaning of case study, going on to explore its origins and background. The relation between case study and theory is examined. Variations in the design are discussed, along with its perceived strengths and weaknesses. Examples of case study research are provided and critiqued. A substantial section on the practice of case study follows, and the chapter concludes by considering where case study may be going as a research design.

What are Case Studies?

The meaning of case study has been the subject of considerable debate – as with any idea of importance – and many definitions can be found in the literature. Here are two examples, which usefully draw attention to some common elements of our understanding of case study:

Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. (Stake, 1995: xi)

Case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems which are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of

the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame – an object – within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates. (Thomas, 2011a: 23)

While Stake (1995) points out that the case being studied is both particular and complex, Thomas (2011a) emphasizes that its study should be holistic; if neither of these points applies, the case would scarcely be worth studying. The case also needs to be bounded or delimited; if it isn't, it isn't a case, and the researcher will have problems in focusing their research.

The case is to be studied in its 'natural' context: cases are not artificial entities, or experiments, but are part of our reality, from which – even though, as cases, they are bounded – they cannot be separated. The case should, as Thomas argues, be illuminating and explicate a particular phenomenon of interest.

As well as clarifying what case study is, these definitions help to make it clear what case study is not. We can be reasonably confident, then, in stating that case study involves the study of a particular case, or a number of cases, that the case will be complex and bounded, that it will be studied in its context and that the analysis undertaken will seek to be holistic. *Case study is*, in other words, *small-scale research with meaning* (Tight, 2017).

It has been argued that 'almost anything can serve as a case' (Punch, 2005: 144), but this does not mean that all research can or should be designated as a case study if no more appropriate terminology can be identified. Of course, 'case' is a generic term, and all research could be said to involve the study of cases, but more typically focusing on specific variables across a larger number of cases. It is critically important, therefore, that we exercise care and discretion in using the label 'case study', restricting it to research that explicitly employs a case study design.

The attention given to case study in the social research methods literature varies (cf. Bryman, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; May, 2001; Punch, 2014), and a range of alternative perspectives are taken. Judging by these texts, we could view case study as a method, approach, style, strategy or design. It can be conceived of in relation to a wide, but differing, range of other social research methods, approaches, styles, strategies or designs, including action research, comparative studies, cross-sectional studies, ethnography (see Buscatto, Chapter 28, this *Handbook*), experiments, grounded theory (see Thornberg and Keane, Chapter 27, this *Handbook*), historical studies, internet-based studies (see the Chapters in Part VII, this *Handbook*), longitudinal studies (see Henwood and Shirani, Chapter 25, this *Handbook*) and surveys.

While recognizing that the terms 'method', 'approach', 'style', 'strategy' and 'design' share overlapping meanings, the perspective taken here is that it is most sensible to view case study as a research design. Within this research design, particular methods, approaches, styles or strategies may then be adopted in order to progress the research.

Origins and Background

Writing nearly a century ago, Burgess (1927: 114) noted that '[t]he case-study method was first introduced into social science as a handmaiden to statistics', with the latter then regarded as the most desirable way of undertaking research. Case study was seen as a means for fleshing out and providing detailed exemplification to complement statistical analyses, rather than as an alternative to them. For example, Symonds (1945: 357) argued that

much remains to be done to improve its methodology so that case materials may be amassed and treated in a manner that includes, on the one hand, objective appraisal and statistical integrity and that, on the other hand, never loses sight of the integrated, dynamic, holistic picture of human personality which the case study approach to research uniquely may give.

With case studies viewed as the detailed components of large-scale 'objective' analyses, it is little surprise that, from its beginnings, a great deal of attention has been given to trying to devise common standards or approaches to case study (e.g. Foreman, 1948).

In the 1950s, case study was in less favour in the social sciences. Platt (1992) associates this decline with its imprecise usage, the issues of generalization and prediction, problems with the articulation of case study analysis and increased competition from the development of more sophisticated quantitative techniques. Case study began to make a comeback in the 1980s, as qualitative techniques assumed a greater importance and popularity, particularly outside of North America.

In the last 25 years the shift away from quantification and large scale survey methods in the social sciences, alongside the increasing attention being given to language and meaning in constructing identity and social relations, has seen a significant revival in case study methods. This has led to a range of reappraisals of the method, and an increased emphasis upon lived experience, the life-story and the biographical/autobiographical in social research. (David, 2006: xxxix)

This trend has also led to case study being increasingly, but wrongly, regarded as a solely qualitative research design. There is a great deal of variation between disciplines, and it is important that case study researchers maintain an open-ness in their practice.

Case Study and Theory

As with any research design, the relationship between case study and theory is important. Indeed, case study as a research design may be said to embody theoretical assumptions, notably that it is worthwhile studying individual cases in detail.

While critics of case study argue that because it is small-scale, it is not suitable for theory development or testing, its advocates contend that precisely because it is so in-depth, it is well suited to theory development (see Thornberg and Keane, Chapter 27, this *Handbook*) and that, when suitably replicated, case studies may also test theories. Of course, much depends, as Hammersley (2012) points out, on what type of theory you are talking about and/or what you mean by theory (see Hammersley, Chapter 4, this *Handbook*).

Eisenhardt (1989), in a much cited article (see Ravenswood, 2011), offers a roadmap for building theories from case study research. She argues that while theory building may begin from the analysis of a single case, to progress further, additional case studies need to be undertaken or examined. Dooley (2002: 336) offers a similar formulation:

The researcher who embarks on case study research is usually interested in a specific phenomenon and wishes to understand it completely ... From this single observation, the start of a theory may be formed, and this may provoke the researcher to study the same phenomenon within the boundaries of another case, and then another, and another (single cases studied independently), or between individual cases (cross-case analysis) as the theory begins to take shape.

Hoon (2013) goes further in arguing for the use of meta-synthesis – analysing multiple case studies (see Timulak and Creaner, Chapter 33, this *Handbook*) – for building theory from qualitative case studies, while noting that ‘the greatest challenge that a qualitative synthesis faces is viewed in the heterogeneity inherent in the primary studies’ underlying paradigmatic perspectives, methods, and quality’ (2013: 543).

As well as using case studies to build or develop theory, they may also be employed to test theory. Yin (2009)

links this with the issue of generalization, arguing that case studies may be used to perform what Yin terms ‘*analytic* generalization’ (see Maxwell, Chapter 20, this *Handbook*),

in which a previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study. If two or more cases are shown to support the same theory, replication may be claimed. The empirical results may be considered yet more potent if two or more cases support the same theory but do not support an equally plausible, *rival* theory. (2009: 38–9, *emph. in orig.*)

By building up more and more case studies, theory may, in this way, be tested and verified, or rejected and then modified.

While, then, there is a divergence of opinion on the use of case study in theory development and testing, there is a general recognition that this is made easier when multiple case studies are carried out or available.

Variations

Case study is widely used as a research design throughout the social sciences and beyond. Swanborn (2010) identifies several disciplinary sources of importance in the development of case study, including the health sciences, clinical psychotherapy, law, cultural anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology and many policy fields.

Currently, the use of case study is particularly evident in the business/management area, and in other professional disciplines such as education (see Tarozzi, Chapter 65, this *Handbook*), health (see Mesinioti et al., Chapter 48, this *Handbook*), law, psychoanalysis and social work (see Gilgun, Chapter 66, this *Handbook*). In some, case study is used as a teaching method as well as, or instead of, a research design. This is common in the health/medicine field, in law and social work and in business/management studies. Case studies are used to explore and illustrate particular medical conditions, legal precedents or business problems. Teaching and research case studies may also overlap.

Proponents of case study have long recognized that there are different sorts of, or approaches to, case study. It is illustrative to compare the views of two of the most referenced authors on case study, Stake and Yin, who both offer threefold categorizations. Thus, Stake (2005: 445) recognizes intrinsic (to understand a particular case), instrumental (to provide insight into an issue) and multiple case studies, while Yin (2009: 19–21) iden-

tifies explanatory, descriptive and exploratory case studies, each of which may be single or multiple.

Both recognize that case studies may be single or multiple. Both link case study to theory, with Stake recognizing the possible role of case study in generalization and Yin stating their explanatory purpose, while also accepting that they may be simply descriptive. And both stress that case studies may be carried out for pure interest: Stake's intrinsic category and Yin's exploratory category.

While no typology seems entirely satisfactory, and while the usage of alternative terms to mean much the same thing can be confusing, this suggests that there are three major factors to bear in mind when considering examples of, or undertaking, case studies:

- whether they focus on a single case or involve a comparative study or two or more cases;
- whether they confine themselves to description or engage with theory (discussed in the preceding section);
- whether they are intended primarily to support teaching or research (outwith the scope of this volume).

For those committed to case study research, one of the key decisions concerns moving from single case studies to carrying out and/or analysing multiple case studies. This decision is bound up with a whole range of issues, including generalization (see Maxwell, Chapter 20, this *Handbook*) and theory development (see Thornberg and Keane, Chapter 27, this *Handbook*) and testing, as well as with building up the credibility of case study as a research design.

Over 40 years ago, Lijphart (1975) defined what he referred to as the comparative method, which he presented as an alternative to the statistical method. By selecting similar sorts of cases for study, the researcher would be able to assess whether the same sorts of relationships between variables could be observed within them and thus provide support, or otherwise, for their hypotheses about how these relationships worked. More recently, Odell (2001) has argued that single case studies, multiple case studies and statistical analyses lie on a spectrum of research designs.

If you are carrying out a multiple case study, there are additional factors to bear in mind (Small, 2009). McClintock (1985: 220) recommends the use of the case cluster method, which 'offers a way to structure case study research so that data collection, analysis and reporting can be accommodated in a more focused manner'. George and Bennett (2005) emphasize the importance of structured and focused comparison, standardizing data collection and analysis. They also make the point that such studies are made easier when the work is

all undertaken by a single researcher (see Morse, Chapter 23, this *Handbook*). If this is not feasible, then training, piloting and calibrating the work done becomes critical, especially if it is international in scope.

Gerring and McDermott (2007) seek to provide what they term an experimental template for comparative case study research, proposing four alternative designs: dynamic comparison (involving the use of both temporal and spatial variation), longitudinal (i.e. temporal) comparison, spatial comparison and counterfactual (imagined) comparison (see Demuth and Fasulo, Chapter 26, this *Handbook*). Larsson (1993) argues for what he terms the 'case survey method':

(1) select a group of existing case studies relevant to the chosen research questions, (2) design a coding scheme for systematic conversion of the qualitative case descriptions into quantified variables, (3) use multiple raters to code the cases and measure their interrater reliability, and (4) statistically analyze the coded data. (Larsson, 1993: 1516–17)

The quantification of qualitative data proposed transforms the case study design into something that many small-scale researchers might be uncomfortable with, but illustrates the potential if numbers of similar existing case studies are available.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Criticisms of case study are of long standing (Atkinson and Delamont, 1985; Platt, 1992). Hence, those in favour of case study as a research design often feel obliged to defend their choice:

Case studies of whatever form are a reliable and respectable procedure of social analysis and ... much criticism of their reliability and validity has been based on a misconception of the basis upon which the analyst may justifiably extrapolate from an individual case study to the social process in general ... The validity of the extrapolation depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but upon the cogency of the theoretical reasoning. (Mitchell, 1983: 207)

Proponents of case study sometimes try and anticipate their critics by identifying the criticisms that have been made, and then articulating responses to these. Flyvbjerg (2004), for example, identifies what he terms 'five misunderstandings or oversimplifications':

1. General, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (con-

text-dependent) knowledge.

2. One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case [...]
3. The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses ... while other methods are more suitable for hypothesis testing and theory-building.
4. The case study contains a bias towards verification [...]
5. It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies. (Flyvbjerg, 2004: 391)

On the first point, Flyvbjerg argues that in social research 'we have only specific cases and context-dependent knowledge' (2004: 392). On the second and third points, he contends that it depends upon the case and how it is chosen. On the fourth point, Flyvbjerg argues that this criticism is true for all methods of social research, and on the fifth that '[t]he problems [...] are due more often to the properties of the reality studied than to the case study as a research method' (2004: 402).

Many others have wrestled with these issues over the years. Feagin et al. (1991) outline how issues of reliability and validity can be handled by conducting team research and triangulating (see Flick, Chapter 39, this *Handbook*) data sources, and assert the strengths of case study in providing a close reading set within its context. Ragin and Becker (1992: 2) argue that the response to criticisms of case study is implicit in its practice: 'even in case-study research the principle of repetition is often implicated in statements concerning the relation between the chosen case and other cases'.

Gomm et al. (2000: 102) argue that 'while *some* case study research may be able to avoid "the problem of generalization" because the case(s) studied have sufficient intrinsic relevance, this is not true of most of it' (emphasis in original). They then articulate effective strategies for drawing general conclusions, involving theoretical inference and empirical generalization, either to a larger population or within cases.

Strengths

These debates enable us to construct a shortlist of the strengths and weaknesses of case study as a research design. To start with their strengths, case studies are in-depth, detailed and particular; they allow a close focus on the chosen case, which the researcher thoroughly studies.

Second, and relatedly, the research is holistic, aimed at understanding everything – or, at least, as much as possible – about the particularity of the case in question (hence the importance of using a range of methods

in studying it). These characteristics are in contrast to much other social research, which tends to focus on a limited range of variables or factors, and inevitably over-simplifies what is going on.

Third, the case being studied may be typical or exemplary, and if this can be demonstrated, then the likelihood of the findings from it being of broader relevance increases. Or, alternatively, if the case being studied is critical or extreme, it is the very particularity of the case, rather than its broader significance, that is important.

Finally, a very important advantage of case study research from the point of view of the small-scale researcher is that it is bounded and, therefore, more feasible (see Swift, Chapter 18, this *Handbook*). When there are limits – of time and other resources – on what the researcher can afford to spend on a particular piece of research, it is highly pragmatic to be able to tightly and precisely define what is going to be researched. Of course, at the same time, the researcher will still wish to complete a piece of research that is useful and meaningful.

We may add to these strengths three desirable qualities for case study (and other forms of) research. First, the case study needs to be approached and carried out rigorously. Second, it should have a theoretical framework, enabling the development of a fuller understanding of how it works. And third, it is highly desirable that the findings are triangulated in some way, for example by comparison with other similar case studies or other kinds of evidence.

Weaknesses

Turning to weaknesses, the major criticism of case study as a research design, which has already been touched upon, undoubtedly has to do with generalizability. We might seek to argue that this is to overlook the strength of case study, its focus on the particular and to assert that what really matters is the quality of the case study, but there are many who would reject this position.

The main response to this criticism has been to argue for the accumulation of single case studies on the same topic to allow for the identification of similarities and differences. This is how case studies have long been used in certain disciplines. Jensen and Rodgers (2001) argue that such meta-analysis (see Timulak and Creaner, Chapter 33, this *Handbook*) may be used to cumulate what they refer to as ‘the intellectual gold’ of case study research. In this light, Ruzzene (2012: 99) demands that ‘the emphasis should be placed on the

comparability of the study rather than on the typicality of the case'.

Evers and Wu (2006: 524) take a different tack, arguing that it is possible to generalize from single cases: 'cases possess considerably more structure than is commonly supposed [...] researchers bring to a case much more knowledge than is often supposed'. Clearly, the researcher's experience will be a key factor here, suggesting that generalization is much more difficult or risky, though often difficult to resist, for the novice researcher.

Thomas (2011b: 33) reminds us that generalization is an issue throughout the social sciences: 'to seek *generalisable knowledge*, in whatever form – everyday or special – is to miss the point about what may be offered by certain kinds of inquiry, which is *exemplary knowledge*' (emphasis in original). We study particular cases for their interest and what we can learn from them.

Other perceived weaknesses of case study are those of validity and reliability. Riege (2003) considers which tests can most appropriately be used to evaluate case study research. He argues that alongside the four 'traditional' tests of construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability, 'the application of four "corresponding" design tests is recommended to enhance validity and reliability, that is credibility, trustworthiness (transferability), confirmability and dependability' (Riege, 2003: 84; see Morse, Chapter 23, this *Handbook*). These alternative ways of judging the quality of a piece of case study research have the benefit of being much more suited to qualitative forms of research.

Most researchers, though, have sought to remain true to the 'traditional' ideas of validity and reliability when assessing the results of case study research. Thus, Diefenbach (2009: 892) concludes that 'many qualitative case studies either do not go far beyond a mere description of particular aspects or the generalizations provided are not based on a very sound methodological basis'.

One of the strongest contemporary advocates of case study, Yin (2013, 2018), offers rather more hope, discussing a range of different approaches that have been taken towards addressing validity and generalization in case study evaluations, including alternative explanations, triangulation, logic models and analytic generalization and theory.

Clearly, as practitioners of case study research, we need to be aware of its limitations and do what we can to overcome them, but we should also emphasize the strengths of this research design. In the end, perhaps it

does come down to how well the case study has been carried out, and how useful, interesting or meaningful the story it tells is.

Examples

This section presents and examines four examples of the application of the case study design, selected from different disciplines and focusing on different issues and parts of the world. Their selection should not be taken as implying that these are the four 'best' examples of case study research, though clearly some judgement of quality is implied. Rather, they illustrate some of the range of practices – including engagement with theory, use of existing and/or newly collected data, scale of study and triangulation – that may be incorporated in case study research. Many alternative examples could have been chosen instead.

McCarthy et al. (2003)

McCarthy, Holland and Gillies – three sociology researchers based in the UK – concern themselves with the family lives of young people. Their data consists of interviews with nine individuals from three case study 'families', and their focus lies in 'how to make sense of differences and of standpoints within this set of interviews, and questions that arise in approaching the analysis of clusters of interviews from within the same "family" units' (McCarthy et al., 2003: 2).

They examine their data using, successively, objectivist, interpretationist and reflexive approaches, and then, more briefly, from the standpoints of generation and gender. They note that

each twisting of the analytic kaleidoscope brings different issues into focus, even when only nine interviews are being explored ... When we looked at individual accounts within families we saw multiple perspectives, and when we looked at the related family accounts we were able to discern commonality. We identified similarities within the standpoints of gender and generation, and again found that these were cross cut by further differences which seemed to reflect ethnicity and class. (McCarthy et al., 2003: 19)

The over-riding conclusion, then, is one of the complexity of individual and social relations. This has an im-

portant message for case study design, as well as for other kinds of research – the importance not just of what others might term triangulation but also of interrogating the data collected from different perspectives or positions.

Mjøset (2006)

Mjøset, a Norwegian sociologist, presents a case study of the Israel/Palestine conflict, employing what he calls a 'pragmatic strategy of generalization'. The study was based on existing documents and studies. His interest was in why this conflict has become so deep-seated and persistent, for which he had to assess at least 22 differing theories, on topics such as colonialism, international relations and settler states. He argues that 'pragmatist researchers find ways of accumulating knowledge that transcend the engrained dichotomies explanation/understanding, generalization/specification [...] a researcher with a pragmatist attitude will seek the grounded knowledge necessary to answer her or his research questions in the relevant *local research frontiers*' (Mjøset, 2006: 755–6; emphasis in original).

He explains the nature of local research frontiers, and the processes involved in the research, as follows:

as empirical researchers, we observe with reference to several theories embedded in a smaller set of local research frontiers. My project relied on several more or less well-formulated local research frontiers that mediate between theories and observation. Although I did a single-case analysis, it relied on observations also from many other cases, observations that were synthesized in local, problem-related research frontiers that connect several 'literatures'. (Mjøset, 2006: 757)

In this way, he argues, he is able to produce a single case study that, as well as offering a reasoned explanation of the Israel/Palestine conflict, suggests how we might progress thinking around similar conflicts. He also effectively demonstrates the centrality of theory in case study design.

Oke and Gopalakrishnan (2009)

Oke and Gopalakrishnan, two researchers based in the USA, examine the management of disruptions in the supply chain of a large retailer. They justify the use of a single case study approach in the following way:

[a] case study offers the opportunity to study a phenomenon in its own natural setting where complex links and underlying meanings can be explored, whilst also enabling the researcher to study whole supply chains. It is also appropriate where existing knowledge is limited because it generates in-depth contextual information which may result in a superior level of understanding. (Oke and Gopalakrishnan, 2009: 169–70)

While only a single case was examined, this was a sizeable case: 'North America's leading retailer of food, supplies, accessories, pets and professional services for the lifetime needs of pets [...] with over \$3 billion in sales in 2003' (Oke and Gopalakrishnan, 2009: 170). Data collection was through interviews with senior informants at the company's headquarters and distribution centre.

Oke and Gopalakrishnan (2009: 174) found 'the simple classification of supply chain risks as high-likelihood, low-impact and low-likelihood high-impact to be highly relevant'. They acknowledge the issue of generalization, but argue that

the purpose of the empirical case study analysis in this study is not one of generalization but one of theoretical replication for which propositions have been developed in a theory-building approach ... the propositions developed from this study are broad relating to classifications of risks and mitigation strategies that can be employed by different organizations irrespective of sectoral differences. These propositions can be further tested using other methodological approaches such as a large survey. (Oke and Gopalakrishnan, 2009: 174)

They demonstrate the value of the case study design in developing theory, positioning it as an initial stage in a larger research project.

Vellema et al. (2013)

Vellema and three colleagues are based in the Netherlands and focus on partnerships between companies and non-governmental organizations, designed to incorporate smallholder farmers into value chains (hence their term 'value chain partnerships') and thus contribute to development. Their two case studies of value chain partnerships are based in Uganda and Rwanda. They employ a case study design because

[c]ase studies, understood as an intensive, in-depth study of a relatively bounded phenomenon lend

themselves to making cautious causal inferences about the mechanisms of change triggered by the intervention, in this instance, value chain collaboration. Our two case studies allowed us to investigate partnering as 'situated action'. This individual case research provides a basis for a cross-case analysis that aims to distil more generic causal inferences about partnering activities. (Vellema et al., 2013: 306)

They employed a three-stage approach to the use of case studies: (i) descriptive inference within cases; (ii) developing hypotheses regarding the individual cases; (iii) theorizing regarding institutional change from both cases. They conclude that '[t]he use of case studies enabled us to identify how underlying dynamics and processes can be either conducive or obstructive to achieving desired developmental outcomes' (Vellema et al., 2013: 317).

The use of two case studies based in bordering African countries was clearly a strength of the research design; note again the central importance given to theory.

Practice

Most of the issues and processes involved in carrying out a case study – choosing what to study, how to study it and how to analyse and write up your findings – are common to those faced when applying other research designs. The key difference is that in case study research, we choose to focus in detail on a particular example or on a small number of examples.

Those who offer guidance on doing case studies tend to organize this – as here – into a series of stages or tasks. For example, Stuart et al. (2002) identify five 'steps', Stake (2005) gives six 'responsibilities', George and Bennett (2005) suggest five 'tasks' and Pan and Tan (2011) list eight 'steps'. The number of points identified and the labels given to them differ, but all of these authors present a sequential listing of tasks to be undertaken, from defining the research question(s), through developing a data-collection strategy, gaining ethical approval, data gathering, seeking patterns in the data and aligning theory and data, to writing up and disseminating the results.

While presenting the practice of doing a case study as a sequence of steps can be helpful, it should also be

recognized that it is artificial and over-simplified. Actually doing a case study, as with any other form of research, can be a messy and confusing business, with, for example, data collection and analysis taking place more or less simultaneously, and research questions being altered to better fit emerging findings.

Research Questions

Many researchers would argue that your research questions (see Rapley, Chapter 16, this *Handbook*) are key, and should drive all your other research decisions:

[a] question is the starting point for your research. Begin with a question, not a presupposition that you are going to do a case study. A case study should follow logically from your question or else you should not do one. (Thomas, 2011a: 30)

It would be unusual to conduct research without any idea of what you were researching and why. However, having only a general idea gives you quite a lot of scope for wasted time and effort, hence the importance of being as specific as possible about what you want to research. Research questions should be short, specific, clearly answerable and limited in number.

Sampling and Selection

Sampling and selection (see Patton, Chapter 70, this *Handbook*, and Meyer and Mayrhofer, Chapter 17, this *Handbook*) are fundamental processes in almost any research project, unless you plan to study every example of the particular population of interest to you. This is so even if you have already identified the case you intend to study. Many small-scale researchers select their own case – for example, where they work – or have it selected for them by their funder or employer. But you should carefully consider other options, if possible, and be aware of the consequences of engaging in ‘insider’ research, as well as the comparative characteristics of your case.

Thomas (2011a: 95–6) identified three main reasons for choosing a particular case to study:

[y]ou may choose it because you know a great deal about the case in question and you want to understand some feature of that subject [...] Alternatively, you may choose it because it provides a particularly good example of something. The other option is that the case may reveal something interesting because it is different from the norm.

The first of these reasons applies when you study your own institution, hoping to better understand its operation and be able to make practical recommendations for improvement. For Thomas' other two options, your choice is determined more by whether your findings might be of wider interest, either because the case studied is more typical or because it is unusual. Seawright and Gerring (2008) identify several case study designs – typical case, diverse cases, extreme case, deviant case, influential case, most similar/most different cases – all of which seem worthy of consideration.

A key issue in sampling and selection is having access to the people, institutions, documents or whatever it is that you need to study to understand the case. Clearly, gaining only limited access, or being refused access at the beginning – or part way through – your study, will not help you answer your research question(s). This also helps to explain why so many small-scale researchers opt to research within their own institution, because access seems to be assured. Yet, this is not the only factor of importance: 'you should choose the case(s) that will most likely illuminate your research questions' (Yin, 2009: 26).

Selecting cases for study solely on the basis of convenience may limit the usefulness of the research you carry out. The greater effort, and possible delays, involved in going beyond the familiar may yield significant benefits in the longer run: 'insufficient concern is often given to the choice of research sites [...] however difficult access may be, it is crucial that obtaining access is not seen as the primary consideration in selecting an appropriate site' (Walford, 2001: 151).

Selecting the right case or cases for study may involve quite a bit of work, but it should be worth it when you finish. While the ideal selection strategy may be unrealizable, the researcher should always be aware of, and be prepared to justify, the factors they took into account in making their selection.

Boundary and Environment

Given the importance that case study researchers accord to bounding the case, and understanding its place within the surrounding environment, it is surprising how little explicit attention is given to these issues. This may be because, as with so much about case study, the notion of bounding the case is simply specialist terminology for what is a much more generic process. All researchers have to place limits on their research projects. This is particularly so in small-scale research, where focusing the research is of key importance if it is to be manageable and deliverable within time and resource constraints. The same considerations are

involved in bounding the case.

This is readily apparent in the advice given by Baxter and Jack (2008: 547): '[s]uggestions on how to bind a case include: (a) by time and place; (b) time and activity; and (c) by definition and context'. To take the first two of these suggestions, you might bound your case in terms of when and where it occurred, and when and what was of interest. The third suggestion involves the consideration of the relationship between case and environment.

It is important to always bear in mind that if you had defined your case somewhat differently, your findings might be significantly different.

Collecting and Analysing Data

Approaches to the collection and analysis of data vary within case study, in terms of methodological strategy adopted and the level of sophistication sought. In principle, any of the wide range of qualitative (and also, though they are not the focus of this book, quantitative) approaches might be used, singly or in combination.

Amongst case study researchers, Swanborn (2010) distinguishes five traditions:

1. Analysis of data collected in the field of changing organizations, according to Yin [see Kutter and Masson, Chapter 62, this *Handbook*].
2. Analysis of data collected in one of the qualitative traditions, especially the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin [see Thornberg and Keane, Chapter 27, this *Handbook*].
3. Data analysis and presentation according to the work of Miles and Huberman.
4. Time-series analysis [see Henwood and Shirani, Chapter 25, this *Handbook*].
5. Data analysis according to Ragin's method, using Boolean logic and fuzzy-set theory. (Swanborn, 2010: 114–15)

Yin (2009: 136–60) himself identifies five analytic techniques: pattern matching (i.e. comparing the pattern found with that expected), building an explanation about the case, time-series analysis (examining what happens in the case over time), logic models (which predict and then test complex chains of events), cross-case synthesis (e.g. using multiple cases or meta-analysis).

All of these approaches to case study analysis seek to draw out the lessons that may be learned, and relate

them to existing knowledge on the topic and/or area.

Assessing Your Work

A number of authors provide checklists for judging the worth of a completed case study (see Morse, Chapter 23, this *Handbook*). These may, of course, be used to assess published case studies as well as your own. Yin (2009: 185–90) identifies five 'general characteristics of an exemplary case study': it must 'be significant [...] be "complete" [...] consider alternative perspectives [...] display sufficient evidence [...] be composed in an engaging manner'. All of these characteristics are, of course, couched in rather subjective language: what, for example, is significant or engaging, and who is to be the judge of this? These characteristics are also, however, generic in nature, and could be applied to any piece of research.

Thomas (2011a: 67–8) provides another checklist. He stresses quality, which he suggests can be assessed through three questions:

1. How well has the case been chosen?
2. How well has the context for the study been explained and justified?
3. How well have the arguments been made? Have rival explanations for the same kinds of observations been explored?

The first of these questions is similar to Yin's point about significance, while the last encompasses aspects of Yin's strictures regarding the consideration of alternative explanations and writing in an engaging manner. Thomas' second question, however, opens up another aspect for evaluation – the context for the case study – and takes us back to considerations of bounding.

Writing Up

Another way of assessing the quality of a case study, particularly one you have recently completed, is to write it up for publication and find out what others (editors, reviewers, readers) think of it. Academic publishing is a competitive practice and almost always involves the author(s) undertaking some significant revision of what they originally drafted, in the light of comments made by reviewers, if they are to proceed to publication.

Successful publication in a reputable academic journal is a significant achievement and a strong (but by no means foolproof) indication of quality.

One obvious way to get a grip on what is involved in writing up your case study is to examine previous examples (Darke et al., 1998). Whatever genre of publication you are attempting – for example, a journal article, book chapter, report, conference paper or dissertation – there will be existing examples you can access and study. Get advice, if you can, on particularly good examples, or focus on those which are highly cited by other researchers. Look at the way in which the writing has been organized, and the balance of space devoted to the different sections. Note the kind of language used, the way references to other publications are brought in and how the author(s) put forward their argument.

Alternatively, there are also guides available to writing up. For example, Pan and Tan (2011) recommend that a case study paper should contain six sections: introduction, literature review, research method, results, discussion and conclusion. That is a perfectly reasonable structure to adopt for writing up a case study, but it is generic and would do just as well for many other kinds of research. Don't be afraid to move away from such formulaic approaches.

New Directions

Where is case study going as a research design? I would argue that – as you may have picked up from reading this chapter – it is going in two, at least somewhat contradictory, directions simultaneously.

First, with the increased interest in qualitative research, and particularly small-scale qualitative research, there is a trend towards much more detailed, in-depth studies of single cases, which are likely to be of most interest and use to those involved in the case.

Second, with the continuing desire of establishing qualitative research on a par with quantitative research, there is a growing interest in combining the results of case studies dealing with the same or similar topics. This may be done by qualitative and/or quantitative means, following the strategies of systematic review or meta-analysis.

Further Reading

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