

Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginning Researchers

reviewed by Jolyn Blank & Jennifer Wolgemuth — May 31, 2017

Title: Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginning Researchers

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Publisher: Teachers College Press, New York

ISBN: 0807758132, **Pages:** 116, **Year:** 2017

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The third edition of *Doing Case Study Research: A Practical Guide for Beginning Researchers* is a *how to* guide for doing case studies for students new to research that is 13 chapters long. Its authors Dawson R. Hancock and Bob Algozzine provide an introductory text that is wholly practical. The volume assumes readers bring very little or no prior knowledge about the aims and outcomes of educational research. Therefore, Part One, “Foundations,” begins with an inclusive discussion of the scientific method and scientific inquiry (Chapter One). This accommodates and contextualizes an introductory binary driven discussion of educational research as either quantitative or qualitative (Chapter Two).

Part Two is comprised of Chapter Three to Chapter Eleven. Hancock and Algozzine dedicate these concisely written chapters to the vital elements of case study research. This includes knowing when a case study is a good approach (Chapter Three), reviewing the background literature (Chapter Four), determining the appropriate case study design (Chapter Five), gathering and collecting data (Chapter Five to Chapter Eight; observations, interviews, and documents), summarizing and analyzing data (Chapter Nine), and reporting and confirming findings (Chapter Ten to Chapter Eleven). Part Three concludes the volume with a helpful guide for writing a case study proposal (Chapter Twelve) and disseminating case study research (Chapter Thirteen).

In line with their aim of helping “beginning researchers to get a handle on what it takes to complete a systematic case study” (p. vii), Hancock and Algozzine include content reviews with activities and applications across the book. Additionally, many chapters include *how to* illustrations, examples from case studies in the published literature, and checklists to determine whether essential elements are included or procedures followed. The volume privileges practicality, applicability, and accessibility. As such, it is a very reader friendly, graspable, and concise methods handbook. What *Doing Case Study Research* intentionally lacks in its theoretical discussions of methodology and complex accounts of issues in the field is made up for as a user friendly text. It scaffolds its content for beginning researchers by providing points of departure to increasingly complex and reflective thinking about case study research design. Perhaps this choice is necessary for advanced graduate students who are embarking on thesis research or dissertation research.

In their preface, Hancock and Algozzine note that *Doing Case Study Research* may serve as a practical companion to more theoretical research texts. It is this idea that drives the remainder of our review. We are instructors for doctoral level qualitative research courses in education, including a course titled Case Study Research. We expect that pairing *Doing Case Study Research* with other well known qualitative case study texts, like Robert Stake’s *The Art of Case Study Research* (1995), could prompt important reflective conversations about the nature, role, and purpose of case study inquiry in education. Below we share questions that arose for us as we contemplated the conversations that adopting *Doing Case Study Research* might provoke in our classrooms.

The first conversation we anticipate might be guided by the question *what is a case?* Hancock and Algozzine describe case study research as characterized by its focus on a case. It is an “individual representative of a group” (p. 15) or a phenomenon bounded by space and time that is situated in a specific context. In contrast, Stake’s description of a case as a “specific, complex, functioning thing” (1995, p. 2) is offered with the caveat that precise definitions of cases or case studies are not possible given so many conflicting precedents. Rather, Stake suggests we recognize that research terms are not used by everyone in the same way, are dynamic, and can be contested. As they engage in designing and doing case study research, novices will likely raise the following questions. How do I select a case? What constitutes a case? Can one do case study research without extensive advanced deliberation about the boundaries of the case? Is it possible to be too focused on defining the case and defending its boundaries? Considerations of these inquiries will benefit from both the solid groundwork Hancock and Algozzine offer or the pliability that Stake suggests are provided by case studies.

A second conversation we anticipate might be guided by the question *what data do I need and how do I analyze it in case study research?* A great deal of Part Two in *Doing Case Study Research* discusses basic ways to gather data. Hancock and Algozzine point out that case study research is characterized by the use of multiple data sources. As a result, case studies are “grounded in deep and varied sources of information” (p. 16). Increasing the complexity, Stake presents the idea of data within the context of a larger conversation about case study as a flexible methodology that invites a “palette of methods” (1995, pp. xi-xii) and views data as “impressionistic” (Stake, 1995, p. 49). Again, doing and designing case study research will likely raise questions that invite

movement back and forth from starting points to more complex ideas. What does it mean to include multiple data sources? How flexible can one be with data sources? What is and what is not data?

A third conversation we anticipate might be guided by the question *what do case studies look like?* Hancock and Algozzine point out that case study research is “richly descriptive” (p. 16). They briefly allude to the narrative composition of case studies and the use of literary writing techniques to bring to life the intricacies of what is being studied. In their discussion pertaining to reporting findings in Part Two, the authors adapt criteria from Stake’s (1995) text as a checklist. It includes things like “[i]s there a sense of story to the presentation?” (p. 69) and “[i]s the reader provided some vicarious experience?” (p. 69). Stake’s (1995) book elaborates on these ideas by pointing out that case researchers construct narratives to provide experiential understandings, that case reports read like stories, and that the stories that are being told are as much the researcher’s own narrative as anybody else’s. The question about what case studies look like will likely raise the following questions for novices engaged in doing case study research. How are such narratives constructed? How can I intersect powerful storytelling with academic forms of writing preferred by many venues for dissemination? To what extent is my voice woven into the narrative? Can I really represent the story of another?

We also anticipate that beginning case study researchers will pose a question like *what is the role of theory in doing case study research?* Hancock and Algozzine’s aim is to provide a text that helps beginners *do* case study rather than bogging them down in concepts and theories. Still, they offer ideas about the nature of research in their brief introduction to Part One. In this part, they provide a juxtaposition of qualitative and quantitative research. Positioning this idea in dialogue with Stake (1995), research issues are made more complicated, suggesting that these two things should not be positioned side by side. Rather, Stake argues that they are instead different kinds of emphases within a broad array of opportunities for multiple and alternative ways of understanding. As a result, he highlights “the centrality of [personal] interpretation” in case study research (p. 42). Although assumptions about the nature of knowing and being in the world are not always articulated, they are embodied in every methodological choice and manifest themselves in each step taken in doing case study research. *Epistemological awareness* refers to informed and clearly articulated positions that are taken regarding knowledge and truth in relation to the choices of method and claims in a research project (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). Developing epistemological awareness is an ongoing and challenging endeavor that poses questions for novice and experienced researchers alike. How does epistemology manifest itself in design choices including the formulation of research questions, the selection of cases, and any decisions made about data generation and interpretation? How do I explain these choices and when or in what ways should I make them visible? Where does this articulation fit within a narrative case study approach? Can I cross borders and blur methodological boundaries? How do I know if my case study is good? What validity or other kinds of quality criteria do I use?

We conclude by considering one final question. *How do we teach and learn to do case study research?* Should emphasis be given to *doing* case study (e.g., addressing consideration of methods like finding a site, constructing research questions, generating field notes, conducting interviews, analyzing data, and writing a case report)? Instead, should we emphasize exploring epistemological principles, ethics, and values rather than techniques (Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011)? *Doing Case Study Research* provides a practical resource for beginning researchers who want a prescriptive step by step guide. In this review, we explored the dialogue between this book and a more complex companion text as per the authors’ suggestion. We agree that the complicated and at times contradictory writing about case study research is often confusing for novice researchers. Also, the challenge is exacerbated because, as Hancock and Algozzine point out, the term case study is sometimes used as a *catch all* category for research that is neither experimental nor statistical in nature. Still, we find it problematic to portray theory and method as if they are separate things that can exist in isolation. We propose that learning to do case study research is a non-linear process and that it does not occur in stages from simple to complex. Instead, doing case study research involves an ongoing dialogue between simple and complex, among places to hold onto, and ask for a willingness to embrace uncertainty. Toward that end, the authors offer a solid launching point for critical departures and safe returns.

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: May 31, 2017
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 21995, Date Accessed: 6/9/2017 9:02:35 AM

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