

Chapter 1

Case Study: Defining and Differentiating Among Types of Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Case studies have been widely used across a number of disciplines including health, business management, education, law, and in the social sciences. The purpose of this chapter is to define and differentiate types of case studies, discuss the pros and cons of single versus multiple case studies, explore the necessary processes for engaging in this technique, and explain how data is collected and analyzed. A variety of data gathering methods are discussed to identify the challenges to be confronted, and the skills necessary to engage in this methodology. The author identifies how qualitative and quantitative techniques are used in case study analysis. Methods to maximize researcher objectivity, reliability and validity are examined by focusing on data collection, document management, and data analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly every discipline has made use of case studies, but they are defined in a variety of ways and for multiple purposes. They are particularly beneficial in pragmatic disciplines where theoretical models can be applied to real life situations. Case studies are generally classified as qualitative research. Whereas quantitative data focuses on numerical comparisons and statistical inferences, qualitative data focuses on conceptual meanings. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), qualitative

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research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (p. 2). This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. There is disagreement on the limitations of case study research (Yin, 2009; Flyberrg, 2010; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier 2013, Vannoni, 2015). The researcher's philosophical theory has a strong impact on how they perceive of case studies and the limitations they set for assessing the quality of the study. This chapter will address the relationship between researcher theory and case study implementation.

It is not feasible to adequately address the processes involved with case studies in one or even a few chapters. In this chapter, the author provides a general understanding, an overview, of the relationship between researcher goal and case study design and implementation. One of the primary goals of the chapter is to identify the various ways in which case studies can be used, and the value they can provide in research and non-research contexts, with an emphasis on the latter. After reading this chapter, the reader should have a comprehensive idea of the skills needed to engage in the various types of case studies, and the challenges the researcher will likely confront. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of case study and method selection, theorizing, and differing viewpoints on the limitations in conducting case studies.

PURPOSES AND TYPES OF CASE STUDIES

Because there are a variety of case studies with differing definitions, the author prefers a very broad definition that covers all types: A case study is a “documented study of a specific real-life situation or imagined scenario either used as a training tool or a vehicle to present analysis and conclusions” (Business Dictionary).

McLeod (2010) identifies a number of ways in which case studies are particularly useful: identification of good versus poor outcomes, highlighting previously neglected issues, exploring the meaning of contradictory findings from a previously conducted large-scale case study, and in practitioner or student training and assessment.

Case studies involve depth as well as breath. In some circumstances, they may be described as complimentary research approaches vis-a-vis other methodologies. In other circumstances, they can withstand the tests of reliability and validity. Case analysis is theory-driven analysis in which one or multiple cases are used to identify factors underlying key issues. A survey of the literature on case studies indicates a clear emphasis on discipline-based practices and procedures. While the case study process is relevant to numerous disciplines, it is nevertheless, developed and explained theoretically within the confines of the discipline of the researcher/s involved.

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