

Revisiting Case Study Method of Social Research Examining Its Cardinal Attributes and Its Potential for Generating Authoritative Knowledge

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Abstract: A Case Study is one of the most popular and widely used methods in social research. Though case studies primarily involve qualitative research techniques, they can also make use of quantitative methods, thus, providing a fascinating turf for the interplay of both qualitative and quantitative methods in carrying out a social research. This paper is an attempt to study and examine the primary attributes of a case-study method and its potential for generating authoritative knowledge. Some of the major dimensions of a case study being reviewed and dealt with in this paper include –a) the debates surrounding the enunciation of precise definitions and key characteristics of a case study method b) the types of researches where case studies can be most aptly employed c) the relative utility and merits/demerits of case studies vis-à-vis other methods of qualitative research d) the issues of reliability and validity of a case study method and e) the seemingly unending debate surrounding the role of a case study in effecting broader generalizations and its future promise.

Keywords: case study protocol, generalization, reliability, replication, research design.

I. Introduction

A CASE STUDY is an intensive and detailed analysis of a single social unit (an organization, group, event, institution etc.) which stands out as a typical example or quintessence of a class of phenomenon. The social unit is studied in its totality and not in terms of some specific variable. Case studies make use of several methods of data collection (questionnaires, interviews, surveys, participant/non-participant observations, documentary studies etc.) in order to have an in-depth and extensive knowledge of the unit under study. Case study methods are widely used when ethnographies are undertaken. Some of the landmark social researches being conducted using case study method include Union Democracy (1956) by Seymour Lipset, Middletown: A study in American Culture (1929) by Robert Lynd and Street Corner Society (1955) by William Whyte. A case study may be descriptive or explanatory or even exploratory. However, since case studies involve intensive study of only one social unit, doubts are often raised about their utility in contributing towards broader generalizations and theories.

II. Some Definitions Of Case Study

Yin (2009:18) defines case study as an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined, and in which multiple sources of data collection are used. Case study is not a method of data collection. It is a research strategy or design that makes in-depth investigation of a social unit. Any method of data collection can be used provided it is practical and ethical.

Creswell (2007:73): Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (observation, interview, audiovisual method, documents etc.) and reports a case description or case-based themes. A case-study is at once a methodology, a research strategy or design, an object of enquiry as well as a product of enquiry.

David de Vaus (2001:220): A case is an “object” of enquiry. It is a unit of analysis about which we collect detailed information. In case study design, a unit is studied as a whole within its context. The unit of analysis may be an individual, a family, a household, a community, an organization, an event or a decision.

Abercrombie et al. (2006): A case study is a detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomenon. It is often used in the preliminary stages of an investigation (but often as a primary research strategy) since it provides hypothesis which can be tested systematically using a large number of cases.

III. Characteristics Of Case Study

Sarantakos (1998:192) highlights the following distinguishing characteristics of case-study.

- It studies whole units in their totality and not some selected aspects or variables of these units.
- It employs several methods of data collection to avoid errors and distortions.
- It might study a typical or an atypical case.
- The researcher generally studies one unit but may also study multiple comparable units for theory testing or for making some generalization.

Goode and Hatt (1952:331) say that case studies emphasize an understanding of the whole case and seeing the case within its wider context. A case study is a way of organizing social data..... to preserve the unitary character of the object being studied..... it is an approach which sees any social unit as a whole. Yin (2009) also identifies some attributes of a case study. First, the case is a “bounded system”: it has boundaries. The boundaries between the case and the context may not be necessarily clearly evident. Nonetheless, the researcher needs to identify and describe the boundaries of the case as clearly as possible. Second, there should be an explicit attempt to preserve the wholeness, unity and integrity of the case. The word “holistic” is often used in this connection. Third, multiple sources of data and multiple data collection methods are likely to be used, typically in a naturalistic setting. Many case studies may use sociological and anthropological field methods, such as observations in natural settings, interviews and narrative reports. But they may also use questionnaires and statistical/numerical data. This means that a case study is not necessarily a qualitative technique and it may also involve quantitative techniques, though most case studies are predominantly qualitative.

Flyvbjerg (2006/2011) identifies five common misunderstandings about case-study research. He says the following statements about case-studies are too “categorical”. A researcher must avoid these misconceptions about case studies:

- General, theoretical knowledge is more important than concrete, practical knowledge.
- One cannot generalize on the basis of a single case and, hence, case studies do not contribute to scientific knowledge.
- Case studies are more useful for generating hypothesis while other methods are more suitable for hypothesis testing and theory building.
- Case studies contain a bias towards verification i.e. a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions.
- It is often difficult to develop general propositions/theories on the basis of specific case studies.

IV. Types Of Case Studies

Stake (1994) distinguishes three main types of case studies:

- Intrinsic Case Study – where the study is undertaken because the researcher wants a better understanding of a particular case.
- Instrumental Case Study – where a particular case is studied to give insight into an issue, or to refine a theory.
- Collective Case Study – where the instrumental case study is extended to cover several cases, to learn more about the phenomenon.

The first two of these are single case studies, where the focus is within the case. The third involve multiple cases, where the focus is both within and across cases. It is also called multiple case study or comparative case study. Yin (2009) also highlights several types of case study designs. They may be descriptive, explanatory or exploratory; theory testing or theory building; retrospective or prospective; critical case where the researcher has a well developed theory and a case is chosen on the ground that it will allow a better understanding of the circumstances in which the hypothesis will or will not hold; representative or exemplifying case where the case is the typical or quintessential example of a class of phenomena.

V. Some Classical Case Studies

- Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union by S. Lipset and J. Coleman (1956).
- Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum by William Foote Whyte (1943).
- Middletown: A study in American Culture (1929) and Middletown in Transition (1937) by Robert and Helen Lynd (1929/1937).
- Tally’s Corner by E. Liebow (1967).
- Yankee City: A study of Modern American Culture by W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt (1941).

Middletown : A Study of Modern American Culture

By Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd (1929)

Middletown is one of the most famous case studies of all times in American social sciences. The authors lived upto 18 months in the city being studied, during the mid-1920s. The authors deliberately chose a medium-sized city as an average city in the US, as 'representative of possible contemporary American life'. The authors are, however, careful to note that the study's findings can 'only with caution' be applied to other cities or the American life in general. The case study is descriptive and the authors' theoretical perspective focuses on a significant development in all of American history: the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy that occurred in American cities as part of the industrial revolution. The resulting work was so well received that the authors returned to the city 10 years later, eventually producing a follow-up book 'Middletown in Transition' (1965). [Yin 2004: 25-26].

"The aim of the field investigation was to study synchronously the interwoven trend that are the life of a small American city...The stubborn resistance that the 'social problems' offer may be related in part to the common habit of piecemeal attack on them. Students of human behavior are recognizing increasingly, however, that 'the different aspects of civilization interlock intertwine, presenting in a word – a continuum'. The present investigation, accordingly, set out to approach the life of people in the city selected as a unit complex of interwoven trends of behavior.

Two major difficulties present themselves at the outset of such a total-situation study of a contemporary civilization. First, there is the danger, never wholly avoidable, of not being completely objective in viewing a culture in which one's life is embedded. Second, granted that no one phase of life can be adequately understood with a study of all the rest, how to set about the investigation of such a complex whole. A clue to securing both the maximum objectivity and of some kind of orderly procedure in such a maze can be found in the approach of the cultural anthropologists. There is, after all, despite infinite variations in detail, not so many major kinds of things that people do...This study, accordingly, proceeds on the assumption that all the things people do in this American city may be viewed as falling under one of the following main trunk-activities: a) getting a living b) making a home c) training the young d) using leisure e) engaging in religious practices and f) engaging in community activities.

The study is aimed at bringing forth the major changes the city has undergone as a part of the industrial revolution. The year 1890 was selected as the baseline. Based on available data, the objectively observed behavior is reconstructed as compared to today (1924) to study the changes in the cultural patterns. The case study involves this narrow strip of 35 years (from 1890 to 1924, the year the study was started)...So comprehensive an approach involves the use of data of widely varying degrees of overtness and statistical adequacy. Some type of behavior lie open to observation over the whole period since 1890; in other cases, only slight wisps of evidence are obtainable. Much folk tale, for instance – the rattle of conversation that goes on around luncheon table, on street corners, or while waiting for a basketball game to commence – is here presented, not because it offers scientifically valid evidence, but because it affords indispensable insights into the moods and habits of thought of the city...." [Lynd and Lynd (1929); Source: Yin 2004: 27-32].

VI. Longitudinal Research And Case Study

Alan Bryman (2008) says that case study research frequently includes a longitudinal element. The researcher is often a participant of an organization or member of a community for several months or years. Alternately, he or she may conduct interviews with individuals over a lengthy period. Moreover, a researcher may be able to inject an additional longitudinal element by analyzing archival information or by retrospective interviewing. Another way in which a longitudinal element occurs is when a case that has been studied is returned to at a later stage. A particularly interesting instance of this is the Middletown study (mentioned earlier). The town was initially studied by Lynd and Lynd in 1929 and was restudied to discern trends and changes in 1937.

VII. Designing A Case Study

Yin (2009) says that the first effort, as always, is to set up the research question. The research question should be focused. Yin suggests that the researcher develop propositions linking the research question to specific things that will be carefully examined in the study. The research question should be rigorously determined because the way the research question is set up will define the actual unit of analysis in the study. The units of analysis depend on the exact nature of the research question. In a study focused on a particular event, the unit of analysis is the event. In a study focused on how decisions are made, the unit of analysis is the decision-making process. And in a study on how decisions are implemented, the unit of analysis is the implementation process.

While collecting data, Yin (2009) suggests that a researcher should strive for three goals. First, they must seek multiple sources of evidence, such as data from surveys, interviews, focus groups, documents, official records etc. Second, a researcher must develop and maintain a case study database. It may include aggregated responses to survey questions, responses to specific interviews, case study documents, notes from observations, narratives statistical data etc. Third, Yin stresses the need to maintain a chain of evidence. He compares this strategy to that of a criminological investigation where all the facts need to be gathered, their relevance to the case assessed, and the logical links between the facts and other forms of evidence carefully connected and addressed to the problem at hand.

VIII. Case Study Vis-À-Vis Other Qualitative Approaches

Creswell (2007:53-81) makes distinction among five major approaches to qualitative inquiry: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography and case study based on their central purposes or focuses. While the focus of a narrative is on exploring the life of an individual, that of phenomenology is a concept or phenomenon and the “essence” of the lived experiences of persons about the phenomenon. In grounded theory, the aim is to develop a theory on the basis of data collected from the field, whereas, in ethnography, the focus is on culture and its purpose is to describe or interpret a culture-sharing group. In a case study, a specific case is examined often with the intent of examining an issue with the case illustrating the complexity of the issue. It also entails a holistic and in-depth description or analysis of a case or multiple cases.

IX. Issues Of Reliability, Validity And Ethics

External validity addresses whether the findings of a study can be generalized to other cases. Yin argues, in a case study, the issue is not to generalize for some broader population because a case study is not based on a sample. Rather, as in an experiment, we need to test the external validity through replication. The problem of establishing internal validity arises when a case study seeks to explain a particular phenomenon. In such a study, a spurious unmeasured factor, rather than a proposed cause, might actually account for the result. Since case studies are done in natural settings, it does not even allow the researcher to even attempt to reduce extraneous factors. But a researcher should carefully consider all the possible unmeasured factors and then find out what effects such factors might have.

The reliability of a case study can be best established by developing a protocol for the case study. A protocol is a written comprehensive outline of how the study is to be carried out. Yin (2009) suggests that the protocol should have the following sections a) an overview of the entire project including its objectives b) a description of field procedures including sources of information and various reminders of how to operate in the field c) the questions to be answered in the study which will guide the data collection and d) the guide for preparing the final case study report.

The same ethical principles that apply to other research designs apply to case study also. David de Vaus (2001) says that since case studies employ a range of data collection techniques, a greater range of ethical issues will arise when using a case study design than with other designs. The particular ethical issue confronted will vary, depending on the case design adopted and the particular form of data collection used for that design. For example, the ethical issues will be different if the case study involves an active intervention or a passive intervention. The ethical issues will also vary according to whether data are collected by interviewing individuals, using informants, passive observations or by using participant observation.

X. Case Study And Issue Of Generalization, Theory-Building And Theory-Testing

Case study method is often criticized on the ground that it is not possible to generalize from the intensive study of a single case. Case studies are primarily ideographic and nomothetic study from them is difficult. However Punch (2005) believes that many of these criticisms are being overdone. Such an over the top reaction against case studies completely obscures their significance. At first, case studies can be very useful in testing a particular theoretical formulation. Further, since a case generally exemplifies a particular class of phenomenon, its in-depth study can generate important hypotheses which can then be tested in comparable case situations. If such a hypothesis is found to hold water or replicate through multiple similar cases, it can help us in moving towards theory building or generalization. Yin (2009) says that since a case is not representative of a sample of cases, it cannot form the basis for statistical generalizations. However, case studies allow for “analytic generalizations in which a previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study”. Such generalizations strengthen the explanatory power of the study. Classic case studies in the literature have often enabled researchers studying cases in very different places and at different times to find similar processes and similar explanations operating.

Blaikie [2000: 222] holds that the question of whether it is possible to generalize from case studies has to do with how cases are selected. Researchers may feel more comfortable generalizing if they work with ‘typical’ cases i.e. if the case being studied can be shown to be similar to other cases in terms of relevant characteristics. However, the difficulty lies in the demonstration whether a particular case study is typical rather than unique. Platt [1988: 17-19] is in favor of generalizing from case studies. She holds ‘a single case may be a useful source of hypotheses, or refuting a universal generalization, or demonstrates the existence of a phenomenon which needs to be taken into account....Case Studies can be used to generalize even if some of the ways less than accepted’.

Eckstein (1975) has identified five theory-related roles, each linked to one of his five uses of case studies.

- Understanding: configurative-ideographic studies (use descriptions to provide understanding);

- Linked to theory: disciplined-comparative theory (each case is viewed in the context of an established or at least a provisional theory);
- Theory building: heuristic studies (more than one case study is conducted in series to facilitate theory development);
- Exploring theoretical possibilities: plausibility probes (A plausibility probe attempts to establish whether a theoretical construct is worth considering at all, by, perhaps, finding an empirical instance of it);
- Testing theory: crucial-case studies (are similar to crucial experiments and are designed to challenge an existing theory);

XI. Conclusion

This paper, in its various sections above, highlights the key elements of the case study method in order to demystify several of its intricacies. Its utility as a research methodology is so widely acknowledged that it is now used in an array of social science disciplines. Since a case study studies a phenomenon exhaustively, it should be studies using different techniques of data collections. A case study undertaking requires not only immense patience and meticulousness but also every attempt by the researcher to 'bracket out' their preconceptions and biases. Even if the researcher holds some values, as suggested by Weber (1917/49), they should be made clear upfront. As regards generalization using case study, we have seen earlier that many scholars are now in favor of rudimentary level generalizations. However, requisite caution must be maintained especially while going for broader level generalizations. As Mitchell (1983) puts it, case studies are mainly ideographic and attempts at finding a 'typical' case study to carry out a nomothetic study are not only tricky but also arduous.

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