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A Case Study Primer: Origins and basic Principles

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Abstract- Case studies are a highly utilized methodology in the field of qualitative research. The case study approach is appealing to researchers across the continuum from beginners to experts. Unlike quantitative data that focuses upon numerical implications and statistics, case studies allow the researcher to use various observational tools to collect indepth data about a given research inquiry. This data collection tends to focus on a single case or group, and often includes a more human or behavioral sense of direction within the confines of the research setting. Case study practitioners also wish to see the interaction of subjects within this research setting, as opposed to treating these subjects as wholly individualized entities.

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A Case Study Primer: Origins and basic Principles

Chris Sclafani

Abstract- Case studies are a highly utilized methodology in the field of qualitative research. The case study approach is appealing to researchers across the continuum from beginners to experts. Unlike quantitative data that focuses upon numerical implications and statistics, case studies allow the researcher to use various observational tools to collect in-depth data about a given research inquiry. This data collection tends to focus on a single case or group, and often includes a more human or behavioral sense of direction within the confines of the research setting. Case study practitioners also wish to see the interaction of subjects within this research setting, as opposed to treating these subjects as wholly individualized entities.

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I. Introduction

There will be times when the numbers are unable to tell the whole story. It is true that statistical methods can provide high quality data in a multitude of areas, but many times there is far more to research than that which can be deemed "statistically significant". Thus, one must turn to qualitative research in instances where numerical work would not be suitable. Often, qualitative methods fulfill the need for a more in-depth introspective related to the topic of choice. Within this world of qualitative research, there is the 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, p.xi). The strength of this type of research is its ability to provide detailed and extensive observational data and analysis that is both focused and understandable in relation to the stated or potentially constructed goals of the researcher. The case study eschews breadth in the name of providing depth. "The researcher who embarks on case study research is usually interested in a specific phenomenon and wishes to understand it completely, not by controlling variables but rather by observing all of the variables and their interacting relationships" (Dooley, 2002, p.336). Dooley (2002) highlights some key concepts when he acknowledges that there are specific differences in the way a given variable is approached and viewed when compared to quantitative methods, and also in his identification of a "complete" comprehension of a given situation or setting by case studies.

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II. Origins

Many current writers postulate that the case study is among the first methodologies to find traction in the community of qualitative authorship. "Arguably the case study was the first method of social science. Depending upon one's understanding of the method, it may extend back to the earliest historical accounts or to mythic accounts of past events" (Gerring, 2007, p. x). The previous quote not only discusses the birth of the case study, but it also hints at the ideology that these studies have an instinctive and natural quality about them. If one does not accept the notion that case studies date back to early points in written human history, there are more recent scholars that must be noted. "The case study has a long and neglected history, starting with Frederic LePlay (1806-1882), and the so-called Chicago school in the United States, including such luminaries as Herbert Blumer, Ernest W. Burgess, Everett C. Hughes, George Herbert Mead, Robert Park, Robert Redfield, William I. Thomas, Louis Wirth, and Florian Znaniecki" (Gerring, 2007, p. x). It must be added that although the Chicago school played an important role in the proliferation of case studies, their work came after the work of France's Frederic Le Play, who is often given credit for the introduction of this method during the 1800's. Tellis (1997) makes further distinctions of the origins of case study research.

> "The earliest use of this form of research can be traced to Europe, predominantly to France. The methodology in the United States was most closely associated with The University of Chicago Department of Sociology. From the early 1900's until 1935, The Chicago School was preeminent in the field and the source of a great deal of the literature." (p. 2)

Here, it can be inferred that Tellis' reference to France is likely directly pointing to the work of Le Play, who Gerring (2007) also credits with being the pioneer of case study methodology. Although LePlay primarily researched items in the financial realm, case studies are used in a wide range of fields. "Case studies are a standard method of empirical study in various 'soft sciences' such as sociology, medicine, and psychology" (Kitchenham, Pickard, & Pfleeger, 1995, p.52). Clearly, the diversity of acceptable usage areas for a case study is another strength of this research method.

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III. Data Collection Methods

Those who select to perform case studies will have a wide array of data collection modalities that could be potentially utilized. There are no strict limitations upon exactly how these studies must be done, but rather the user is offered a looser framework that honors diverse forms of data beyond simple field notes (though field notes are certainly acceptable). Rossman and Rallis (2011) touch upon the data recording process.

> Case studies may use questionnaires, archival records, or psychological testing in addition to interviewing, observing, and analyzing documents. Just as with ethnographies, case studies are methodologically eclectic. Whatever his choice of techniques, the researcher immerses himself in the case setting or individual of interest. (p.118)

One can see how a case study format is ideal for researchers ranging from beginning or intermediate researchers to high level professionals with very detailed goals. For those newer to data collection methods, the aforementioned variety of approaches allow for experimentation with different techniques, and is therefore more forgiving to this form of risk-taking. Conversely, experts are then able to play to the data collection methods that they have mastered, all while taking the opportunity to potentially hone in on any method in need of some additional work. Flyvberg (2006) actually makes the assertion that case studies lead to one becoming an expert in a given topic matter. "It is only because of experience with cases that one can at all move from being a beginner to being an expert." (Flyvberg, 2006, p.224). The argument is furthered when Flyvberg (2006) discusses the idea that case studies place a research question or phenomenon in the proper context, whereas basic research often points repeatedly to numbers or other people's work to make its points. Thus, contextualized understandings allow for the opportunity to see the idea or phenomenon "at work" in the most naturally achieved researchable state, leading to inferences and theories that would not be otherwise present in studies of another type. "Hence, a case study will never provide conclusions with statistical significance. On the contrary, many different kinds of evidence, figures, statements, documents, are linked together to support a strong and relevant conclusion" (Runeson & Host, 2009, p.7). Here it is abundantly clear that there is a high level of validity to claims and postulations made by properly conducted case studies regardless of the lack of "hard numbers" to support them.

IV. Cross-Case Study

It has been established that qualitative studies do not need to be readily generalized to the larger population, or determine predictability to be considered a success. "Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive. In contrast with quantitative approaches, which attempt to control and predict, qualitative research focuses on descriptive analysis and interpretation" (Rossman & Rallis, 2011, p.27). These points do not mean that pertinent theory cannot be constructed from case study methods. Kathleen Eisenhardt (1989) advocates that cross-case study observations are one possible way in which theory can be confirmed or uncovered by researchers.

> Overall, the idea behind cross-case searching tactics is to force investigators to go beyond initial impressions, especially through the use of structured and diverse lenses on the data. These tactics improve the likelihood of accurate and reliable theory, that is, a theory with a close fit to the data. Also, cross-case searching tactics enhance the probability that the investigators will capture the novel findings which may exist in the data. (p.541)

It is important to note that this author initially advocates utilizing multiple case studies to provide evidence for theory. Additionally, in the latter portion of the quote, Eisenhardt (1989) makes another important strength of cross-case searching. There will be items that might not occur across all studies, and these could also be potential points of analysis for the researchers (p.541). These "red herrings" are frequently causes for additional study and analysis. These could be critical incidents that call for further review regarding the circumstances and conditions that led to this occurrence. McGuiggan and Lee (2008) support this idea as well. "A general analytic strategy identifies important differences in the patterns observed as a way to develop a theoretically significant explanation for the different outcomes" (McGuiggan & Lee, 2008, p.2). Once more, it is not only the consistencies between studies, but the inconsistencies that must be brought to light. The collection of data from multiple case studies carried out by a researcher or group of researchers appears to lend strength to the claims and implications that are listed in that study. Less common items appear to be even rarer due to the glut of data, and repeated themes are more pervasive throughout the fibers of many different sources of data. Using cross-case analysis allows the study to have some manner of breadth in the context of a research methodology that typically aims primarily towards depth.

While these cross-case methods have their defined merits, it should not wholly supplant the usage of a single, deep case study. Yin (1981) argues against forcing a cross-case study. "The number of case studies must be large enough to warrant cross-case tabulations" (p.62). There will be times when it is perhaps more appropriate to look deeply at a singular case that is clearly representative of that which the study demands

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than to pull in voluminous cases. Also, there is high potential for relevant information and important findings in lone studies, due to both the flexibility in the ways that data is gathered, and the very nature of the inward-looking perspectives given by case studies. A single study could serve as the launching pad for future research.

V. Conclusion

It is crucial to note that cross-case or singular case studies are both important methods, and that the researcher must decide which is a better fit for the given study, as one is not inherently and independently better than the other. However, it is the research context that dictates what one would select for a given pursuit. Regardless of these nuances. the case study is a flexible, informative, and powerful weapon in the arsenal of any qualitative researcher. Researchers are empowered to look with the depth required to answer their research inquiries, and to see far beyond the surface of a given scenario.

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