Qualitative Case Study Research as Empirical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of qualitative case study research as empirical inquiry. It defines and distinguishes what a case study is, the purposes, intentions, and types of case studies. It then describes how to determine if a qualitative case study is the preferred approach for conducting research. It overviews the essential steps in designing qualitative case study research, including the role of literature and theory, approaches for collecting data and analyzing it, as well as how to write up and present case study findings. It articulates how to avoid common pitfalls when engaging in qualitative case study research and concludes with the strengths and limitations associated with this form of empirical inquiry.

KEYWORDS

Case Study Research, CAQDAS, Phenomenological Case Study, Qualitative Case Study Research

INTRODUCTION

Case study, as a “distinctive form of empirical inquiry,” (Yin, 2014, p. 19) is a popular and prevalent form of social science research that is widely used in many disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology, social work, nursing, education, business, community planning, economics and political science (Baskarada, 2014; Merriam, 1998; 2009; Thomas, 2011; Stake, 1995, 2010; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2003, 2012, 2014). Yet, despite its prevalence, there remain misconceptions, misunderstandings, along with concerns associated with rigor (da Mota Pedrosa, Naslund, & Jasmand, 2012; Ellram, 1996; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; Tetnowski, 2015; Rule & John, 2015; Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2014). In terms of misconceptions, Ellram (1996) has indicated that some of the common misconceptions are that case study research and the use of teaching cases are closely related, that case studies are only appropriate at the exploratory phase of an investigation and cannot be used to describe or test propositions (Yin, 2014), case studies lack rigor and require large numbers to provide meaningful results which are not generalizable, and that anyone can do a case study (p. 94).

Similarly, Flyvbjerg (2006) has acknowledged that there are five common misunderstandings about the nature of case study research: that context-independent knowledge is more valuable than context-dependent knowledge, that individual case studies cannot be generalized and therefore do not make contributions, that they are most useful for generating hypotheses, not for hypotheses testing and theory building, that they tend to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions, and that it is challenging to develop general propositions and theories from specific case studies (p. 221). Lastly,
Case study research is often critiqued for a lack of attention to rigor regarding issues associated with validity and reliability (Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012). Yet, despite these issues, some scholars contend that “case studies have provided the management field with some of its most ground-breaking insights” (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010, p. 711). Further, Siggelkow (2007) suggested that there are three valuable uses of cases which include, “the immersion in rich case data enables… inspiration for new ideas… can also help sharpen existing theory by pointing to gaps and beginning to fill them… and, in the context of making a conceptual contribution is to employ them as illustration” (p. 21).

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to define what case study is, and is not, the purposes, intentions, and types of case study research, when case study is the preferred approach, and the roles of literature and theory in case study research. It will also address issues associated with rigor, considerations for how to design case studies, how to collect and analyze case study evidence, the use of technology to assist with data management, and how to report findings. In particular, a qualitative perspective will be undertaken with regard to case study research to enable students, researchers and practitioners to more effectively and rigorously develop and evaluate qualitative case study research.

Distinguishing and defining case study in general and qualitative case study in particular

Scholars contend that there is often confusion about what a case study is and suggest that case study research is distinct from case studies used for teaching and case study records (Ellram, 1996; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Yin, 2012, 2014). Case study research is designed to “explain, explore, or describe a phenomenon of interest” (Ellram, 1996, p. 94) whereas the use of case study in teaching refers to the provision of cases that enable students to engage in discussions and debate as well as make decisions and solve problems in a real-life context. Further, case records used as a form of recordkeeping in the social work and medical contexts are not reflective of case study research. While case records may be developed for case study research, the criteria for doing so differs from that of practice (Yin, 2014).

There are many definitions that have been developed for case study in general and qualitative case study in particular. According to Meredith (1998), case study research “typically uses multiple methods and tools for data collection from a number of entities by a direct observer(s), in a single, natural setting that considers temporal and contextual aspects of the contemporary phenomenon under study, but without experimental controls or manipulations” (pp. 442-443). Yin (2014) offered a two-fold definition that captures both the scope of case study research and its features which he contends “comprises an all-encompassing method” and one that is applicable to different epistemological orientations. For Yin (2014), “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). Further, he suggested that “a case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p. 17).

Yin (2014) contended that this definition of case study research can be oriented toward a realist perspective but can also accommodate a relativist perspective. A realist perspective “assumes the existence of a single reality that is independent of any observer” whereas a relativist perspective acknowledges that there are “multiple realities having multiple meanings” (p. 17). Therefore, case study research can be quantitative, qualitative and mixed-design, and may also be used for conducting evaluations (Ellinger, Watkins, & Marsick, 2005; Tetnowski, 2015; Yin, 2014). White, Drew, and Hay (2009) suggested that Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) paradigm positions placed case study “at the conservative end of the qualitative research continuum” (p. 21). However, they noted that Willis (2007) considered case study to be used by critical and interpretivist researchers. According to Willis
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