Case Study Research

Definition and Background

The entire culture-sharing group in ethnography may be considered a case, but the intent in ethnography is to determine how the culture works rather than to understand an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration. Thus, case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context). Although Stake (2005) states that case study research is not a methodology but a choice of what is to be studied (i.e., a case within a bounded system), others present it as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). I choose to view it as a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, or an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry. 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 (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. For example, several programs (a multi-site study) or a single program (a within-site study) may be selected for study.

The case study approach is familiar to social scientists because of its popularity in psychology (Freud), medicine (case analysis of a problem), law (case law), and political science (case reports). Case study research has a long, distinguished history across many disciplines. Hamel, Dufour, and Fortin (1993) trace the origin of modern social science case studies through anthropology and sociology. They cite anthropologist Malinowski’s study of the Trobriand Islands, French sociologist LePlay’s study of families, and the case studies of the University of Chicago Department of Sociology from the 1920s and 30s through the 1950s (e.g., Thomas and Znaniecki’s 1958 study of Polish peasants in Europe and America) as antecedents of qualitative case study research. Today, the case study writer has a large array of texts and approaches from which to choose. Yin (2003), for example, espouses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to case study development and discusses explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive qualitative case studies. Merriam (1998) advocates a general approach to qualitative case studies in the field of education. Stake (1995) systematically establishes procedures for case study research and cites them extensively in his example of “Harper School.” Stake’s most recent book on multiple case study analysis presents a step-by-step approach and provides rich illustrations of multiple case studies in the Ukraine, Slovakia, and Romania (Stake, 2006).
Types of Case Studies

Types of qualitative case studies are distinguished by the size of the bounded case, such as whether the case involves one individual, several individuals, a group, an entire program, or an activity. They may also be distinguished in terms of the intent of the case analysis. Three variations exist in terms of intent: the single instrumental case study, the collective or multiple case study, and the intrinsic case study. In a single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995), the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue. In a collective case study (or multiple case study), the one issue or concern is again selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue. The researcher might select for study several programs from several research sites or multiple programs within a single site. Often the inquirer purposefully selects multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue. Yin (2003) suggests that the multiple case study design uses the logic of replication, in which the inquirer replicates the procedures for each case. As a general rule, qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalize from one case to another because the contexts of cases differ. To best generalize, however, the inquirer needs to select representative cases for inclusion in the qualitative study. The final type of case study design is an intrinsic case study in which the focus is on the case itself (e.g., evaluating a program, or studying a student having difficulty—see Stake, 1995) because the case presents an unusual or unique situation. This resembles the focus of narrative research, but the case study analytic procedures of a detailed description of the case, set within its context or surroundings, still hold true.

Procedures for Conducting a Case Study

Several procedures are available for conducting case studies (see Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This discussion will rely primarily on Stake’s (1995) approach to conducting a case study.

- First, researchers determine if a case study approach is appropriate to the research problem. A case study is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases.

- Researchers next need to identify their case or cases. These cases may involve an individual, several individuals, a program, an event, or an activity. In conducting case study research, I recommend that investigators first consider what type of case study is most promising and useful. The case can be single or collective, multi-sited or within-site, focused on a case or on an issue
Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry

In choosing which case to study, an array of possibilities for **purposeful sampling** is available. I prefer to select cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process, or event I want to portray (called “purposeful maximal sampling,”; Creswell, 2005), but I also may select ordinary cases, accessible cases, or unusual cases.

- The data collection in case study research is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. For example, Yin (2003) recommends six types of information to collect: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, and physical artifacts.

- The type of analysis of these data can be a **holistic analysis** of the entire case or an **embedded analysis** of a specific aspect of the case (Yin, 2003). Through this data collection, a detailed description of the case (Stake, 1995) emerges in which the researcher details such aspects as the history of the case, the chronology of events, or a day-by-day rendering of the activities of the case. (The gunman case study in Appendix F involved tracing the campus response to a gunman for 2 weeks immediately following the near-tragedy on campus.) After this description (“relatively untested data”; Stake, 1995, p. 123), the researcher might focus on a few key issues (or **analysis of themes**), not for generalizing beyond the case, but for understanding the complexity of the case. One analytic strategy would be to identify issues within each case and then look for common themes that transcend the cases (Yin, 2003). This analysis is rich in the **context of the case** or setting in which the case presents itself (Merriam, 1988). When multiple cases are chosen, a typical format is to first provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, called a **within-case analysis**, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a **cross-case analysis**, as well as **assertions** or an interpretation of the meaning of the case.

- In the final interpretive phase, the researcher reports the meaning of the case, whether that meaning comes from learning about the issue of the case (an instrumental case) or learning about an unusual situation (an intrinsic case). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) mention, this phase constitutes the “lessons learned” from the case.

**Challenges**

One of the challenges inherent in qualitative case study development is that the researcher must identify his or her case. I can pose no clear solution to this challenge. The case study researcher must decide which bounded system to study, recognizing that several might be possible candidates for
this selection and realizing that either the case itself or an issue, which a case or cases are selected to illustrate, is worthy of study. The researcher must consider whether to study a single case or multiple cases. The study of more than one case dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases an individual studies, the less the depth in any single case. When a researcher chooses multiple cases, the issue becomes, “How many cases?” There is not a set number of cases. Typically, however, the researcher chooses no more than four or five cases. What motivates the researcher to consider a large number of cases is the idea of “generalizability,” a term that holds little meaning for most qualitative researchers (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Selecting the case requires that the researcher establish a rationale for his or her purposeful sampling strategy for selecting the case and for gathering information about the case. Having enough information to present an in-depth picture of the case limits the value of some case studies. In planning a case study, I have individuals develop a data collection matrix in which they specify the amount of information they are likely to collect about the case. Deciding the “boundaries” of a case—how it might be constrained in terms of time, events, and processes—may be challenging. Some case studies may not have clean beginning and ending points, and the researcher will need to set boundaries that adequately surround the case.

The Five Approaches Compared

All five approaches have in common the general process of research that begins with a research problem and proceeds to the questions, the data, the data analysis, and the research report. They also employ similar data collection processes, including, in varying degrees, interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. Also, a couple of potential similarities among the designs should be noted. Narrative research, ethnography, and case study research may seem similar when the unit of analysis is a single individual. True, one may approach the study of a single individual from any of these three approaches; however, the types of data one would collect and analyze would differ considerably. In narrative research, the inquirer focuses on the stories told from the individual and arranges these stories in chronological order. In ethnography, the focus is on setting the individuals’ stories within the context of their culture and culture-sharing group; in case study research, the single case is typically selected to illustrate an issue, and the researcher compiles a detailed description of the setting for the case. As Yin (2003) comments, “You would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions—believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (p. 13). My approach is to