
CASE STUDY RESEARCH

Researchers often refer to case studies when describing and modeling organisations and the practices within them. The case study approach is most often used when investigating something ‘*in depth*.’ A case study is a single unit of analysis in case research. Yin (2018) defines a case study as an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. For example, observations, interviews, audiovisual material and documentary evidence. A case study can be an in-depth study of a single individual, a group of people, a location, an organisation, or an event (Table 1). It can involve the use of different cases from the same organisation, to study different issues, or when researching the same issue in a variety of contexts within the same organisation. Case research can take the form of a longitudinal study of a single case, conducted over a number of years, or it can be an in-depth study conducted in a matter of weeks or months. It follows, therefore, that, when conducting a case study investigation, the researcher can often end up gathering data from a large number of people.

TABLE 1 TYPES OF CASE STUDY

Person	The study of one single individual, generally using several different research methods.
Group	The study of a single distinctive set of people, such as a group or team of people.
Location	The study of a particular place, and the way that it is used or regarded by people.
Organisation	The study of a single organisation, and the way that people act within it.
Event	The study of a particular social or cultural event, and the interpretation of that event by those participating with it.

Source: Hayes (2000:134)

Case studies benefit from the prior development of theoretical propositions, research questions, and techniques for collecting, handling and analysing data. In case research, the amount of data collected is often vast. This is particularly so in qualitative research. Consequently, the identification of prior research propositions and questions, however tentative they may be, is a crucial starting point (Yin, 2018). Guided by these research propositions and questions, the researcher is better placed to decide on the number and type of cases to be explored, and the methods to use when gathering and analysing data.

When adopting a case study approach, the researcher’s purpose is to focus on giving as full a description of the selected phenomenon and its meanings as possible (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997). The phenomenon in question can include individuals, groups, or organisations, and methods of

collecting appropriate data can include the use of interviews, surveys, observation, personal diaries, field notes, and archival data (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2012).

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

As with other research methods, the case study approach is considered to be a preferred way of conducting research in certain situations. Searle (1999) identifies four situations when it is considered advantageous to use the case study approach (Table 2.). First, the case study approach is particularly relevant when the aim is to stimulate new research. In the early stages of a research programme, it is often useful to begin with one or more case studies in order to generate a list of research ideas, questions, and hypotheses.

TABLE 2: TYPES OF CASE STUDY

Stimulating new research
Contradicting established theory
Giving new insights into phenomena or experience
Permitting investigations of otherwise inaccessible situations

Source: Searle (1999)

Because case studies are so rich in information, a case approach is also advantageous when there is a need to investigate little understood aspects of a particular phenomenon. Case study research is widely recognised as being particularly useful when examining the how and why questions (Yin, 2018), when the intention is to generate new insights into phenomena or experiences (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997), and when building theory (Denscombe, 2010). The case study approach is also a useful one to adopt when the aim is to test, refine, extend, or challenge established theory (Denscombe, 2010). Case research provides an excellent means of studying emergent practice, and relating it to existing theory. Another advantage of case research is that it enables the researcher to undertake investigations that would be otherwise impossible to conduct in controlled, laboratory-like conditions, or for ethical reasons. For example, Heron (1996) and Reason (1994), assert that research into the ‘condition’ of the organisation, and its people, should be done with them, not on them, or about them.

Whilst case study research has many advantages, there are also some criticisms. A common criticism is to do with the perceived excess of bias within case research. Case research methods produce a huge amount of complex data, and consequently, the researcher has to be selective in his, or her, treatment of the data. It is often pointed out that the case study approach is an open opportunity for the injection of subjective bias into the research findings. For example, Bromley (1986) refers to the way subjective judgments during the data collection stages can render constructs invalid. Identifying another potential source of bias, Searle (1999) points out that the researcher’s feelings for, and attitudes towards, the subjects may invalidate the research conclusions.

Commenting on the criticism that case study findings are potentially affected by the researcher's subjective attitudes and judgments, Hayes (1997) asserts that it is naïve, and impractical, for researchers to claim they have no impact on what they are studying when working in real organisations. The natural curiosity of people working in organisations, concerning the researcher, and his, or her, activities, causes them to develop their own theories about what is going on, and what lies behind the research activity. Furthermore, it is argued that it is both morally, and scientifically valid, to inform and involve subjects of research into organisational behaviour (Heron, 1996, Reason, 1994).

Another identified potential source of bias lies in the way some case studies are based on retrospective material. In such instances, information is gathered concerning peoples' recollections of past events and experiences. Commenting on the problems which the researcher faces when attempting to tap into peoples' recollections and understandings concerning past experiences, Hayes (2000) asserts that memories are notoriously subject to distortion. Looking back in time, people are naturally inclined to focus on factors they believe to have been important, while being unaware of other possible influences.

Approaching the issue of bias from a slightly different perspective, several researchers, including Heron (1996), focus on ethical aspects of case study research. When interviewing people, the researcher is often presented with information of a sensitive and confidential nature. On such occasions, the researcher is obliged to protect the identity of the interviewee and the organisation (Leach, 2009), and this ethical obligation can, at times, cause the researcher to with-hold vital information, when reporting his, or her, findings. At other times, and as Hayes (2000) emphasises, the researcher needs to be aware of the danger of becoming involved in a discussion which goes beyond his, or her, professional competence, and to take steps to avoid such a danger. However, the most common criticism of the case study approach is that it suffers from a lack of scientific rigor. Amaratunga and Baldry (2001) point to the ever-present dangers of ad hoc theorising and of neglecting to test the data. Other researchers, including Searle (1999) and Denscombe (2008:45), point out that case study research provides a limited basis for traditional scientific generalisation. Often, it is impossible to generalise from the results, since each case is likely to be atypical (Voss et al, 2002). Sometimes, however, it is possible to draw useful comparisons between findings from different cases, and, because of this, Amaratunga and Baldry (2001) and Yin (2018) recommend a multiple case study approach when theory building.

According to Hayes (2000), the criticism regarding the reliability of case study research is in some respects questionable. Often, the researcher is required to choose between a methodology which is likely to deliver reliable results, and one which is more likely to deliver valid results. The purpose of the case study approach is not to identify general laws and principles of human behaviour. Case studies are only used in this type of research to supplement, or illustrate, other research methods (Lennon and Wollin, 2001). Used in conjunction with other research methods, case study research is a useful approach to adopt when the overall aim is to develop a more rounded picture of the investigated phenomenon (Voss, et al, 2002; Yin, 2018).

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