

Case Study Methodology as an Appropriate Research Strategy in International Management Studies

Cristina Sales Baptista. Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Often, qualitative research has not been considered to be a rigorous alternative to established quantitative methods in management studies. This paper argues for the use of case study methodology as a thorough and precise research methodology particularly in the analysis of complex issues such as international management and cultural diversity that encompass the need for holistic perspectives.

The article reviews classic and recent contributions on case study research and presents advantages and constraints of this research strategy. Achieving a deeper understanding of case study research and its contribution, can serve as a catalyst for others to look constructively towards future case study research opportunities and problems.

Search Words:

Case Study Research Methodology; International Management Studies

INTRODUCTION

Albeit their frequent use and relatively long history, case study research is often regarded as a weak sibling among social science methods (Yin, 1994). One often quoted reason relates to the lack of quantitative measures in case study research, which translates, according to some authors, in lack of objectivity and exactitude (Patton and Appelhaum, 2003). In fact, the argumentation for weaker and stronger research approaches seems to be grounded in the dichotomy between the positivist and interpretative paradigms. The positivist paradigm is commonly associated to quantitative research approaches and methods, with explanation achieved through the formulation of causal laws or law-like generalizations attained by the objective collection of data, whilst the interpretative paradigm seeks explanation through descriptions of social meanings/ reasons and the collection of more subjective data (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to gain an insight on case study research strategy and argue for its pertinent usage when conducting research into international management studies.

WHY CASE STUDY RESEARCH?

According to Grunbaum (2007), case study research has been used for several decades, progressively more for the past 30 years, in several disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, public administration, public policy, social work and management.

The most cited definition of case study research encompasses two distinctive parts and was proposed by Yin (1994, 2003, p.13):

“1. A case study is an empirical inquiry that:

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.”

Thus, clearly Yin states that researchers who adopt case study research want to cover contextual conditions in the belief that they might be extremely relevant to the understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The second part of Yin’s (1994, p.13) definition states:

“2. The 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.”

Hence, case study research is comprehensive in the way that it entails several data collection methods and analysis relies on previously elaborated theoretical propositions.

Merriam (1988, p.xiv) affirms that “The Qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit”, whereas Eisenhardt (1989, p.534) emphasizes that “The case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings”.

Common among all presented definitions is that case study research provides rich, solid descriptions of a contemporary phenomenon understood through the perceptions' and/or meanings that social actors attribute to that same phenomenon under study, providing findings which are holistic and lifelike.

On the other hand, generally, in quantitative studies relationships are sought between a small number of variables, operationalization is not contextualized and efforts are made to reduce interpretation to a minimum until data is analyzed (Stake, 1995).

Of course, the option between research approaches relies on the nature of the research problem and research questions at hand.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH DESIGN

Once selecting case study as a research strategy, the research design encloses the selection of the research methods. According to Easton (1995), research methods highlight the logical path followed in order to be able to ultimately answer a study's research problem. As referred by Potter (1996, p.65), "Methodologies and methods are not the same thing. Methodologies are strategies that lay out the means for achieving the goals of research, whereas methods are the techniques used in the service of achieving those goals. Methodologies are the blueprint; methods are the tools". Hence, the *tools* necessary to conduct case study research include sampling and the specification of the data collection methods.

Yin (1994, 2003) proposes four types of research designs, as described in the following figure:

	single-case designs	multiple-case designs
holistic (single unit of analysis)	TYPE 1	TYPE 3
embedded (multiple units of analysis)	TYPE 2	TYPE 4

Figure 1: Basic Types of Designs for Case Studies

Source: Yin (1994, p.39, Figure 2.4.)

The first decision regarding case study designs prior to data collection is whether a *single-case* or *multiple-cases* are selected in order to address the research questions. The rationale for single-cases can be one of the following (Yin, 1994, 2003):

1. when it represents the *critical case* in testing a well-formulated theory;
2. when it represents an *extreme* or *unique* case;
3. when it represents the *revelatory* case.

As emphasized by Yin, in either of these situations the researcher must maximize the access needed to collect the case study evidence.

Regarding the issue of *holistic* versus *embedded* units of analysis, again, the nature of the research problem and research questions, stand at the outset of the decision. For example, if the intent is to investigate the global nature of an organization, a holistic design is selected. On the other hand, when logic sub-units can be identified, an embedded design serves as an important tool for focusing a case study inquiry. (Ibid, p.42)

Grumbaum (2007) illustrates Yin's rationale as presented in the table below:

	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Type 1	One case, holistic, one unit of analysis, case and unit of analysis is indistinguishable	Critical case Unique case Typical case Revelatory case
Type 2	One case, embedded units of analysis, not holistic(?), but still context depended, case and unit of analysis is distinguishable	Extensive analysis More focused analysis
Type 3	More cases, holistic, case and unit of analysis is indistinguishable	More robust findings Replication logic (literal/theoretical) Extern validity
Type 4	More cases, embedded unit of analysis, not holistic, yet context depended, case and unit of analysis is distinguishable	More robust findings Replication logic (literal/theoretical) Extern validity Extensive analysis Focused analysis

Table 1: Case Study Designs and Their Rationale

Source: Grunbaum (2007, p.86, Table III)

Another relevant question that must be addressed regards the *number of cases* to be included. Furthermore, the issue of information depth grounds the decision on the number of cases needed.

Eisenhardt (1989) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) agree when recommending sampling selection “to the point of redundancy”. There is no consensus found regarding the ideal number of cases that should be included. Some advocate a minimum of two, while, for instance Eisenhardt (1989) suggests between four and ten cases. Perry (1998) analyzes views from different authors and concludes that the minimum accepted range in multiple cases is two to four while 12 to 15 seem to be the maximum acceptable.

One should mention that constraints of time and funding need to be considered when conducting research, and therefore the ideal number of cases might not always be possible.

Finally, it should be stressed that for case study research, posited in the realm of qualitative research, the selection of cases should be purposeful, involving a replication logic. By replication logic one either seeks the prediction of similar results for predictable reasons (literal replication) or contrary results for predictable reasons (theoretical replication) – Yin(1994).

As stated by Perry (1998, p.789):

“In brief, for qualitative research like the case study methodology, the selection of cases is purposeful and involves using replication logic and largely depends on the conceptual framework developed from prior theory.”

Data Collection Methods

There is a wide array of data-gathering methods or techniques when conducting case studies. There also exists a great proliferation of terms in the literature and different authors mention different methods. For example, Potter (1996, p.95) states that, “the qualitative approach relies on three types of evidence-gathering methods: document examination, interview, and observation”. Yin (1994) discusses data collection methods in terms of six sources of evidence: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Marshall and Rossman (1999) argue that there are typically four methods for gathering information: (a) participation in the setting, (b) direct observation, (c) in-depth interviewing, and (d) analyzing documents and material culture.

Although there is a wide proliferation of terms and ideas concerning the different methods, on one issue qualitative scholars appear to be in agreement, i.e., that qualitative researchers should strive to use as many data collection methods as possible. In this way, converging lines of inquiry are made possible, i.e., the process of triangulation is applied (Yin, 1994).

Documentation may assume many different forms, e.g., letters, memos, notes, articles, books, administrative documents. This source of evidence is very useful, especially as a mean to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (cf., Yin, 1994, p.81). As mentioned by Potter (1996, p.96) “documents may provide confirmatory evidence and strengthen the credibility of the results of interviews or observations”.

Archival records include those documents and records that were produced in the past and can also be utilized as sources of evidence in case study research. Usually, archival records are deemed useful, especially regarding the gathering of secondary evidence needed to build the case history. Such records preserve the past and highlight how things happened and were perceived at a certain time.

Interviewing is “the technique of gathering data from humans by asking them questions and getting them to react verbally” (Potter, 1996, p.96). This is the technique in which qualitative researchers conducting case studies rely most on (Yin, 1994; Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Often, interviews are the core source of primary evidence in case study research.

There are several ways of characterizing interviews. Yin (1994) refers to three types: (1) the open-ended nature (characterized by being essentially unstructured leaving the possibility to the respondent to respond freely and provide various insights); (2) the focused interview (characterized by following a semi-structured guide but still assuming a conversational manner); and (3) the structured type (characterized by entailing more structured questions, along the lines of a survey). Marshall and Rossman (1999) adopt Patton’s (1990) categorization in three types: (1) the informal conversational interview; (2) the general interview guide approach, and (3) the standardized open-ended interview. All these types refer to in-depth interviewing.

Marshall and Rossman (1999, p.108) explain: “Typically, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal events, with predetermined response categories.

The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses”.

Personal interviews are usually preferred to telephone interviews. By using personal interviews human interaction is present and probing is made possible. However, many issues can be tackled through telephone interviews. Hence, a combination might be used, but it should be stressed that the core of the primary evidence should be done through personal interviews and telephone used complementary as a way to establish initial contacts and verify and/or add to facts that had been obtained through the personal in-depth interviews.

USAGE OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH IN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES – A RATIONALE

Among the disciplines that increasingly use case study research, *management* prevails. The term management herein refers to the collective designation for business and public administration (cf. Gummesson, 2007, p.227). Particularly, it is argued that case study research is appropriate for international management studies since focus is often given on the decisions and behaviors by individual and groups within and between organizations. This context entails complexity, which is further enhanced by the multicultural environment in which these decisions take place. Thus, further levels of analysis are needed to tackle and conceptualize the concerns of researchers.

Woodside and Wilson (2003, p.497) propose that “deep understanding of the actors, interactions, sentiments, and behaviors occurring for a specific process through time should be seen as the principal objective by the case study researcher”. Undoubtedly, this is the concern of innumerable international management studies.

Based on the above stated, many authors argue that “case research is superior to survey methods at answering the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ because the case analysis can delve more deeply into motivations and actions than structured surveys.” (Westgren and Zering, 1998, p.416).

Patton and Appelbaum (2003, p.63) state:

“Case studies offer the opportunity for a holistic view of a process as opposed to a reductionist-fragmented view that is so often preferred. (...) As a research endeavor, the case study contributes uniquely to our knowledge of individual, organizational, social, and political phenomena.”

Moreover, an important advantage of case study research is formulated as follows by Valdelin (1974):

"The detailed observations entailed in the case study method enable us to study many different aspects, examine them in relation to each other, view the process within its total environment and also utilize the researcher's capacity for 'Verstehen'¹. Consequently case study research provides us with a greater opportunity than other available methods to obtain an holistic view of a specific research project."

(as quoted by Gummesson ,1988, p.76)

In agreement with this view, Easton (1995, p.476) affirms:

"case research allows the researcher the opportunity to tease out and disentangle a complex set of factors and relationships, albeit in one instance."

Field Examples

The following table illustrates field examples of investigations that have used case study methodology as their research strategy.

Author (year)	Study's focus	Design Methodology	Number of Cases	Data Collection Methods	Number of Interviews
Egan and Shipley (1996)	Countertrade in emerging markets	Multiple-case holistic design	fifteenth	Documents Interviews	19 (primary study) +15
Tunisini (1997)	Changing customer relationships	Longitudinal multiple-case embedded design	nine	Documents Archival records Interviews	48
Lageson (1999)	Technical consultancy services	Single-case holistic design	one	Documents Archival records Interviews Direct observation and participant-observations	20
Baptista (2001)	Business relationships	Longitudinal multiple-case embedded design	eight	Documents Archival records Interviews Direct observation	50
Wallstrom (2002)	Industrial Buying Behavior	Multiple-case embedded design	four	Documents Interviews Observation	29
Correia (2005)	Tourism Networks	Single-case holistic design	one	Documents Interviews	16
Prekert and Hallén (2006)	Business networks	Single-case embedded design	one	Documents Interviews	22

Table 2: Field Examples of Research Using Case Study Designs

¹ empathetic understanding

CONCLUSIONS

The intent of this paper was to describe case study as a rigorous, coherent research strategy that fits a wide range of research challenges, particularly when the analysis of complex contemporary organizational processes are at hand and a holistic perspective is compulsory. In our view, this is the case in many international management studies.

Empirically, case studies have provided important contributions to a wide array of research fields. Hopefully, this paper can serve as a catalyst for others to look constructively towards future case study research opportunities and problems.

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