

What is Case Study Research?

1

'Knowledge is power', Bacon (1561–1626)

Learning outcomes

At the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- appreciate what case study research consists of and can achieve;
- provide basic arguments for the number of cases in a piece of research;
- understand the main criticisms of case study research;
- realize key ethical questions about case study research.

Introduction

In this chapter, we get acquainted with the basics of case study research as well as some basics of research more generally. All research is a mixture of fun, hard work and heartache, not necessarily in that order. You will learn as much about yourself as you do about your chosen topic, discovering new strengths as well perhaps as one or two unsuspected weaknesses. At this early stage, there are just two things that I would like you to bear in mind. First, there are no short cuts to good research. All the good students whom I have had the pleasure of supervising have worked very hard and I am afraid that the reverse is also true. Second, you have to be something of a 'completer-finisher' (Belbin 1981) in that you will have to persevere and address the detail as well as the strategy of your research.

You will also be dependent to a greater or lesser degree on a number of people or stakeholders in your environment. In the next section we discuss relationships in research.

Relationships in research

The most important person in your research is you and the outcome will depend on the work and the other attributes such as stamina, intellectual capacity and self-belief. A sustained project tests everyone's mettle. Although you are studying independently, that is you are not part of a structured work group and you are not being taught,

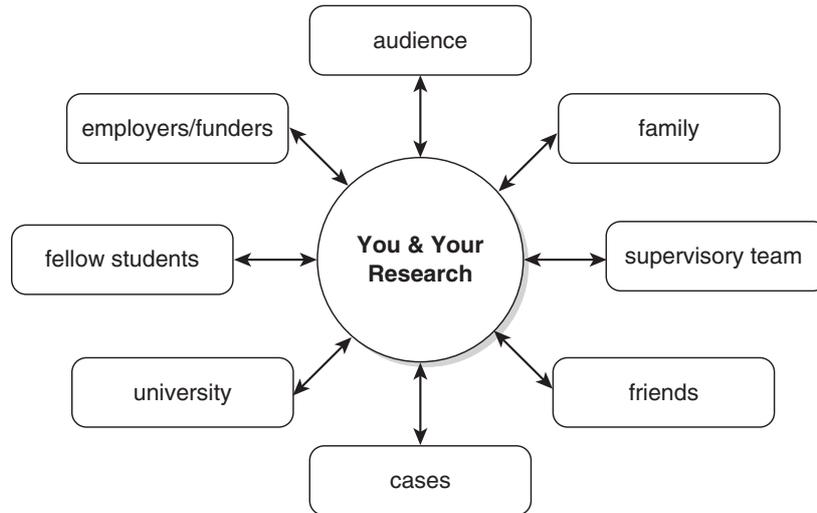


Figure 1.1 Stakeholders in your research

Adapted from Farquhar (2009)

you study within a framework of relationships with people who have a stake in your research. Figure 1.1 suggests who these stakeholders may be.

An obvious stakeholder is the supervisory team. Most research students have two supervisors these days who are academics with experience of supervision at your level and with knowledge of the area in which your investigation is based. You might like to confirm that this is the case. Your supervisors want you to complete your study successfully and to time. You will probably be allocated a supervisor in the first instance with expertise in the subject area and/or method. At doctoral level, it is essential that you have an experienced member of the team and at least one other team member who brings something relevant to the team, for example research expertise in a closely related area of investigation. You work as a team although you as the student produce the outcomes, that is, the chapters, presentations, conference papers or whatever has been agreed. Full-time study means just that – working as if you were carrying out a full-time job – a minimum of 35 hours a week (note the minimum). Since most academics work considerably more than that, do not expect any sympathy if you are not doing at least those hours. You will probably have some formal stages in your research progress that you will have to meet, for example registration and transfer from MPhil to PhD. Other targets will be more informal, for example submitting sections of your literature review and then draft chapters. You will agree dates with your supervisors. Supervisors will need to read these submissions before the next tutorial and will probably need them a few days in advance to do your work justice. Try to stick therefore to the agreed deadlines as your supervisors will have allocated time to reading your work. If you miss the deadline, then they will have plenty of other work to take its place. If your supervisors are not reading your work in advance of the tutorial and not preparing feedback, you are being disadvantaged and should seek formal redress. As a doctoral programme leader, I advise my colleagues that students should complete their theses in three years to a standard of minor revisions. Your supervisors will probably have this aim in mind too.

If you are studying part-time then your employers will have also have a stake in your research. The preferred scenario is that they fully support your studies in terms

of time and payment of fees. This may not always be the case so you may wish to see if you can negotiate informally about some flexibility in your working commitments. Certainly get used to the idea of working weekends, holidays and late at night. That timetable brings us on to your family. A family stake can range from parents paying fees to being a partner but they may find it very difficult sometimes to understand what is involved and the strains of studying at a high and sustained level. Your friends can provide a very valuable function in offering you the social situations that you will need from time to time, so do not neglect them. The university has a significant stake in your research as well. The graduate school will provide training and support throughout your studies and you would be foolish not to fully exploit it. Most universities in the UK already have or are aiming to have a healthy research programme, which counts in a range of quality indicators, so they should be providing a good student experience. If they are not, you should complain. You will have fellow students who are also studying at your level. They will be researching similar or related topics and experiencing similar trials. Make the time to have a coffee with your colleagues at least once a week, as you will all gain from it.

Important stakeholders in your research are your cases, that is those organizations, teams, units or groups you choose to select and who consent to be your cases. We will talk in much greater depth about your relationships with your cases in Chapter 4. The final stakeholder is your audience who can be your supervisory team, your examiners, your readers, business and the academic community. The rest of this book will advise you how you can best relate to them through the writing and completion of your case study research.

Case study research?

One of the disconcerting aspects about research methods literature is that there is not always the agreement or consensus that a student might expect and this is certainly exemplified in case study research. It is important first to make a distinction between case studies that you may have encountered in teaching and case study research. This distinction is important as they are designed and written for quite different purposes. The case study that is used in teaching has been written as a means of training students for a career in business. It usually presents a real-life example of a company or organization and a specific example of some activity, usually discipline based. Questions are sometimes provided at the end of the case which aim to generate a class discussion. The students are supposed to bring their theoretical knowledge to the situation as a means of interpretation and/or recommending better practice. The analysis of the case consists of an application of theoretical understanding to a given situation. This kind of case is not the subject matter of this book as the role of theory is brought to a case. This book provides information about using a particular research strategy called case study research in order to respond to a research question and where data are gathered and analysed by the researcher. Case study research is usually defined as follows:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

(Yin 2009: 18)

By using case study research, you will gain particular understanding or insight into whatever you have chosen to research which usually is a contemporary phenomenon. Case study research allows the researcher to look at the phenomenon in context. In business research, that means collecting evidence about that phenomenon where it is actually taking place, for example in a company, in a country or even in a university. In your case or cases, there is something that is of great interest to you and which you will argue will be of interest to others. In line with that view, Stake's (1995: 1) vision of case study research is that:

we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how [actors] function in ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn.

Case study research is suitable for answering questions that start with how, who and why. Its further strength is that it is particularly well suited for investigating events that are occurring in a contemporary context; for example, you might be interested in how the takeover of Cadbury by Kraft is impacting on the career progression for graduate recruits. Case study research is concerned with investigating single or multiple units of study, using familiar research methods for data collection such as interviews or surveys. Case studies are empirical investigations, in that they are based on knowledge and experience, or more practically speaking involve the collection and analysis of data. By circumscribing the area of a study to a small number of units, the case study researcher is able to look in depth at a topic of interest or phenomenon. This small number of cases contrasts with large samples that feature in survey research. As such, case studies are preferred in the following situations (Yin 2009):

- When, how or why questions are being asked.
- When the researcher has little control over events.
- When the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon.

The research insight below illustrates research using case studies in retail banking.

Research insight: relationships in retail banking

Dibb and Meadows (2001) set out to investigate how relationship marketing was being applied in retail banking and chose four retail providers in the sector as units (or cases) of study in their research. The focus of the study was the application of relationship marketing, therefore the researchers were concerned about the current approaches and so had no control or influence at the time of data collection. Finally, the aim of the study was to capture how relationship marketing was being applied at that time so the phenomenon (relationship marketing) was contemporary.

Case study research is also concerned with studying the phenomenon in context, so that the findings generate insight into how the phenomenon actually occurs within a given situation. For business researchers, there are many advantages in looking at something within a particular location, company, team, department or industry. At

the same time, these advantages have provided critics with ammunition about the wider contribution of these findings and which are discussed later in the chapter. The limitation of studying a small number of cases is that you will not be able to make statements about how your research can be extended to other situations as in survey research. This limitation is offset by the understanding that you gain an awareness of how this deep understanding can contribute to knowledge in business.

It is critical in case study research that you are very clear about the focus of your research and indeed this statement can be applied to all research. Creswell (2007: 73) describes a case as 'a bounded system' (for one case) or 'multiple bounded systems' (for more than one). What he means by bounded is that the researcher makes very clear statements in the research objectives about the focus and the extent of the research. Stake (1995) makes distinctions between different types of case studies. He states that an intrinsic case consists of a situation where you need to learn about a particular case, which could be a problem in a particular work situation. The second type of case, he argues, is an instrumental case, where you could use a case to learn about something else, for example the efficacy of cross-functional teams in managing customer relationships. Here you might choose any two teams within an organization which has relationships with its customers for the investigation. Finally, there is a collective case where you want to find out about a particular phenomenon from a number of different cases. An example of this type of case would be senior executive pay, where you might collect data from a number of organizations, for example banks and large retailers.

Because you are studying what seems to be a single case or a small number of cases, you may be lulled into thinking that it is easy to keep on track. A useful device of any research topic is to be able to tell people what your research is about in a single sentence. It is also very useful to keep this sentence and the research objectives in front of you when working as it may deter you from too much straying away from the track of your investigation. Research may evolve but if it does then the research objectives need to be revised and reframed, checking that the research topic is still focused and not in danger of getting out of control.

In responding to the questions of how, why and who in case study research, the essential tactic and a characteristic of case study research is to use several different sources of data within each case or cases (Yin 2009). Such data sources can include both primary and secondary data sources. In the Dibb and Meadows (2001) study, the sources of data consisted of internal documentation, industry reports (secondary) and two sets of interview data (primary). By using several different sources of data or different methods of data collection, the research findings are strengthened as the evidence is triangulated. Triangulation is an important concept in case study research because an investigation of the phenomenon from different perspectives provides robust foundations for the findings and supports arguments for its contribution to knowledge.

Case study research also enables a phenomenon to be studied over a period of time, that is, a longitudinal study. Longitudinal studies are not as common as they should be in business and management, and great insight can be gained by looking at a business phenomenon over a year or longer. An early example of case study research in business featured as part of the data in a three-year study of the transfer of new technologies from the developers to the users (Leonard-Barton 1990). The researcher argued that the close-up lens of the longitudinal study allowed the study of process and evolving patterns, which she was able to argue could be applied more widely to the transfer of new technologies.

What can case study research achieve?

Having arrived at a basic idea of what case study research is, it is now useful to understand what case study research can achieve. It has been described as having two outstanding strengths (Meredith 1998), both of which echo the definitions and views of the key contributors to case study research design:

- The phenomenon can be studied in its natural setting and meaningful, relevant theory generated from the understanding gained through actual practice.
- The case method allows the questions of why and how to be answered with a relatively full understanding of the nature and complexity of the complete phenomenon.

Case study research is ideal for looking at research questions which are closely connected to their context or situation, which in business is particularly appealing. Research questions of problems can be explored from perspectives that could be industry-specific, geographical location or size/type of business such as entrepreneurial or creative. Different functions such as accounting, operations or marketing can be investigated. For example, a study into working time regulations was conducted in the hospitality industry across two cases and uncovered the existence of accidental compliance with the regulations (Hurrell 2005). The first point refers to how theory can be generated from this understanding. Research is concerned with theory and how each study in some way contributes to theory in a given area. It is perhaps a weakness of the definitions cited earlier that neither mention theory when case study researchers go to great lengths to demonstrate how their research contributes to theory.

By understanding the capabilities and scope of a case study, the researcher will be able to develop the rest of the research. The aim of case study research is to dig deep, look for explanations and gain understanding of the phenomenon through multiple data sources and through this understanding extend or test theory. The value of case study research for business is that it allows the researcher to examine a problem or question in a practical, real-life situation. Readers of case studies expect a compelling argument for the choice of the case study research approach. For business, the advantages of this situational approach of case study research are significant. Case study research is particularly suitable for description, explanation and exploratory research or, as Yin (2009) suggests, case studies explain, describe, illustrate and enlighten. Stake (1995) argues that the real business of a case is particularization and understanding the case itself. Case study research is versatile in that the variety of data collection methods at the disposal of the case study researcher can be adapted to particular situations and conditions. In a larger organization, for example, it may be quite feasible to collect data using a survey of staff. Smaller organizations may lend themselves to a study of their documents and archives or in-depth interviews. As case study research usually involves a number of different data sources and methods, further insight is gained from considering the question from a multi-dimensional perspective. If there are multiple data sources, where does case study research fit in the research design? In this book it is argued that case study research is a research strategy, that is, it is the overall direction of the study upon which the rest of the research rests. Table 1.1 illustrates how case study research compares with other research strategies.

This comparison is useful in illustrating what case study research is not as well as what it is. Experiments and cases studies share the characteristics of a small number

Table 1.1 Comparison of case study research with experimental and survey approaches

Experiment	Case study	Survey
Small number of units	Small number of units (sometimes one)	Larger number of units
Data collected and analysed about small number of predetermined features of each unit	Data collected and analysed about large and often not predetermined features of each unit	Data collected and analysed about a small number of features of each case
Study of units organized in such a way as to control variables of interest	Interest in naturally occurring features or the variables in context	Units selected to represent characteristics of the study's population
Data usually quantified	Data can be quantitative, qualitative or both	Data usually quantified
Aim is of testing theory or evaluation of an intervention	Aim is to understand and theorize through enfolding the literature	Aim is to generalize findings from sample to population

Adapted from Gomm et al. (2000)

of units but they diverge in how the data are collected and analysed. Experiments are more concerned with relationships between variables, which are usually defined in advance. According to Collis and Hussey (2009), the aim in an experiment is to manipulate the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable. For a survey, the aim is usually to measure key variables in a sample that represents a larger population and to generalize the findings of the survey to this larger population.

One or more than one?

As you will have seen above, the aim of case study research is not to make statements about the cases to a larger population but to explore in depth a particular phenomenon in a contemporary context. Nonetheless, an enduring question for researchers in case study research is how many units of study they should choose for their case study research. This question is not readily answered as it depends on a number of considerations which will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3. For the time being the following research insight is an example of the process one student went through in finalizing the number of cases.

Research insight: how many?

Frederick wanted to study tourism from the perspective of authenticity. The key question was how best to study the phenomenon of authenticity in tourism. He considered a number of possible cases to study this question. For quite some time, the study was going to consist of two units. Eventually Frederick settled on the single unit of South Africa so that he could illuminate the unique features of the case and how the research question could be addressed through this particular case.

The pressing question then is what might constitute a case or more properly unit of study? In business, a unit of study could be an individual, an organization, an event or an activity. If you wanted to investigate leadership, you may want to look at a particular individual or individuals and provide an analysis of leadership styles. If you were going to conduct a study into organizational culture, you would probably want to gain access to an organization (profit-making, charity, local government) and look in depth into that organization, study two departments or groups within that organization or make comparisons between two or more different organizations. You may want to evaluate, for example, the sponsorship of the London Olympics, where you might analyse how particular campaigns supported the marketing communications of a large beverage company. You may be seeking to find an instance of good practice which may involve looking at a number of units within a single organization. Cases, therefore, constitute a range of phenomena but the aim is to provide a rich multidimensional holistic picture of the situation (Remenyi et al. 1998) in a real-life context. Some examples of units of study in business research have included hospitality organizations (Hurrell 2005), process modelling projects (Bandara et al. 2005) and an urban university medical centre (Kaplan and Duchon 1988). The question of one or more than one unit of study is not easily resolved and the justification of the final choice needs to be carefully argued by the researcher.

Prejudice against case study research

If you understand some of the prejudice that case study research encounters, you will be able to construct and frame your research in such a way that your 'story' is credible. If your work is presented according to recognized and accepted research protocol, then reviewers or examiners will be largely satisfied.

Criticisms of case study research occur at three levels. The prime criticism levelled at case study research is that it lacks objectivity and rigour (Remenyi et al. 1998). Objectivity refers to the idea that reality is singular and separate or apart from the researcher. Objective research usually consists of experiments and surveys, where there is some distance between the researcher and the units of study. Although case studies may incorporate a survey, the aim of case study research is, as has been stated, an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon in context, therefore objectivity is not something that it is seeking to achieve. Indeed the case study researcher is often immersed in the case or cases and so the research can be described as subjective. Rigour is a term which arises constantly in research but its exact meaning is elusive. The view adopted in this book is that rigour can be achieved through a consistent and coherent research design, where the philosophical approach is stated at the beginning, an appropriate research strategy is adopted, data collection and analysis follow research methods, and protocols and justification for each phase of the research are provided.

At the second level of criticism, researchers who prefer quantitative studies, for example those experiments and surveys mentioned above, find the lack of large sample sizes of case study research disconcerting. They will worry about the lack of generalizability, as they know it, of the case study contribution. It is central to case study research to remember that the case itself does not constitute a sample of one (Bryman and Bell 2003) and that the aim of case study research is not to generalize the findings of a sample to a population. The issue of generalizability in case study research is a complex one and is presented in Chapter 7.

Finally, many of the criticisms levelled at case study research are also levelled at qualitative investigations. Some critics do not appreciate that case study research is not necessarily an example of qualitative research. Again, the responses to these criticisms should be addressed through the statement of clear research objectives, rigorous research methods and analysis and a transparent discussion of the findings. There are qualitative researchers who argue that this is playing the quantitative ‘game’ but it is hard to see how any of the above can be deemed a betrayal of qualitative research. As argued above, case study research is a strategy and as such the methods that are used for data collection can be qualitative, quantitative or incorporate both types.

As a research supervisor, one of the (many) things that I stress to my poor long-suffering students is that your dissertation or thesis must have a spine. By this I mean a strong thread that runs throughout the length of the investigation onto which everything that you discuss hangs. In a doctoral thesis which can be 100,000 words long, it is vital that the reader is reminded at regular intervals about the theme of the research and the consistency of the research method adopted. You should be able to map onto this spine every activity that you have conducted. This process will not be linear in spite of the metaphor of the spine. Some things will be re-visited, re-worked and re-interpreted but that should not stop you from carrying out this valuable activity. Arguably, this spinal map is even more important in case study research where the multiplicity of sources, data sets, analyses and findings make things a little more complicated than a study using survey research.

Ethical research

If you are researching as a student, it is very likely that your research proposal will be subject to ethics approval and that you will be provided with a set of criteria that it must meet. The following research insight is an example from a university’s research guidelines.

Research insight: ethical research

Researchers are responsible for ensuring the following:

- Integrity – that the research has been carried out in a rigorous and professional manner.
- Plagiarism – that proper acknowledgement has been given regarding the origin of data and ideas.
- Conflicts of interest – that any financial or professional conflicts of interest have been properly declared.
- Data handling – that there has been effective record keeping, proper storage with regards to confidentiality and data protection.
- Ethical procedures – that proper consideration has been given to these and appropriate approval sought; should conform to professional codes of conduct where appropriate.
- Effective management and supervision of staff for whom they are responsible.
- Health and safety – that proper training has been provided and assessment of health and safety issues has been undertaken and appropriate action identified.

(www.beds.ac.uk/research)

The governing principle of research ethics can be reduced to ‘do no harm’, either to the research participants or to the wider world of research and the community of researchers. The case study researcher will become fully immersed in the context of the research, which may provoke some tension, and a thorough awareness of ethical research guidelines such as the above may assist in avoiding some uncomfortable issues.

Examples

You will do an immense amount of reading for your dissertation or thesis which will include different types of publications. You will be accessing reports, for example, I have been looking at UK government reports recently, research methods books, such as Yin (2009) or Creswell (2007), newspapers and practitioner publications, blogs, tweets and journal papers. All these publications have particular qualities, such as content, writing style, presentation, credibility and relevance to your research. Look at the style as well as the content.

Summary

It is worth remembering that the real business of case study research, according to Creswell (2007), is understanding the case or cases themselves through an interpretation of the data. Case study research is exciting, although arguably all research is exciting, and has a great deal of potential in business research which is only slowly being acknowledged. However, its role will only be fully appreciated if research in this tradition is well executed. This is the challenge owing to the range and variety of methods available to case study researchers, so the onus is very much on the researcher to present their work in such a way that it overcomes the prejudices that exist.

- Independent study might require a different mindset to your previous learning experiences.
- Case study research is concerned with investigating a unit of study or multiple units of study using familiar research methods such as interviews or surveys.
- Case study research is suitable for providing a holistic in-depth investigation into a contemporary phenomenon in a particular context.
- Criticisms of case study research can be addressed through clear statements of the research objectives, adherence to accepted research protocols and transparent research methods.
- Ethical research practice is as important in case study research as anywhere else with particular attention to ‘do no harm’.

Exercises

- 1 Explain what case study research is and the type of research questions for which it is well suited.

- 2 Outline when it may be appropriate to use single or multiple case studies.
- 3 Outline the discussion of the benefits and weaknesses of case study research.
- 4 Describe key ethical issues arising from case study research.

Key words

Relationships: you are not alone in your research and you are part of a network. Take the time to find out how to make the most of this network.

Prejudice: researchers are a mixed bunch and have their own preferences and views. In some disciplines, case study research is not particularly well received; if you are doing case study research, you have an obligation to do it well and perhaps change some minds.

Further reading

- Maylor, H. and Blackmon, K. (2005) *Researching Business and Management*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Remenyi, D., Williams, B., Money, A. and Swartz, E. (1998) *Doing Research in Business and Management: An Introduction to Process and Method*, London: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. (2009) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, fourth edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

References

- Bandara, W., Gable, G. and Rosemann, M. (2005) 'Factors and measures of business process modelling: model building through a multiple case study', *European Journal of Information Systems*, 14, 347–360.
- Belbin, R. (1981) *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*, London: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2003) *Business Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Collis, J. and Hussey R. (2009) *Business Research*, third edition, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007) *Qualitative Enquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dibb, S. and Meadows, M. (2001) 'The application of a relationship marketing perspective in retail banking', *Service Industries Journal*, 21, 1, 169–194.
- Farquhar, J. (2009) 'Stakeholder branding in financial services', *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Services Management*, Oxford.
- Gomm, R. Hammersley, M. and Foster, P. (2000) Introduction, in R. Gomm, M. Hammersley and P. Foster (eds), *Case Study Method*, London: Sage Publications.
- Hurrell, S. (2005) 'Dilute to taste? The impact of working time regulations in the hospitality industry', *Employee Relations*, 27, 5, 532–546.
- Kaplan, B. and Duchon, D. (1988) 'Combining qualitative and quantitative methods in information systems research: a case study', *MIS Quarterly*, 12, 4, 571–586.
- Leonard-Barton, D. (1990) 'A dual methodology for case studies: synergistic use of longitudinal single site with replicated multiple sites', *Organizational Change*, 1, 3, 248–266.

- Meredith, J. (1998) 'Building operations management theory through case and field research', *Journal of Operations Management*, 11, 3, 239–256.
- Remenyi, D., Williams, B., Money, A. and Swartz, E. (1998) *Doing Research in Business and Management: An Introduction to Process and Method*, London: Sage Publications.
- Stake, R. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. (2009) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, fourth edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.