

Case Studies

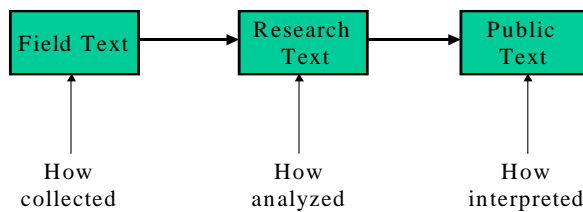
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A case is defined as “a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context.” (Huberman and Miles 1994). Therefore, while a case study may be thought of as a methodology, a case is not. It is an object to be studied (Clandinin and Connelly 1994). A case study is an in-depth study of the case or of a group of cases, the bounded system. The case is bounded by specifying time and place. It centers around a phenomenon such as a program, event, or activity, or it may center around an individual or group(s) of individuals. The case study should utilize multiple sources of information including interviews, observations, documents, reports, and archival material. In describing the case, it should be put in context. This could include descriptions of the physical, organizational, social, political, or economic settings.

A case study may focus on a single case or multiple cases. In general, the process for conducting a multiple case study resembles the process for a single case study. See figure 1. It begins with the researcher’s collection of field notes through the accumulation of documents, interview notes, written observations, etc. This corpus of unanalyzed text can be called field text. A discussion of how documents are selected, informants are selected, observations are made, etc. is necessary for understanding the production of the field text. Next, the researcher examines the field text to discern patterns, ascertain what is salient to

understanding the phenomenon, and summarize what has happened in the case. Analysis is iterative, both in the single case study and in the multiple case study. Understanding builds as analysis suggests further avenues for exploration. Miles and Huberman (1994) offer a compendium of techniques including extensive use

Figure 1
Case study research process



of matrices for comparing data along different dimensions and network models made up of nodes and connectors for understanding relationships between the phenomenon under study and contextual features. They observe that the field text that is initially produced can be voluminous (thousands of pages) and that organized techniques for analysis are necessary to make the data manageable. They describe the analytical process generally as one that progresses from describing to explaining.

As the analysis proceeds, the process of interpretation begins resulting eventually in public text. Through analysis and interpretation, the researcher makes sense out of what he or she has discovered in the case. The public text

that is produced for the reader reflects the researcher's interpretive paradigm. While the public document may take different forms, there is no single interpretive truth, but rather different criteria for evaluation of the public text appropriate to each of the different interpretive communities. For our purposes, the public text may be thought of as a story.

The strength of the case study is the extent to which it retains the context and nuances from the natural environment, its realism. In contrast to laboratory experiments, it does not control what is observed and the tasks examined are not artificially contrived. For this reason, case studies are most appropriate for studying weakly understood phenomena, carrying out exploratory or pre-theoretical studies.

References

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