

Writeup of Fidel (1984)

Fidel, R. (1984). The case study method: A case study. *Library and Information Science Research*, 6(3), 273-288.

Summary

Fidel's (1984) article provided an explanation of the case study method, a walkthrough of the process of conducting a case study based on her study of search behavior, and a brief discussion of the problems one may face when using the case study method. She first explained that a case study is "a detailed analysis of an individual case" in an intensive manner, both obtaining "a comprehensive understanding of the event under study" and developing "more general theoretical statements about regularities in the observed phenomena" (p. 274). It often uses "a method of controlled comparison" (p. 275) which moves "from the particular to the general and back in small steps rather than in one grand jump" (Diesing, 1971, p. 183, as cited in Fidel, 1984, p. 276). Crucially, it is "not rigorously planned," instead evolving through the cyclical process of qualitative data collection and analysis (p. 274). Fidel noted the case study process lacked "linearity," but she still presented it as such in order to "clearly distinguish" the elements (p. 277). The first element, study design, may change, expand, contract, and otherwise be altered in the course of a case study. In Fidel's example she expanded her study's scope and changed the analysis of each of the cases, examining the patterns in events rather than analyzing each event individually. Selection of participants tends to be purposive and convenience-based, rather than "by any statistical method of sampling" (p. 278). Researchers must also prepare prior to an investigation by reviewing previous studies and literature. Sources for data gathered, the second element, may vary; observations, interviews, and documentary evidence are common sources. Fidel used think aloud sessions, search protocols, interview transcripts, written search requests, written annotations, and messages sent to users. The third element, data analysis, takes place at multiple stages of the process; in Fidel's example it occurred both between the think aloud session and interview and after the interview for each case. Model development may occur less often; in particular Fidel did not develop her model after completing analysis of the second participant because she found many differences between the first two participants and needed to "gather more evidence" (p. 281). The process of case study analysis is highly cyclical and returns to previous data sources as the model or theory develops. In Fidel's case, after three participants a model of two different search strategies was identified; this was then further tested and

expanded based on the fourth and fifth participants (purposively selected by Fidel to address limitations). Fidel concluded with a brief discussion of the problems faced in case studies, including gaining access “to the people one wants to observe” (p. 285) as well as three kinds of potential bias: (a) that caused by participants being aware they are being observed; (b) that caused by participants having different ideas of what is important for them to discuss; and (c) that built-in to the observer and researcher conducting the study. Fidel noted the particular solutions she used to address these problems in her case study.

Analysis

Fidel discussed both case study research in general and provided an example from her own research to explain the process. I found this both brought down barriers in understanding the method as well as creating some further barriers of its own. The latter occurred because much of Fidel’s explanation of the process focused on the particulars of her case study, not stating directly how what she did in her study could be applied to other case study designs. Readers thus need to be careful to read between the lines—as I attempted to do in my summary above—and extract the lessons that can be learned from Fidel’s example. I found the controlled comparison method comparable to the constant comparative method used in grounded theory (see Bong, 2002; Westbrook, 1997), and it could be considered a variant of the latter that moves less quickly and directly—“in small steps”—between the particular and general. While the article’s age might present a few minor concerns for some—most notably, Fidel said qualitative methods are rarely used in library and information science (LIS) and case studies are even more rare, which may have been true in 1984 but certainly isn’t today—I would still recommend it for the lessons it provides in the process of conducting case study research in the LIS field in general.

Keywords: case studies, controlled comparison method, constant comparative method, research process, cyclical, design, flexibility, sampling, data collection, data analysis, model development, theory development, problems in case studies, biases

Writeup of Stake (2005)

Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

Stake (2005) discussed the process of conducting and analyzing qualitative case study research, also broaching some of the epistemological and methodological issues case study researchers face. A case “is a specific One,” typically a living or nonliving system that has boundaries (albeit these are often fuzzy), a surrounding context, and patterns of activity (p. 444). Case studies can be broken into three types (fuzzy themselves): (a) “intrinsic,” focused on obtaining “better understanding of this particular case” (p. 445); (b) “instrumental,” focused on “provid[ing] insight into an issue or redraw a generalization ... the case ... play[ing] a supportive role” (p. 445); and (c) “multiple case stud[ies],” which are “instrumental stud[ies] extended to [include] several cases” jointly (pp. 445-446). Data is gathered on the case’s “nature ... activity and functioning ... historical background ... setting ... [and] contexts,” as well as on other similar cases and on informants related to the case (p. 447). This data, and the case study as a whole, should revolve around particular issues or research questions of interest that relate to the case study and topic area. The selection of cases is purposive and convenience-based, intended to provide “variety and acknowledg[e] opportunities for intensive study” while being limited to those cases that are available and “offer opportunity to learn” (p. 451); “cases within the case” may also be chosen during the study (p. 451). Stake argued researchers must “place [their] best intellect into the thick of what is going on,” being “reflective” throughout a case study (p. 449) upon recollections, records, meanings, and theories. Generalization occurs, but independently by both researcher and readers; the former should be focused on “what can be learned about the single case” (p. 443) and “learn enough ... to encapsulate complex meanings into a finite report,” but still provide a sufficiently thick “descriptive narrative so that readers can ... draw their own conclusions” (p. 450). Stake stressed the importance of triangulation “to clarify meaning,” not just through repeatability but also “by identifying different ways the case is being seen” (p. 454). He also discussed how one could learn from particular cases and particularly from “experiential knowledge” and empirical—albeit subjective—data gathered from observations, interviews, and the like (p. 454), as well as the transfer of knowledge of a case from the researcher to the reader.

Finally, Stake discussed case study research as a process of “storytelling” (p. 457)—and sometimes of comparisons between stories—and the ethics of case study research.

Analysis

As might be evidenced by the summary above, Stake covered a great deal of ground in his chapter on case study research. While this is commendable in terms of providing readers with a good and thorough overview of this kind of research, it also tended to make the chapter a little disorganized in parts, especially further towards the end. Rather than being organized around the research process (as in Fidel, 1984), Stake’s subheadings seemed to be randomly chosen—albeit important—topics under each of the main headings (“The Singular Case,” “The Study,” “Learning from the Particular Case,” “Storytelling,” “Ethics,” and “Summary”). A careful reader is able to follow the article successfully—especially with the aid of their own summary or outline of Stake’s discussions, arguments, and points—but they must pay attention and not get mired in the sometimes-rambling nature of the second half of the chapter (as I feel I came close to doing myself). Because of the numerous points Stake raised that are important to case study research—and indeed in many cases to qualitative research in general—I would hesitantly recommend his chapter to other researchers and students interested in the case study method. However, the combination of Yin (2003) and Fidel (1984) better fills much the same need and role. I would strongly recommend anyone reading Stake also look at these readings and consider taking detailed notes or making their own outline of Stake’s chapter to ensure they grasp all of the points he raised.

Keywords: case studies, epistemology, methodology, intrinsic, instrumental, multiple case studies, data collection, research questions, case selection, sampling, reflection, reflective, generalization, thick description, triangulation, storytelling, ethics

Writeup of Yin (2003)

Yin, R. K. (2003). Designing case studies. In *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed., pp. 19-56). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

Yin (2003) provided an excellent discussion of the process of designing qualitative case study research, focusing on the components of such designs, how to judge the quality of a design, and the four different types of case study designs. He argued that “five components of a [case study] research design are especially important” (p. 21):

- the research questions the study asks;
- the “propositions,” each of which “direct attention to something that should be examined within the scope of study” (p. 22);
- the unit of analysis, the defining of which is a “fundamental problem ... that has plagued many investigators” and should be done tentatively based on the research questions (p. 22);
- “linking data to [theoretical] propositions,” matching patterns with theories (p. 26); and
- “the criteria for interpreting [the] findings” (p. 27).

Yin noted that these five components “will effectively force [the researcher] to begin constructing a preliminary theory” (p. 28), placing theory development before data collection in case study research (as opposed to after in grounded theory approaches). Such theories may cover individuals, groups, organizations, societies, and/or practical implementation. Yin next discussed four measures of the quality of case study research—construct, internal, and external validity, along with reliability—and recommended using multiple sources and chains of evidence, having some participants review the case study report, matching patterns, addressing rival theories, using theory and replication, and thoroughly documenting the procedures followed. He continued by discussing four types of case study designs, divided into single-case and multiple-case designs that may be either “holistic,” having a single unit of analysis, or “embedded” with multiple units of analysis (p. 42). Single cases might be critical, extreme, unique, representative, typical, revelatory, or longitudinal cases, depending on the problem and needs of a particular research study. Yin felt multiple-case studies are similar to multiple experiments, both literally replicating the results of an initial case and theoretically replicating

the results through contrasting but predictable cases. Yin took great pains to separate this approach from sampling, discussing the “very different logic” it presented and how to choose the number of cases to use for each kind of replication (p. 51). All four types have different strengths and weaknesses that researchers must weigh when choosing a design; Yin argued that multiple-case designs were less vulnerable to the “all your eggs in one basket” problem (p. 53), but expressed no strong preferences between holistic and embedded designs. He concluded with a brief note that case study designs must be flexible and may change as a result of one or more cases not turning out as expected.

Analysis

Despite the length of Yin’s chapter (37 pages) it was a relatively easy read; he usually wrote quite clearly and explained the concepts of case study designs very well. Some of his discussions went on just a little longer than perhaps necessary; in particular the differences between literal and theoretical replication in multiple-case studies and sampling in quantitative experiments could have been more succinct, especially given other readings on this topic. He also uses the term “propositions” to refer to both theoretical propositions and phenomena examined in a case study, which may confuse non-careful readers. Despite this Yin is definitely easier to follow than Stake (2005), and in my view is a more useful counterpart than the latter to Fidel’s (1984) LIS-oriented, example-driven article. Researchers who favor grounded theory or other approaches that collect data first and then generate theories—attempting to let go of any expectations prior to the study—would likely not favor Yin’s process of developing theory and having some expectations prior to conducting a case study. However, he agreed with most qualitative researchers in the need for flexibility in such research, so there is scope for common ground (pun not intended) between these different epistemological approaches. Especially for new researchers, I would highly recommend Yin’s chapter as an easy-to-read discussion of how to design qualitative case study research.

Keywords: case studies, components, quality, types, research questions, propositions, unit of analysis, theories, patterns, pattern-matching, theory development, validity, reliability, single-case, multiple-case, holistic, embedded, experiments, sampling, flexible