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# UNIT 7 CASE STUDY

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## ASSOCIATED STUDY MATERIALS

Reader, Chapter 16, 'Increasing the generalizability of qualitative research', by Janet Schofield.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The term 'case study' is used in various ways in discussions about social research methodology. Very often, though, it signifies an approach to social research that rejects and offers an alternative to quantitative method. The term 'case study' was used in this way in US sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, when the methods of data collection and statistical analysis characteristic of quantitative research today were only in the early stages of development. It referred then to detailed investigation of particular situations, events or people. It was modelled initially on the way that doctors produce medical histories of their patients, and social workers investigate the circumstances of their clients. Also influential were the examples of investigative journalism and of historical research, and the methodological guidelines developed by historians, notably Langlois and Seignobos in their classic study of 1898 (1966)

This notion of case study as the detailed investigation of particular phenomena was put into practice by Chicago sociologists at that time. They carried out a series of studies of aspects and areas of life in Chicago, from the world of the rich in the 'Gold Coast' hotels to the taxi dance halls, where men (many of them newly arrived migrants) paid women for dances. In the early part of this century, survey research as we know it today did not exist, but in the 1930s and 1940s there was a growing movement towards the use of rudimentary statistical techniques on national and local data of a quantitative kind, especially census data. Initially, case study and statistical work were generally regarded as complementary, on the model of Charles Booth's investigation of the lives of the London poor, published in the last decade of the nineteenth century, which employed a wealth of both sorts of data (Booth, 1889–1902). However, over time, at Chicago and in US sociology generally, quantitative research increasingly came to be presented by its practitioners as more scientific — i.e. closer to the methods of natural science — than case-study research. At the same time, some advocates of case study argued for *its* superiority, on the grounds that statistical method was not scientific because it could produce only probabilistic generalizations, not universal laws (Hammersley, 1989, ch. 4). Such debates about the relative value of qualitative and quantitative methods have continued ever since.

As a result of this history, the term 'case study' tends today to be associated with qualitative approaches to social research like ethnography and life history. And it has acquired an additional burden of meaning from this association which we need to consider.

Ethnography originated in anthropology and is still central to that discipline, but is now widely used in sociology and in various applied areas. Ethnographic work usually has the following features.

- 1 Investigation of one (or at least a very small number) of cases in depth. These could be residential communities, occupations or organizations, deviant groups or networks, particular settings (public and private), etc.
- 2 The cases studied are 'naturally occurring' ones, rather than specially created by the researcher as in the case of experimental research.
- 3 The adoption of a wide initial focus to the research, rather than the testing of narrowly pre-defined hypotheses. Ethnographers tend to begin with only a rather general interest in some types of social phenomena or some issue. Only over the course of the research do they adopt a more specific research focus and engage in hypothesis testing.
- 4 A range of data collection techniques is employed, not just one. Observation and/or interviewing are usually the main sources of information employed by ethnographers, but use is also often made of documentary sources, and sometimes of questionnaires.

- 5 There is minimal pre-structuring of the data collected. When observing events ethnographers usually write fieldnotes: they try to describe what they see in whatever terms seem appropriate at the time, rather than, for instance, going into the situation with a list of categories and ticking off events falling into these categories. They may also use audio- and even video-recording. Categories for structuring and analysing the data will be developed in the course of collecting it rather than beforehand. It is for this reason that the observation and interviewing used by ethnographers are sometimes referred to as 'unstructured'
- 6 The analysis carried out by ethnographers generally takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis taking a subordinate role at most

Life history research involves many of the same features as ethnography, except that it is based primarily, if not exclusively, on in-depth interviews with one or a small number of people, the aim being to reconstruct the pattern of their lives, often giving particular attention to life-cycle and generational factors. In some respects, this approach is analogous to historians' use of biography to study individuals who have played a key role in historical events, a well-known example being Bullock's biography of Hitler (Bullock, 1962). Often, though, even historians are interested in more general issues, as in the same author's more recent comparative study of the lives of Hitler and Stalin as a basis for investigating the nature of totalitarian leadership (Bullock, 1991). In social science disciplines, the aim is also usually to derive more general conclusions about particular social types of individuals, rather than simply to characterize the life of an individual for its own sake. (This is the distinction between a nomothetic and an ideographic focus that we discussed in Unit 1/2.) Thus, within sociology, much life history work has focused on practitioners of deviant occupations, treating them as exemplars of those occupations: for example Shaw's famous study of a 'jack roller' or mugger (Shaw, 1930; see also Snodgrass, 1982) and Klockars' life history of a professional fence (Klockars, 1975). At the same time, some life history work has involved the study of larger numbers of informants, for instance Oscar Lewis's anthropological studies of Mexican families (Lewis, 1961, 1964, and 1970), the work of Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1981) on bakeries in France, and Thompson's investigation of fishing communities in Scotland (Thompson, 1983). Even here, though, the number of cases studied has been relatively small compared with the samples studied by survey researchers.

The term 'case study' is often used, then, to refer to the sort of qualitative research characteristic of ethnographic and life history work (see, for example, Becker, 1971). Such work is also often treated as exemplifying a paradigmatic approach to social research based on philosophical assumptions that are at odds with those that motivate most quantitative research (for example, Plummer, 1983). However, this is not the way that we shall use the term 'case study' in this course. As I argued in Unit 3/4, the conceptualization of social research methodology in terms of competing, comprehensive paradigms oversimplifies the range of choices that are available to the researcher. Distinctions between paradigms do not capture the variety of strategies that one finds deployed in social research. Nor are they reasonable philosophically. Epistemological debate among philosophers has not been, and is not today, a dialogue between only two positions. The arguments are more diverse and complex. What this means is that in doing research one is not faced with a choice between two well-defined routes that go off in opposite directions. Instead, the research process is more like finding one's way through a maze. And it is a rather badly kept and complex maze, where paths are not always distinct, where they wind back on one another, and where one can never be entirely certain that one has reached the centre.

Given this, we shall use the term 'case study' in a narrower sense than is common in the methodological literature today: to refer to a strategy for dealing with one aspect of the research process, the task of case selection. In this sense, the term carries no implications for the sort of data that might be employed, or for which forms of analysis should be used. Case studies, in our terms, may be quantitative

as well as qualitative. They do not even necessarily involve the collection of primary data; the data employed may be secondary.

Case selection is a problem that all research faces. What I mean by the term 'case' here is the phenomenon (located in space/time) about which data are collected and/or analysed, and that corresponds to the type of phenomena to which the main claims of a study relate. (This was the way we used the term in Activity 6 in Unit 1/2.) Examples of cases can range from micro to macro, all the way from individual people or particular events, social situations, organizations or institutions, to national societies or international social systems.

We define 'case study', then, in terms of only one of the central features commonly associated with ethnographic and life history research: the investigation of a single case or a small number of cases. As I noted in the discussion of life history work, research may be aimed at drawing conclusions about a particular case that is of interest in itself. For example, occupational practitioners sometimes study their own work situations with a view to solving problems they face, their interest in this investigation not extending much beyond that situation. However, even where studies are aimed at more general conclusions, a single case or a small number of particular cases may reasonably be studied rather than a large sample. Where this occurs a case study strategy has been employed.

In order to clarify further the concept of case study, let me compare it with the two other main case selection strategies discussed in this Block: experiment and survey.<sup>1</sup> What is distinctive about an experiment is that the researcher constructs the cases to be studied, through the establishment of the research situation, the manipulation of the variables that are the focus of the research, and the control of at least some of the relevant extraneous variables. The distinctiveness of surveys, on the other hand, is that they involve the simultaneous selection for study of a relatively large number of naturally occurring (rather than experimentally created) cases. Case study combines some features of these other two strategies, involving the investigation of a relatively small number of naturally occurring (rather than researcher-created) cases.<sup>2</sup> The three strategies differ, then, in how many cases are studied and how these are selected.

Each of the case selection strategies may be usable to investigate any particular research topic, though their strengths and weaknesses will have varying significance, depending on the purposes and circumstances of the research. It is not uncommon to find in the literature discussions of case study that either treat it as inherently superior to other approaches, or dismiss it as inferior. Neither of these is the attitude we adopt in this course. In our view, in selecting one case selection strategy rather than another, we are usually faced with trade-offs. Each strategy has its advantages and disadvantages. We can never have everything we want, and usually we can get more of one thing only at the expense of getting less of something else. In other words, a researcher can usually gain the benefits of one strategy only at the expense of costs that could be avoided by using another strategy, but whose use would carry other costs. The choice of case selection strategy ought to be determined, then, by judgment of the likely resulting gains and losses in the light of the particular goals and circumstances of the research, including the resources available.

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<sup>1</sup>Our interpretation of the terms 'survey' and 'experiment', like that of 'case study', is narrower than in most common usage.

<sup>2</sup>It may involve the study of only one case, but where more than one is studied these may be selected consecutively rather than simultaneously, so that analysis of data from the first case influences the choice of subsequent cases for investigation. This is what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as 'theoretical sampling', which is discussed below.

## 2 CASE STUDIES AND SURVEYS

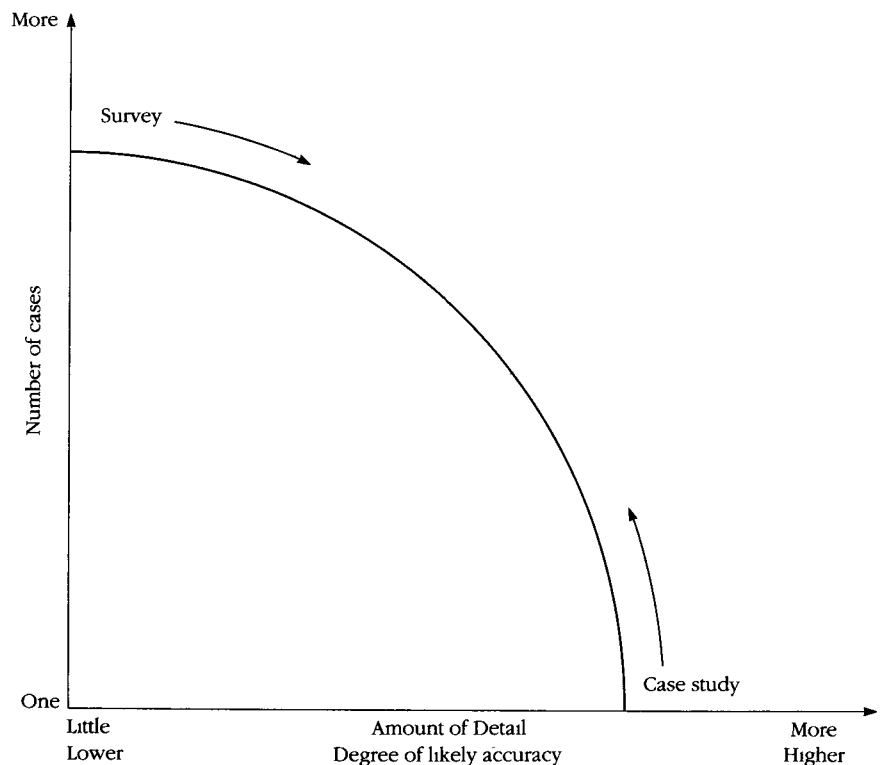


### ACTIVITY 1

What do you think the respective advantages and disadvantages of case studies and surveys are? Jot down your answer before you read on.

Let me begin, then, by comparing the case study with the survey. The great strength of case study in this comparison is that research employing this strategy usually provides more detailed information about the case(s) studied, and information that is more likely to be valid. This is because, given finite resources (including time), more of these resources can be spent on the investigation of each case than is possible in a survey. Of course, this does not guarantee that in any particular instance case study data will be more accurate than survey data; this is simply the likelihood, other things being equal. Furthermore, this advantage is bought at the cost of being less able to make effective generalizations to a larger population of cases. By 'generalization', I mean the extent to which, assuming valid information about the cases studied, the conclusions of the research can be legitimately inferred to be true for other cases in a larger population that have not been studied. In general, the more cases from a population we study, the more likely our findings are to be representative of that population. Here the survey usually has a clear advantage over the case study.

I can illustrate the relationship between the strengths and weaknesses of the case study and the survey by means of a diagram (see Figure 1). It is worth noting two things about this diagram. First, the difference between case studies and surveys is a matter of degree. We have a gradient or dimension here, not a dichotomy. As the number of cases investigated is reduced, the amount of detail that can be collected on each case is increased, and the chances of there being error in the



**Figure 1** *The relationship between the survey and the case study*