



## 2 CASE STUDIES AND SURVEYS

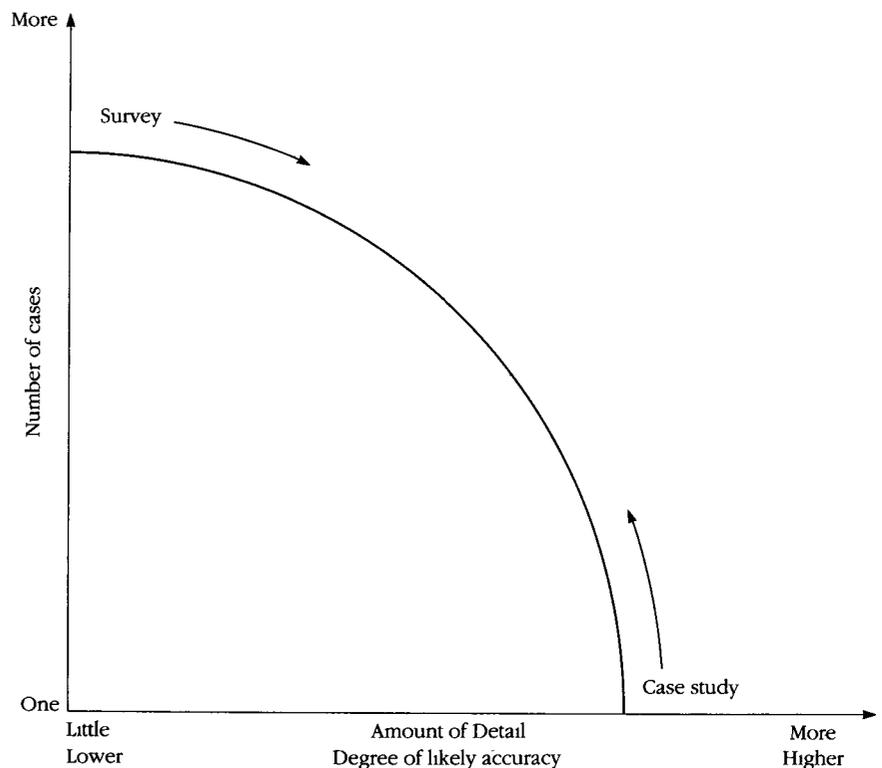


### ACTIVITY 1

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*

information probably reduces too. As this happens, we shift imperceptibly from survey to case study.

Of course, this trade-off is relative to the relationship between resource demands and the resources available. An investigation focusing on relatively small and easily accessible cases, and/or having a relatively high level of resources (more researchers, more time, etc.), would be able to study more cases in more detail than one focusing on geographically and/or temporally large cases and/or having fewer resources. The effect of these factors in terms of the diagram is to move the curve outwards or inwards, but not to change its shape. The trade-off remains whatever the levels of resource demands and resource availability.

This leads me to the second point I want to make. It might be thought that with lavish resources we would be able to maximize both the number of cases studied and the detail and accuracy of the information provided. This would be true, however, only if there were finite end-points to the two dimensions in the diagram. As we shall see, this is, at best, likely to be true only under certain conditions.

Let me deal with the possibility of a maximum amount of detail first. It is sometimes thought that case study involves the representation of a case in unique and concrete terms, perhaps involving its reproduction or evocation. Thus, in an otherwise instructive book about case-study research, Bromley (1986, p 288) talks of case studies as preserving 'the wholeness of the phenomenon studied'. But this is misleading. All description is selective. Descriptions never reproduce the phenomena described. We can always in principle provide more or different detail. Of course, practically speaking, we can usually resolve the problem of what and how much detail is required with little trouble. Our purposes generally dictate fairly clearly the degree of detail that is necessary. But given different purposes the descriptions produced would vary.

The same sort of argument applies to accuracy. The accuracy of information can always be subjected to further checks, in principle at least. It is sometimes argued that studies should be replicated several times before we take their conclusions to be sound; and further replications can always be called for. Similarly, faced with research making a particular claim, we may ask not just for evidence in support of that claim, but also for evidence of the validity of the evidence provided, and so on *ad infinitum*. There is no absolute foundation for us to reach that would necessarily stop this process, as we saw in Unit 1/2. Practically speaking, though, we usually soon reach a point at which we decide that it is not reasonable to demand further replications, or search or ask for further evidence. The appropriate point at which to stop is impossible to specify in the abstract. It will depend considerably on the nature of the claim and evidence involved; in particular, on their plausibility and credibility and on the purpose which the information is intended to serve. However, wherever we do stop, we could, in principle, always have gone further in checking the validity of the findings.

Let me turn now to the other dimension highlighted in the diagram: number of cases. Here, there is an obvious possible end-point. If we were trying to represent a population, the maximum number of cases would be reached if we decided to study every case in the population. But this assumes that the population of cases in which we are interested is finite. Sometimes this is true. But there are situations where the population of interest is not finite. This is the case, for example, where we are interested in testing a theory, where the term 'theory' implies universal or probabilistic relationships among categories of phenomena. Such theories refer to all possible instances that meet their conditions: those that have occurred in the past and those that could occur in the future. While even here (other things being equal) the more cases we study the better, there is no possibility of us studying all of them.

It is worth emphasizing that not only are there often no end-points to these two dimensions in principle, for most practical purposes the dimensions are likely to extend beyond the trade-off point the researcher chooses, so that in most studies the researcher could always have pursued more detail or done more checking for accuracy, or collected information on more cases.

So, the distinction between case study and survey is a matter of degree, and it usually involves a trade-off between the likely generalizability of the information obtained on the one hand, and the detail and likely accuracy of data about particular cases on the other. This is not always recognized, as I noted earlier. Often case studies and surveys are regarded as quite different sorts of research. Thus it is sometimes denied that case studies are intended to be representative or typical in the sense that is true of the findings of surveys. For example, Yin (1984) distinguishes between the logic of 'statistical' and 'analytical' generalization, arguing that only the latter is relevant to case studies. Similarly, Mitchell (1983) claims that case-study research involves 'logical' but not 'statistical' inference. Both these authors define generalization from sample to population as statistical and as irrelevant to case-study research.

This is quite wrong. As I pointed out earlier, it is true that where we are concerned with the development and testing of theory, the issue is not generalization to a finite population. And where the population is infinite, cannot be assumed to be homogeneous in the relevant respects, and its members are not all accessible to study, statistical techniques do not offer a solution to the problem of generalizing from sample to population. Random selection of a sample from the population is not possible under these circumstances, and so the relationship between the characteristics of any sample and those of the population remains uncertain in statistical terms. It is also true, as mentioned earlier, that sometimes we are not interested in any larger population, but only in the case(s) studied. For instance, a study of the National Front, such as that by Nigel Fielding (1981), may be concerned simply with describing that organization; so that the issue of generalizability across cases does not arise.<sup>3</sup> However, often the issue of generalizability to a relatively large, finite population is relevant to case-study work. It is quite common for research employing this strategy to make such claims. For instance, in his book *Policing the Inner City* (1979), Maurice Punch bases general statements about policing the inner-city areas of modern Western societies on an investigation of police officers in the Warmoesstraat area of Amsterdam. Similarly, Peter Woods treats the option system at the secondary school he studied as typical of those at other English secondary schools (Woods, 1979). Moreover, such empirical generalization is just as legitimate a goal for case-study research as is the development and testing of theories, and in some respects it is more straightforward.

Where empirical generalization is the goal, there is no doubt that, whatever its advantages in terms of detail and accuracy, case study is usually weaker than the survey in the generalizability of its findings. But to say this is not to say that case study provides no basis for such generalization, or that the generalizability of its findings cannot be improved or assessed. It is very important not to think of generalizability as synonymous with the use of statistical sampling techniques. The latter are one useful way of providing for generalizability to a finite and accessible population; but they are neither perfect nor the only way. If they cannot be used, as is usually the position in case-study research because the number of cases investigated is too small, we should not assume that the findings are therefore not generalizable, or that we cannot make reasonable judgments about whether they are representative or not.

A variety of strategies for improving and/or checking the generalizability of the findings of case-study research is available

1 It may be possible to draw on relevant information in published statistics about the population to which generalization is being made. So, for example, in their study of two juvenile courts, Parker *et al* used statistics about the proportions of different sorts of disposal in such courts in England and Wales and in the Merseyside area to show the atypicality of one of the courts they studied (Parker *et al.*, 1981, p 79). Figure 2 suggests that the County Juvenile Court had a distinctive pattern of outcomes compared to others

<sup>3</sup>The problem of generalization within the case may still arise, but not that of generalization across cases, which is my concern here



**Figure 2** Means of disposal of all juveniles (10–17 years) proceeded against as percentages of all cases dealt with for indictable and non-indictable offences (1978–79)

(Source Hammersley, 1991, p 92)

There may, of course, be problems in obtaining the information necessary to make such comparisons. For instance, in studying longshoremen in Portland, Oregon, USA (the equivalent of dockers in the British context), Pilcher wanted to document their income. Unfortunately, this information was not available. However, he *was* able to obtain official statistics about the average earnings from waterfront work of longshoremen in Oregon as a whole. This information obscured variations in earnings between workers in different ports in Oregon. Even more important, it omitted income from other forms of work (the uncertain nature of waterfront work makes other sources of income a necessity for many) and fringe benefits, official and unofficial (Pilcher, 1972, pp 15–17). However, despite its limitations, such information is better than nothing. It can often be used to get a general sense of whether or not the case studied is atypical.

2 Another possibility is increased collaboration between ethnographers and survey researchers, or the combination of case study and survey strategies in the same investigation. (The advantage of this over reliance on already available statistics is, of course, that information that is not provided in those statistics can be collected.) Thus, survey researchers have sometimes complemented their work with more detailed case studies; and ethnographers sometimes use questionnaires to provide information from a broader sample (though often this is generalization within, rather than across, cases). An example of the latter would be Olesen and Whittaker's study (1968) of the socialization of nurses, in which they used a questionnaire to collect background information about the nurses they studied, and those in preceding and succeeding years. In much the same way, Rock (1973) employed a small social survey of public knowledge and opinion to complement his ethnographic study of the process of debt collection in London in the 1960s. There are also some investigations that represent a more even balance between case study and survey, including much of the work of the Institute of Community Studies (see Platt, 1971) and, more recently, the study by Millham *et al.* (1986) of children in care and their families. There have long been calls for a more systematic combination of case studies and surveys, but there has been only limited progress towards this (see Zelditch, 1962; Sieber, 1973; and Bryman, 1988).

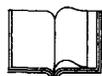
3 It may also be possible for those adopting a case-study approach to select for investigation cases that cover some of the main dimensions of suspected heterogeneity in the population to which they wish to generalize. For instance, in investigating the degree of choice given to pupils by option-choice schemes in secondary schools, if we were to study more than one school we might select

them to cover dimensions which could be expected to affect this issue: such as large/small number of pupils, predominantly working-class/middle-class catchment areas, and so on. This sort of 'cross-site' investigation is usually only possible on a significant scale where a team of researchers is involved, and even then very often the time that can be spent investigating each case may be much less than where a smaller number of cases is investigated. Here, as elsewhere, a trade-off is involved. (On such multisite qualitative studies, see for example Firestone and Herrnot, 1984.) However, even where an intensive study of only one case is being carried out, it may be possible to make brief investigations of one or more other cases in order to assess the ways in which the primary case is or is not representative of the larger population that is of concern. Skolnick's study (1966) of law enforcement processes in US cities is an example of this strategy. The bulk of his research took place in one city, but he made a brief investigation of another to assess the likely generalizability of his findings.

4 Similarly, where studies have been carried out by others on other cases in the same population, comparison may allow some judgment of typicality to be made. This strategy is illustrated by Strong's study (1979) of paediatric consultations. He seeks to generalize from the cases he studied to a larger population by comparing his data with those from other studies in the sociology of medicine. He argues that the bureaucratic format he identified as characteristic of those consultations is not typical only of them. With minor modifications, it predominates in all medical consultations in the British health service. In order to establish this, he first considers the extent to which the fact that children were the patients in the paediatric consultations he studied shaped the pattern of interaction characteristic of them, arguing that it made little difference. Secondly, he draws on other studies of medical consultation involving adults as patients, to assess how far these conformed to the bureaucratic mode.

It is worth noting that where the case-study strategy is adopted, cases are sometimes selected for investigation on the basis of their *atypicality*. In the early 1960s, Cicourel and Kitsuse investigated Lakeside High, a school which they pointed out was unrepresentative of US high schools at the time, particularly in having a professional counselling service (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963). But the authors argued that in this respect the school was in advance of changes that were taking place among US high schools generally, so that more and more schools would become similar to Lakeside High in the future. On this basis, Cicourel and Kitsuse claimed that their findings would be generalizable to many US high schools of the future. This sort of generalization requires different kinds of support compared to the more conventional process of generalization to an already existing population of cases. In assessing Cicourel's and Kitsuse's claims, we need to be sure that their assumptions about the trend in the development of US high schools are accurate. In fact, they do not provide much evidence for this; though we are in a better position now to assess whether they were right.

I am not suggesting that these various strategies are always able to give case-study researchers a very sound basis for generalization, but they can provide some evidence, and we should not scorn that evidence simply because it is not statistical. By means of these strategies a researcher can moderate the relative weakness of case study in providing for the generalizability of findings to a large, finite population of cases. And often this is necessary if the findings of research using a case-study strategy are to be of value.



## READING

You should now read 'Increasing the generalizability of qualitative research', by Janet Schofield, reproduced in the Course Reader.

In this article, Schofield examines the problem of generalizability as it arises in the context of applied qualitative research in the field of education. As you read the article, take

## UNIT 7 CASE STUDY

---

particular note of how Schofield conceptualizes generalizability, and also of what she identifies as the main targets of generalization and the strategies that can be used to achieve it.

---

So, the first implication of my definition of case study is that in relation to the survey it involves a trade-off between empirical generalizability on the one hand and accuracy and detail of information on the other. However, I have emphasized that these are tendencies, not inevitabilities, and that generalizability to large, finite populations is not always the goal of research. Furthermore, as outlined above, there are ways in which case-study researchers can improve their methods and assess the representativeness of the cases they study.