

Case Studies: Why Should I Use This Design?

Shelli Casler-Failing

University at Albany

ETAP 777 – Qualitative Research Methods

Final Project – Option I

Abstract

This paper will introduce readers to six research articles and their explanation of case study methodology. This is a critique of six articles and is not meant to provide new information on the topic of case studies, but rather to compare and contrast the articles for their strengths and weaknesses. This critique was based upon the research question, “Case Studies: Why Should I Use This Design?” and is an attempt to find answers that will appropriately answer the question, either partially or completely. This paper will explain my research process, provide a critique of each article, and end with a conclusion that will explain whether or not the research answered my question.

Keywords: *case study; case study methods; case study methodology; case study strengths; case study weaknesses*

This paper will critique six research articles that discuss case study methodology. I am planning on doing my dissertation on a topic in math that will involve understanding what improvements students experience in their understanding given a particular learning strategy. After experiencing a couple of research methodology courses and being introduced to some various types of research methods – some more in-depth than others – I decided to focus this paper on case studies to gain a deeper understanding of the method and, hopefully, help me to decide on whether it would be an adequate design to follow. In order to gain research pertinent to this topic I chose to focus on the research question: “Case Studies: Why Should I Use This Design?”

When I first set out to investigate case study methodology, I felt that this would be an extremely easy topic to research because there is a lot of case study research to look at. Although there may be a lot of research available, it is not necessarily *readily* available or easy to find. I began my search for articles by going to the University at Albany database and searching through educational journals. I began by using the keywords “case study methodology” which returned actual completed case studies rather than the methodology behind the process. I also searched “case study ethics” which provided me with ethical considerations for specific studies, not ethical considerations to be followed *in general* when collecting and reporting on data from case studies. I was about to throw “my hands in” when I looked at the article by Robert Yin; his article was titled *Case Study Methods*. The revelation led me to refine my search to “case study methods” and I was, at last, provided with some usable resources that included advantages and disadvantages of case study methodology, different types of sampling procedures, classification of case studies, and various forms of data collection techniques. I completed my research by

going to *Google Scholar* and searching “case study methods” which allowed me to view articles that were not readily available through the University at Albany.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 532-550.

Building Theories from Case Study Research was written by Kathleen M. Eisenhardt and deals specifically with performing case studies as a means to create or substantiate theory. In this article, Eisenhardt describes the background and approach to theory-building case study methodology; breaks down the process for the novice researcher by providing steps, activities related to the steps, and reasons for the steps and activities; and provides some examples of inductive case study research.

After providing the background and overall process, Eisenhardt goes through each step in detail while linking it to one, or more, of the examples provided. During the “Discussion,” Eisenhardt reiterates the main points of the process before discussing the weaknesses, strengths, and applicability of the method. Eisenhardt (1989) concludes theory-building case study methods are appropriate for new areas of research as well as “research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate” (p. 549).

The title chosen for this article and the abstract are clear indicators of the material covered in the article. The author has organized her paper very well and gives the novice a good path to follow. The introduction gives a brief history of theory development, a short description of the paper’s contents, ties the paper to well-known researchers in the same area, and describes the two contributions the author hopes to make to existing literature. The author writes about the

entire process and then discusses the strengths, weaknesses, and applicability; I feel that it would be easier to link the strengths and weaknesses to the sources of such if they were contained within the part of the process where they are prone to exist.

Eisenhardt included only the important aspects that helped to support claims presented when including excerpts from the example case studies; she could have focused more on the examples, but that would have muddied this article. She tied-in the previous research when it was necessary to substantiate a part of the process. Eisenhardt speaks about research teams; I feel that more care should have been given to the manner in which teams work together when observing cases. She does give details on this matter, but to be more specific, she should have exposed areas that could produce reliability and validity issues during team observations.

I do not feel that she appropriately stressed the difficulty of such a study. Case Studies by themselves can be very difficult for the novice researcher, but add the theory-building aspect, and it becomes a method that should only be attempted by experienced researchers, in my opinion. Eisenhardt does not stress this enough, rather she writes this article in a manner that would allow a novice to think they are capable of such an endeavor.

I am not totally convinced that Eisenhardt wrote this article in an objective manner. As I read the article it felt as though she was “preaching” this method and writing in a manner that would make every researcher feel capable of such a task. She describes the entire process in detail and explains the strengths before discussing the weaknesses. A more objective view would have included the weaknesses throughout the process to better inform the reader as they progress through the paper. The author seems to assume that anyone can follow this process and be successful at theory-building case study methodology. In my opinion, a researcher should

become familiar with, and complete, case study and grounded theory research before attempting to complete theory-building case study research.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12 (2), 219-245.

Bent Flyvbjerg wrote *Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research* as a way to educate other researchers about some common misconceptions of case study methodology. The title is an excellent description of the subject of the article and after reading the article I cannot say that I could develop a better title other than adding the word *clarified* at the end. The abstract appropriately summarizes the article and goes as far as to include the five misunderstandings so the reader can make an intelligent decision as to whether or not the information provided within the article will be relevant to them.

The author begins the article by introducing the readers to his own experience with case studies. The author mentions that as a graduate student his professors attempted to steer him away from case study methodology; however, this made him want to learn everything that he could about case studies so he could educate others about the benefits and misconceptions of research methodology. I believe that Flyvbjerg presented his findings very clearly and in a manner that all types of readers can understand. Due to the fact that this article is meant to be read by professionals in the areas of research and various content areas such as education and psychology, the author does include the appropriate professional lingo, but includes it in understandable context so a reader of any background can gain a good understanding of the article's main points.

Flyvbjerg begins by presenting the reader with his own experiences with case studies and then moves into the common misunderstandings: (1) general knowledge is more useful than concrete knowledge, (2) generalization is not feasible based on a single case, (3) case studies are for generating hypotheses, not testing them, (4) case studies contain researcher bias, and (5) general propositions and theories are difficult to summarize and/or develop (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The remainder of the paper refutes these misunderstandings and then recaps the entire paper in the conclusion. Flyvbjerg writes this paper in a very logical manner and each section flows into the next almost seamlessly. The reader is never left to wonder or want for more information as each misunderstanding is completely clarified with solid arguments.

The author cites many resources by distinguished researchers well known in the field of case study methodology. All of the information referenced is pertinent and used to substantiate Flyvbjerg's stance that case studies are a much stronger form of research than previously thought. I believe that Flyvbjerg does a great job of presenting his findings with the appropriate amount of emphasis. Flyvbjerg does not present his findings as the "best research ever" rather he allows his readers to interpret the article as they choose. There is not any doubt in my mind that some readers of this article will "toss these ideas aside" and continue to believe the misconceptions of case study research that have been presented over time, such as the inability to generalize based on single-case research. I feel that Flyvbjerg spends the appropriate amount of time on each misunderstanding and does not embellish this article with lots of "fluff" to make it more readable, instead he substantiates his opinions with proven research in a very succinct manner that is understandable for all levels of readers from novice to expert.

When writing this article, Flyvbjerg seems to assume that many educators and researchers feel that case study methodology is less than adequate when completing studies

meant to provide generalizations and construct theories. This paper certainly reflects that assumption and attempts to educate the readers by thoroughly describing how the misunderstandings can be refuted and case studies can be used effectively. It is apparent that Flyvbjerg is very passionate about case studies and through writing this article he is attempting to shed some light on the positive attributes of case study methodology. However, in this article Flyvbjerg is able to maintain objectivity and educate the readers using substantiated arguments. In my opinion when someone is extremely passionate about a topic, they are seldom able to separate their emotions from their work; Flyvbjerg has attempted, and succeeded, in this article.

Qi, S. (2009). Case study in contemporary educational research: Conceptualization and critique. *Cross-Cultural Communication* , 5 (4), 21-31.

The article *Case Study in Contemporary Educational Research: Conceptualization and Critique* was written by Shen Qi, who is a graduate student and Associate Professor in China. In this article, Qi attempts to educate his readers on the use of case studies in educational research. I feel that Shen Qi chose an appropriate title for this article as it clearly explains that this article deals with case studies in recent (contemporary as opposed to traditional) educational research. The subtitle defines the manner in which the information will be discussed – conceptually through critique, or so I thought. After reading the article it was clear to me that *critique* referred to the actual critique of a case study by Ransdell. However, the abstract presented with this article is extremely relevant to the contents of the article; Qi briefly described the entire content of the paper, what he would define and examples presented.

The introduction of this paper allowed the reader to gain a definition of case study research by referring to two well-known case study “fathers,” Cohen and Yin. Qi also briefly

explains what he intends the reader to gain from this article: weaknesses, potential, principles, and process of case study research. The full purpose of the article is clearly stated in its own section.

Qi substantiated all claims that he made by citing researchers who are advocates for case study methodology. Qi does not attempt to make claims that are not substantiated and does not appear to add any of his own conclusions to the article. When Qi writes about the purpose, features, classification, process, methods, strengths and weaknesses, and types of data he lists them in a bulleted format with credit given to the original author. I interpret this to be a rather informal way of writing and see it as a compilation of others' works rather than an original piece.

Qi provides extremely pertinent information and cites references instrumental to providing valid research on the case study method. However, I feel that the reason for the inclusion of such information is not clearly stated and is not to inform the reader on case study methodology, but to prepare the reader for Qi's critique; this is seriously misleading to a reader who intends to learn about case studies by reading this article. The discussion included in this article lead into the critique on the work of D. R. Ransdell. When I first read the abstract, I was led to believe that I would gain a solid understanding of case study research methods from yet another advocate of this method. However, after reading the article, it is clear that the information provided on case study methodology was to help the reader understand Qi's critique of Ransdell's study.

I do believe that the conceptualizing aspect of this article should have been extended to truly speak about case study methodology in the context that it should/would be performed. The author spoke about the philosophy of case study research through bulleted sections with little introduction. In order for this article to become a useful piece of literature for those interested in

completing case study research, the paper would need to become more professional in the explanation of “what” and “how” case study is. As this paper currently stands, it would not be a useful reference to cite in the literature review section of a research report as it is a compilation of others’ ideas and publications.

This article is presented in a clear, coherent manner that is easily readable, but I feel it is due to its unprofessionalism. I would expect that a published graduate student would write papers that would be more substantial in nature and content. The abstract leads the reader to believe that Qi is presenting information about qualitative case study methods that is new, innovative, and “sheds new light” on the information that is currently available. That is not the case and was very disheartening to me as I was looking to increase my knowledge of case study methodology. This article was merely a literature review labeled incorrectly, although it did aid in my ability to make an informed decision regarding my research question since it contained so much information from other authors. Unfortunately, I am still left to research the cited authors to obtain first-hand information to ensure that meaning was not lost in interpretation as this article was written.

It appears as though the author, Qi, was objective in this article as much of the writing in this article is a reference to the work of others. However, there is a lot of information available to those interested in case study methodology and if one were to choose to have case study methodology look favorable as compared to other research methods, they would choose to share only the positive attributes of the method; I believe this is the process that Qi followed when writing this paper, as the weaknesses of case study methodology are not covered in depth in his article. This finding leads me to infer that Qi wrote this paper on a more subjective level rather than objective.

Stake, R. E. (1978). The case study method in social inquiry. *Educational Researcher* , 7 (2), 5-8.

The Case Study Method in Social Inquiry written by Robert E. Stake is an article that explained the relationship between case studies and social interactions; Stake's goal with the article was to show that the case study method is most appropriate when studying cases on the social realm. The title is appropriate for this article due to the fact that the article does speak to case study methods used with human social interactions, however, the majority of the article revolves around the weaknesses of generalizing findings and posits ways to improve and validate generalizations. Therefore, this aspect should also have a place in the title.

This article did not contain an abstract. I actually had to purchase the article in order to obtain a full copy and chose to use this article in my paper after reading the introduction – it seemed to provide a partial answer to my research question. When I read the first page (introduction) I felt that this paper was going to present some history on the case study methodology. After reading the entire article, it was clear the purpose of the article was not made explicitly clear in the introduction; this article focused more on generalizing from data. Stake did not break this paper down into sections (introduction, methods, research, etc.) and treated the entire paper as a discussion on case studies; Stake focused primarily on generalizing from findings and the issues related to validity and reliability that may result.

Robert Stake is a very well-known advocate for case study methodology and citations made to previous research speak to the philosophy behind social interactions and generalization. Stake only included seven references to others' points of views, which, in my experience, is quite few in a scholarly article. However, the citations that are included are extremely relevant, from a philosophical viewpoint, to the point that he is attempting to make in each instance.

Stake is attempting to educate the readers of this article on a certain aspect of case study methodology, generalizing across populations. With that as the main point, I feel that Stake focused too deeply on the case types that comprise a case study. Almost one-third of the article is spent on describing “cases.” If Stake wanted the determination of cases to be a significant part of this paper, it should have been included in the introduction and should have been incorporated into the impact that the case type studied can have on generalization issues. Stake should have expanded more on his introduction to give the reader a true sense of the contents of the article. Since the paper seemed to focus on generalization weakness, that area should have been expanded and the section of case types should have been reduced to only include how case type can affect generalization.

Stake is clear in his statements and gives the appropriate information needed to discern the reasons for including excerpts from the works of other authors. Stake wrote this paper from the point of view of a philosopher, but does so in a way that laymen can understand which is commendable; Stake certainly wrote this paper for readability. Stake seemed to assume that the reader has experience with case study methodology, either by performing research or reading the literature on the methodology. Therefore, a novice who is unfamiliar with case studies may have trouble obtaining valuable information about generalizations from this article.

I believe that Stake attempts to take an objective stance in this article, but his experience and knowledge of case study methodology allows this paper to show his subjectivity. The majority of this paper is written about his beliefs as they relate to case studies and therefore most of the article is a reflection of his beliefs and personal findings through his own research practices.

Vavrus, F., & Bartlett, L. (2006). Comparatively knowing: Making a case for the vertical case study. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 8 (2), 95-103.

Frances Vavrus and Lesley Bartlett wrote *Comparatively Knowing: Making a Case for the Vertical Case Study* to educate their readers about the need for cross-analysis when looking at data. These authors feel that there is more to gain from vertical case studies as opposed to *traditional* case studies. Although vertical case studies were described as having a “commitment to micro-level understanding and to macro-level analysis” (p. 96), the title led me to believe that vertical case studies would be compared to traditional case studies in their methods and processes; this was not the case. The abstract does describe the study well, but again, after reading the title and abstract, I was led to believe that there would be a great deal of information about the vertical case study as a research method.

The introduction introduces the reader to comparative and international education and what is needed to improve both. There isn't anything mentioned about traditional case studies or vertical case studies. Since this paper is about vertical case studies, I would think that the authors would have connected vertical case studies to comparative knowledge from the start of the paper, as the title suggests. The discussion focuses on how to prepare graduate students for research involving vertical case studies, whereas I feel that it should have focused more on the application of vertical case studies as compared to traditional case studies. This paper seemed to have distinct sections that could have been written independently of the rest of the article; there wasn't any continuation of ideas between sections.

The authors cite research that is pertinent to substantiate their beliefs, but only one or two of the references are familiar to me (in my limited experience). While investigating case studies and other forms of qualitative research, I have become familiar with names such as Robert Yin,

Robert Stake, and John Creswell, to name a few. The articles cited in this study have not been cited in other research articles or books that I have read, which leads me to believe that the authors sought out references that substantiated their claims, no matter how obscure they may be.

This article appears to be concerned with data that can be compared to similar data on a global scale. The authors seem to imply that case studies can be compared to gain generalizations, but due to the fact that generalization of case studies can have issues with reliability (Yin, 2006; Stake, 1978; Qi, 2009) I feel that in order to compare data, case studies would need to be completed simultaneously by a single researcher, or team of researchers. Two separate studies cannot be compared due to the different contexts that they occur in.

I would have liked to have read a comparison of case study methodology versus vertical case study methodology to gain a better understanding of the differences and similarities. Due to the fact that this article describes only vertical case studies, throughout the entire article instead of in a specific section, I am required to piece together the differences. The authors state that when data is collected it should be looked at comparatively “among levels rather than across states” (p. 100). This, however, is unclear to me. Does this mean that if I perform case studies on three students I should compare them to each other in a class rather than as individuals? I would have liked the foundation of this method to be more clear for the reader.

The authors seem to stress this is the best method to use and therefore it appears to be subjective rather than objective. The authors would have appeared more objective if they had written about vertical case studies as a method rather than attempting to integrate the concept into an article that speaks to comparative and international education.

Yin, R. K. (2006). Case study methods. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Complementary Methods in Education Research* (pp. 111-122). New York: Routledge.

Robert Yin's article is a good article for the experienced researcher who needs a *refresher* in case study methods. The title of this article is extremely clear and gives the potential reader an idea of the topic of the research, but to make the title clearer, Yin could have changed *methods* to *methodology*. In my opinion, the term methodology leads a reader to infer that the article will speak to the history and use of case studies, whereas the term methods may infer that the article is about a process.

This article did not contain an abstract, but was taken from a book that educates readers on the many different forms of research – both qualitative and quantitative. I felt the title was adequate for me to discern the content of the article and knew that it would be applicable to help me find an answer to my original research question of why I should use a case study for my own dissertation. The introduction clearly sets the reader up for what is to follow. Yin organizes this article around a set of *summary points* to highlight the important (what he feels are important) steps in conducting case study research. The introduction gives the reader a general idea of when and how to use a case study.

Yin presents this paper as a guiding process to completing individual research. Yin presents the steps and adds detail by listing essential skills necessary for researchers to possess, basic skills necessary to design a case study, how to choose which case(s) to study, different types of data collection, ways to analyze the data, and how to write the final report. Yin was careful to include only information and references essential to substantiating his claims and steps in creating a case study. However, I do feel that Yin intended this paper to be a guide after one has researched case study methodology in detail, and therefore, he is very succinct in his writing

of each step. This would not be easily read and understood by a novice due to the limited amount of information provided in each section; this is a great article for aiding a researcher as they complete a study independently.

Yin could certainly make this article into another complete article by expanding each step and adding more case study history and development to the paper. As previously mentioned, Yin seems to have written this as a guide, but if he were to expand on each section by providing more depth and history, he could certainly create an article that would be beneficial to all readers, especially the novice researcher.

I consider Robert Yin to be one of the leading experts on case study methodology due to the fact that he is cited by many other authors, including authors I have referenced in this paper. Yin was careful to include only information and references essential to substantiating his claims and steps in creating a case study. I feel that the information provided in this article is correct and appropriate; Yin references other authors in this article as well, although six of the articles referenced are his own previous works. Yin is extremely clear in his presentation of ideas and writes in a manner that is understandable for all levels of researchers. Yin does not use “fancy terminology” that would only be understood by professionals in the field, rather he creates a smooth flowing piece of literature that does utilize professional vocabulary, but in an “everyday” context that is easy to interpret.

Although Yin is very well-known in the field of case study methodology and research, he is able to maintain professional objectivism when writing this article. Yin does not claim to be “all-knowing” in this area and is providing a method for others to use if they so choose, he is not “forcing this method” on anyone. At no time does this article imply that this is the only way to perform qualitative research and Yin does mention some of the weaknesses of case study

methodology such as researcher bias and inappropriate generalizations. I feel that Yin presented this topic in a very objective manner that will, and most certainly has, aided many researchers in case study methodology. After reading this article, it does appear that Yin assumed this article would be read and used as a guide and not as an all-informing piece of literature; in other words this is a recipe, not a cookbook, on case study methods.

In conclusion, I do not feel that my research question, “Case Studies: Why Should I Use This Design?” was completely answered by the research that I performed, but I did gain a substantial amount of knowledge through the completion of this review. I believe I am more informed about the weaknesses of case study methods and how I can collect and analyze data to not only strengthen my research, but to enhance the reliability, credibility, and validity of my research findings. What surprised me the most was not one of the studies I reviewed included any information about the ethical considerations of completing case study research. In my opinion, the ethical implications should be the most important aspect to adhere to when performing research of any type and are closely monitored by all Institutional Review Boards (IRB).

I would like to learn more about vertical case studies as Vavrus and Bartlett (2006) only briefly discussed the method and did not provide any depth on the topic. The Qi article will be useful as a quick reference as I someday complete my own research due to its bulleted, easy to read format. The authors that I found to be the most knowledgeable about case study methodology are Robert Stake and Robert Yin and I certainly plan to read much more of their work as I continue my quest to fully understand case study methodology.

In order to gain an answer to my research question I will certainly need to complete a lot more research, but that is an endeavor that I am looking forward to. When I begin my own research it will be an important undertaking and I want to be sure that I am fully informed on the research method that I choose and the only way to gain a solid understanding of the strengths and weaknesses is to continue my search for answers.

Bibliography

- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review* , 14 (4), 532-550.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry* , 12 (2), 219-245.
- Qi, S. (2009). Case study in contemporary educational research: Conceptualization and critique. *Cross-Cultural Communication* , 5 (4), 21-31.
- Stake, R. E. (1978). The case study method in social inquiry. *Educational Researcher* , 7 (2), 5-8.
- Vavrus, F., & Bartlett, L. (2006). Comparatively knowing: Making a case for the vertical case study. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* , 8 (2), 95-103.
- Yin, R. K. (2006). Case study methods. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Complementary Methods in Education Research* (pp. 111-122). New York: Routledge.