5
Case Studies

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Case studies have become one of the most common ways to do qualitative inquiry, but they are neither new nor essentially qualitative. Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. By whatever methods, we choose to study the case. We could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically, organically or culturally, and by mixed methods—but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case.

The physician studies the child because the child is ill. The child's symptoms are both qualitative and quantitative. The physician's record is more quantitative than qualitative. The social worker studies the child because the child is neglected. The symptoms of neglect are both qualitative and quantitative. The formal record the social worker keeps is more qualitative than quantitative.[1] In many professional and practical fields, cases are studied and recorded. As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used.

Perhaps a majority of researchers doing casework call their studies by some other name. Howard Becker (personal communication, 1980), for example, when asked what he called his own studies, reluctantly said, "Fieldwork," adding that such labels contribute little to the understanding of what researchers do. Some of us emphasize the name *case study* because it draws attention to the question of what specially can be learned from the single case. That epistemological question is the driving question of this chapter: What can be learned from the single case? I will emphasize designing the study to optimize understanding of the case rather than generalization beyond.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This revision of my chapter of the same title in the first edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* has been enhanced by the fine contributions to *What Is a Case?* edited by Charles Ragin and Howard Becker (1992), as well as by the critical readings of Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, Orlando Fals Borda, Morten Levin, Linda Mabry, and Rita Davis.

◆ Identification of the Case

A case may be simple or complex. It may be a child, or a classroom of children, or an incident such as a mobilization of professionals to study a childhood condition. It is one among others. In any given study, we will concentrate on the one. The time we may spend concentrating our inquiry on the one may be long or short, but, while we so concentrate, we are engaged in case study.

Custom has it that not everything is a case. A child may be a case. A doctor may be a case—but *his doctoring* probably lacks the specificity, boundedness, to be called a case.[2] An agency may be a case. But the *reasons* for child neglect or the *policies* of dealing with neglectful parents will seldom be considered a case. We think of those topics as generalities rather than specificities. The case is a specific One.

If we are moved to study it, the case is almost certainly going to be a functioning specific. The case is a "bounded system" (Flood, as reported in Fals Borda, 1998). In the social sciences and human services, the case has working parts; it is purposive; it often has a self. It is an integrated system. However immature, the child is a working combination of physiological, psychological, cultural, aesthetic, and other forces. Similarly, the hospital as case, the agency as case. Functional or dysfunctional, rational or irrational, the case is a system.

Its behavior is patterned. Coherence and sequence are prominent. It is common to recognize that certain features are within the system, within the boundaries of the case, and other features outside. Some are significant as contexr. William Goode and Paul Hatt (1952) observe that it is not always easy for the case researcher to say where the child ends and the environment begins. But boundedness and behavior patterns are useful concepts for specifying the case (Stake, 1988).

Ultimately, we may be interested in a general phenomenon or a population of cases more than in the individual case. And we cannot understand this case without knowing about other cases. But while we are studying it, our meager resources are concentrated on trying to understand *its* complexities. For the while, we probably will not study comparison cases. We may simultaneously carry on more than one case study, but each case study is a concentrated inquiry into a single case.

Charles Ragin (1992) gives emphasis to the question of "What is it a case of?" as if "membership in" or "representation of" something else were the main consideration in case study. He makes detailed reference to the casework of Michel Wieviorka (1988) on terrorism. Ragin was writing for the social scientist seeking theoretical generalization, justifying the study of the particular only if it serves an understanding of grand issues or explanations. He recognized that even in formal experimentation and statistical survey work there is interest in the illustrative or deviant case. But historians, program evaluators, institutional researchers, practitioners in all professions are interested in the individual case without necessarily caring what it is a case of.

Even if my definition of case study were agreed upon,[3] and it is not, the terms *case* and *study* defy full specification (Kemmis, 1980). A case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry. Lawrence Stenhouse (1984) advocates calling the latter, the product, a *case record,* and occasionally we do, but the practice of calling the final report a *case study* is widely established. Here and there, researchers call a great variety of things case studies.[4] But the more the object of study is a specific, unique, bounded system, the greater the usefulness of the epistemological rationales described in this chapter.

◆ Intrinsic and Instrumental Interest in Cases

I find it useful to identify three types of case study. I call a study an *intrinsic case study* if it is undertaken because, first and last, the researcher wants better understanding of this particular case. Here, it is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because, in all its particularity *and* ordinariness, this case itself is of interest. The researcher at least temporarily subordinates other curiosities so that the stories of those "living the case" will be teased out. The purpose is not to come to understand some abstract

construct or generic phenomenon, such as literacy or teenage drug use or what a school principal does. The purpose is not theory building—although at other times the researcher may do just that. Study is undertaken because of an intrinsic interest in, for example, this particular child, clinic, conference, or curriculum. Writings illustrating intrinsic case study include the following:

The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography (Adams, 1918)

- *God's Choice* (Peshkin, 1986)
- *Bread and Dreams: A Case Study of Bilingual Schooling in the U.S.A.* (MacDonald, Adelman, Kushner, & Walker, 1982) (and most program evaluation studies; see Mabry, 1998)
- *An Aberdeenshire Village Propaganda: Forty Years Ago* (Smith, 1889)
- *The Swedish School System* (Stenholm, 1984)

I call it *instrumental case study* if a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. The case still is looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps the researcher to pursue the external interest. The case may be seen as typical of other cases or not. (In a later section, I will discuss when typicality is important.) Here the choice of case is made to advance understanding of that other interest. Because the researcher simultaneously has several interests, particular and general, there is no line distinguishing intrinsic case study from instrumental; rather, a zone of combined purpose separates them. Writings illustrating instrumental case study include these:

"Campus Response to a Student Gunman" (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995/1997)

- *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School* (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961)
- "Thrown Overboard: The Human Costs of Health Care Rationing" (Kolker, 1996)
- *On the Border of Opportunity: Education, Community, and Language at the U.S.-Mexico Line* (Pugach, 1998)
- "A Nonreader Becomes a Reader: A Case Study of Literacy Acquisition by a Severely Disabled Reader" (McCormick, 1994)

With even less intrinsic interest in one particular case, a researcher may jointly study a number of cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition. I call this *collective case study.*[5] It is instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest some common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each important. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases. Works illustrating collective case study include the following:

Teachers' Work (Connell, 1985)

- "Researching Practice Settings: A Case Study Approach" (concerning medical clinics; Crabtree & Miller, 1999)
- *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1991)
- *Bold Ventures: Patterns Among U.S. Innovations in Science and Mathematics Education* (Raisin & Britton, 1997)
- "The Dark Side of Organizations: Mistake, Misconduct and Disaster" (Vaughan, 1999)

Reports (and authors) often do not fit neatly into such categories. I see these three as heuristic more than determinative. Alan Peshkin (personal communication, October 1992) responded to my classification of *God's Choice* (1986) as an intrinsic case study by saying: "I mean to present my case so that it can be read with interest in the case itself, but I always have another agenda—to learn from the case about some class of things. Some of what that will be remains an emergent matter for a long time." In this work, for 3 years Peshkin studied a single school, Bethany Baptist Academy. Until the final chapter, he does not tell the reader about the emergent matters of great importance to him and to the school people and citizens broadly. The first order of business was to understand the case, and a harsh understanding it turned out to be. But the immediate, if not ultimate, interest was intrinsic. The methods Peshkin used centered on the case, only latently taking up his abiding concern for community, freedom, and survival. Yes, this work could also have been called an instrumental study.

Other types of case study have been acknowledged. Harrison White (1992) categorizes social science casework according to three purposes: case studies for identity, explanation, or control. Similarly, Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) discuss five functions. Ragin (1992) sorts

the studies two by two, conceptualizing cases as empirical units or theoretical constructs, general or specific. Historians and political scientists regularly examine singular episodes or movements or eras, such as Norman Gottwald's (1979) study of the emergence of Jewish identity. But I choose not to call such investigations case studies when the episodes or relationships—however complex, impacting, and bounded—are not easily thought of as organic and systemic, laced with purpose and self.

Elsewhere there is a common form of cases used in teaching to illustrate a point, a condition, a category, something important for instruction (Kennedy, 1979). For decades, law school and school of business professors have gallaried these cases.[6] For staff development and management training, such reports constitute the articles of the *Journal of Case Research,* key publication of the North American Case Research Association. Used for instruction and consultation, they result from instrumental case study.

One could also make a separate category for biography. Bill Tierney's contribution to this series (Volume 2, Chapter 9) is case centered, noting that biography calls for special attention to chronological structures and to procedures for the protection of human subjects. Similarly, television documentaries, many of them easily classifiable as case studies, require their own methods. The work of ethnographers, critical theorists, institutional demographers, and many others follows conceptual and stylistic patterns that not only amplify the taxonomy but also extend the foundation for case study research in the social sciences and social services. My purpose here in categorization is not taxonomic; rather, I want to emphasize variation in concern for and methodological orientation to *the case.* Thus I focus on three types: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective.

◆ Study of the Particular

Case researchers seek both what is common and what is particular about the case, but the end result regularly portrays something of the uncommon (Stouffer, 1941), drawing from all of the following:

1. The nature of the case;
2. The case's historical background;
3. The physical setting;
4. Other contexts (e.g., economic, political, legal, and aesthetic);

5. Other cases through which this case is recognized;
6. Those informants through whom the case can be known.

To study the case, to show particularity, many researchers gather data on all of the above.

The search for particularity competes with the search for generalizability. What all should be said about a single case is quite different from what should be said about all cases. Each case has important atypical features, happenings, relationships, and situations. Pursuit of understanding of those atypicalities not only robs time from the study of the generalizable but also diminishes the value, to some extent, that we place on demographic and policy issues.

Most academic researchers are supportive of the study of cases only if there is clear expectation of generalizability to other cases. Case-by-case uniqueness is seldom an ingredient of scientific theory. Case study research has been constrained even by qualitative methodologists who grant less than full regard to study of the particular (Denzin, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 1989). These and other social scientists have written about case study as if intrinsic study of a particular case is not as important as studies to obtain generalizations pertaining to a population of cases.[7] Some have emphasized case study as typification of other cases, as exploration leading up to generalization-producing studies, or as an occasional early step in theory building. At least as I see it, case study method has been too little honored as the intrinsic study of a valued particular, as it is in biography, institutional self-study, program evaluation, therapeutic practice, and many lines of work. Generalization should not be emphasized in all research (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Simons, 1980).

Reflecting upon the pertinent literature, I find case study methodology written largely by people who presume that the research should contribute to scientific generalization. The bulk of case study work, however, is done by individuals who have *intrinsic* interest in the case and little interest in the advance of science. Their designs aim the inquiry toward understanding of what is important about that case within its own world, which is seldom the same as the worlds of researchers and theorists. Those designs develop what is perceived to be the case's own issues, contexts, and interpretations, its *thick description*. In contrast, the methods of instrumental case study draw the researcher toward illustrating how the concerns of

researchers and theorists are manifest in the case. Because the critical issues are more likely to be known in advance and following disciplinary expectations, such a design can take greater advantage of already developed instruments and preconceived coding schemes.

In intrinsic case study, researchers do not avoid generalization—they cannot. Certainly they generalize to happenings of their cases at times yet to come and in other situations. They expect readers to comprehend the reported interpretations but to modify their (the readers') own. Thus researchers use the methods for casework that they actually use to learn enough about their cases to encapsulate complex meanings into finite reports—and thus to describe the cases in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions (which may differ from those of the researchers).

Even intrinsic case study can be seen as a small step toward grand generalization (Campbell, 1975; Vaughan, 1992), especially in the case that runs counter to the existing rule. Damage occurs when the commitment to generalize or to theorize runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself.[8] The case study researcher faces a strategic decision in regard to how much and how long the complexities of the case should be studied. Not everything about the case can be understood—how much needs to be? Each researcher has choices to make.

Contexts and Situations

With its own unique history, the case is a complex entity operating within a number of contexts—physical, economic, ethical, aesthetic, and so on. The case is singular, but it has subsections (e.g., production, marketing, sales departments), groups (e.g., students, teachers, parents), occasions (e.g., workdays, holidays, days near holidays), a concatenation of domains—many so complex that at best they can only be sampled.

Holistic case study calls for the examination of these complexities. As Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba point out in Chapter 6 of Volume 1, much qualitative research is based on a holistic view that social phenomena, human dilemmas, and the nature of cases are situational and influenced by happenings of many kinds. Qualitative researchers are sometimes disposed toward causal determination of events (Becker, 1992) but more often tend to perceive, as does Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, events not simply

and singly caused. Many find the search for cause of little value, and dramatize instead the coincidence of events, seeing some events as purposive, some as situational, many of them interrelated. They favor inquiry designs that seek data describing diverse operations of the case. To do case studies does not require examination of diverse issues and contexts, but that is the way that most qualitative researchers do them.

Organizing Around Issues

A case study, like research of all kinds, has conceptual structure. It is usually organized around a small number of research questions. These are not just information questions, such as "Who influenced her career choice?" or "What was the impact of his teaching?" They are issues or thematic lines, such as "In what ways did the change in hiring policy require a change in performance standards?" or "Did the addiction therapy, originally developed for male clients, need reconceptualization for women?"

Issues are complex, situated, problematic relationships. They invite attention to ordinary experience but also to the language and understanding of the common disciplines of knowledge, such as sociology, economics, ethics, and literary criticism. Seeking a different purview from that of most crafters of experiments and testers of hypotheses, qualitative case researchers orient to complexities connecting ordinary practice in natural habitats to the abstractions and concerns of diverse academic disciplines. This broader purview is applied to the single case, but does not replace it as focus. Generalization and proof (Becker, 1992) linger in the mind of the researcher, so a tension exists.[9]

The issues mentioned two paragraphs back were aimed at a particular case, but their statement can be more general: "Does change in hiring policy away from affirmative action require change in performance standards?" or "Does addiction therapy originally developed for male clients need reconceptualization for women?" But even when stated for generalization, the issues, as organizers for case study, serve to deepen understanding of the specific case.

Starting with a topical concern, researchers may pose "foreshadowed problems,"[10] concentrate on issue-related observations, interpret patterns of data that reform the issues as assertions. The transformation I have experienced in my work in program evaluation is illustrated by the

TABLE 5.1 An Example of Issue Evolution in a Study

1. *Topical issue:* The goals of the music education program.
2. *Foreshadowed problem:* The majority of the community supports the present emphasis on band, chorus, and performances, but a few teachers and community leaders want a more intellectual emphasis, including history, literature, and critical review of music.
3. *Issue under development:* What are the pros and cons of having this teaching staff teach music theory and music as a discipline in courses required of everyone?
4. *Assertion:* This community was found (by the researcher) to be not supportive of the extra funding necessary to provide intellectual learning of music for all secondary school students.

sequence displayed in Table 5.1, issues for a hypothetical case study of a music education program.

In choosing issues to organize their studies, researchers reflect their orientations to intrinsic or instrumental study. To treat the case as an exemplar, they ask, Which issues bring out our initial concerns, the dominant theme? To maximize understanding of the case, they ask, Which issues seek out compelling uniquenesses? For an evaluation study, they ask, Which issues help reveal merit and shortcoming? But in general, they ask, Which issues facilitate the planning and activities of inquiry, including inspiring and rehabilitating the researcher? Issues are chosen partly in terms of what can be learned within the opportunities for study. They will be chosen differently depending on the purpose of the study, and differently by different researchers. One might say a contract is drawn between researcher and phenomenon. For all the devotion to science or to a client, What can be learned *here* that a researcher needs to know?

The issues used to organize the study may or may not be the ones used to report the case to others. Observing is different work from presenting the case report. At the end, it may be the anticipated issues of readers that will structure the report.

Storytelling

Some call for letting the case "tell its own story" (Carter, 1993; Coles, 1989). We cannot be sure that a case, telling its own story, will tell all or tell

well—but the ethos of *interpretive* study, seeking out emic meanings held by the people within the case, is strong. The choices of presentation styles are many. John Van Maanen (1988) identifies these: realistic, impressionistic, confessional, critical, formal, literary, and jointly told. One cannot know at the outset what the issues, the perceptions, the theory will be. Case researchers enter the scene expecting, even knowing, that certain events, problems, and relationships will be important, yet they discover that some of them this time will be of little consequence (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976; Smith, 1994). Case content evolves even in the last phases of writing.

Storytelling as cultural representation and as sociological text emerges from many traditions, but nowhere more strongly than oral history and folklore, and is becoming more disciplined in a line of work called *narrative inquiry* (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Lockridge, 1988; Richardson, 1997; see also the *Journal of Narrative and Life History*).

Even when empathic and respectful of each person's realities, the researcher decides what the case's *own story* is, or at least what will be included in the report. More will be pursued than was volunteered. Less will be reported than was learned. Even though the competent researcher will be guided by what the case somehow indicates is most important, even though patrons, other researchers, and those researched will advise, what is necessary for an understanding of the case will be decided by the researcher.[11] What results may be the case's own story, but the report will be the researcher's dressing of the case's own story. This is not to dismiss the aim of finding the story that best represents the case but to remind the reader that, usually, the researcher ultimately decides criteria of representation.[12]

Many a researcher would like to tell the whole stoty but of course cannot; the whole story exceeds anyone's knowing, anyone's telling. Even those inclined to tell all find strong the obligation to winnow and consolidate. A continuum runs from telling lots to telling nothing. The holistic researcher, like the single-issue researcher, must choose. Criteria for selecting content are many (Van Maanen, 1988). Some are set by funding agencies, prospective readers, rhetorical convention, the researcher's career pattern, and the prospect of publication. Some criteria are set by a notion of what represents the case most fully, most appreciably for the hospitality received, most comprehensibly. These are subjective choices

not unlike those all researchers make in choosing what to study. Some are made while the case study is being designed, but some continue to be made through the final hours.

◆ Learning From the Particular Case

The researcher is a teacher using at least two pedagogical methods (Eisner, 1985). Teaching *didactically,* the researcher teaches what he or she has learned. Arranging for what educationists call *discovery learning,* the researcher provides material for readers to learn, on their own, things the teacher does not know as well as those he or she does know. What can one learn from a single case? Donald Campbell (1975), David Hamilton (1980), Stephen Kemmis (1980), and Robert Yin (1989) are among those who have advanced the epistemology of the particular.[13] How we learn from the singular case is related to how the case is like and unlike other cases (i.e., comparisons). Yet, in the words of Charles Ragin, "variable oriented comparative work (e.g., quantitative cross-national research) as compared with case oriented comparative work disembodies and obscures cases" (Ragin & Becker, 1992, p. 5).

From case reports we increase both propositional and experiential knowledge (Geertz, 1983; Polanyi, 1962; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977; von Wright, 1971). Readers assimilate certain descriptions and assertions into memory. When the researcher's narrative provides opportunity for vicarious experience, readers extend their memories of happenings. Naturalistic, ethnographic case materials, to some extent, parallel actual experience, feeding into the most fundamental processes of awareness and understanding. Deborah Trumbull and I have called these processes *naturalistic generalization* (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). The reader comes to know some things told, as if he or she had experienced it. Enduring meanings come from encounter, and are modified and reinforced by repeated encounter.

In life itself, this occurs seldom to the individual alone but in the presence of others. In a social process, together they bend, spin, consolidate, and enrich their understandings. We come to know what has happened partly in terms of what others reveal as their experience. The case researcher emerges from one social experience, the observation, to choreograph another, the report. Knowledge is socially constructed, so we

constructivists believe (see Schwandt, Chapter 7, Volume 1), and, in their experiential and contextual accounts, case study researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge.

Knowledge Transfer From Researcher to Reader

Both researcher and reader bring their conceptual structures, for example, advanced organizers (Ausubel & Fitzgerald, 1961), schemata (Anderson, 1977), and an unfolding of realization (Bohm, 1985). Some such frameworks for thought are unconscious. Communication is facilitated by carefully crafted structures. Thought itself, conversation surely, and writing especially draw phrases into paragraphs, append labels onto constructs. Meanings aggregate or attenuate. Associations become relationships; relationships become theory (Robinson, 1951). Generalization can be an unconscious process for both researcher and reader.

In private and personal ways, ideas are structured, highlighted, subordinated, connected, embedded *in* contexts, embedded *with* illustration, laced with favor and doubt. However moved to share ideas, however clever and elaborated their writings, case researchers, like others, pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationship—and fail to pass along others. They know that the reader, too, will add and subtract, invent and shape—reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it differently connected and more likely to be personally useful.

A researcher's knowledge of the case faces hazardous passage from writing to reading. The writer seeks ways of safeguarding the trip. Even as reading begins, often much earlier, the case assumes a place in the company of previously known cases. Conceptually for the reader, the new case cannot be but some combination of cases already known. A new case without commonality cannot be understood. Yet a new case without distinction will not be noticed. Researchers cannot know well the already known cases, the peculiarities of mind, of their readers. They seek ways to protect and substantiate the transfer of knowledge.

The researcher recognizes a need to accommodate the readers' preexisting knowledge. Although everyone deals with this need every day and draws upon a lifetime of experience, we know precious little about how new experience merges with old. According to Spiro, Vispoel, Schmitz, Samarapungavan, and Boerger (1987), most personal experience is *ill-structured,* neither pedagogically nor epistemologically neat. It follows

that a well-structured, propositional presentation will often not be the better way to *transfer* experiential knowledge. The reader has a certain *cognitive flexibility,* the readiness to assemble a situation-relative schema from the knowledge fragments of a new encounter. Spiro et al. contend that

> the best way to learn and instruct in order to attain the goal of cognitive flexibility in knowledge representation for future application is by a method of case-based presentations which treats a content domain as a landscape that is explored by "criss-crossing" it in many directions, by reexamining each case "site" in the varying contexts of different neighboring cases, and by using a variety of abstract dimensions for comparing cases. (p. 178)

Transfer remains difficult to understand. And even less understood is how a small aspect of the case may be found by many readers to modify an existing understanding about cases in general, even when the case is not typical.[14] In a ghetto school, I observed a teacher with one set of rules for classroom decorum—except that for Adam, a nearly expelled, indomitable youngster, a more liberal set had to be continuously invented (Stake, 1995). Reading my account, teachers from very different schools agreed with both. "Yes, you have to be strict with the rules." "Yes, sometimes you have to bend the rules." They recognized in the report an unusual but generalizable circumstance. People find in case reports certain insights into the human condition, even while being well aware of the atypicality of the case. They may be *too* quick to accept the insight. The case researcher needs to provide grounds for validating both the observation and generalization.

Triangulation

With reporting and reading both "ill-structured" (and within an atmosphere of constructivism), it is not surprising to find here a tolerance of ambiguity and the championing of multiple perspectives. Still, I have yet to meet any case researchers who are unconcerned about the clarity and validity of their own communications. Even if meanings do not transfer intact but squeeze into the conceptual space of the reader, there is no less urgency for researchers to assure that their senses of situation, observation, reporting, and reading stay within some limits of correspondence. However accuracy is construed, researchers don't want to be inaccurate,

caught without confirmation. Joseph Maxwell (1992) has written of the need for thinking of validity separately for descriptions, interpretations, theories, generalizations, and evaluative judgments.

To reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, researchers employ various procedures, two of the most common being redundancy of data gathering and procedural challenges to explanations (Denzin, 1989; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). For qualitative casework, these procedures generally are called *triangulation*. Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation.[15] But, acknowledging that no observations or interpretations are perfectly repeatable, triangulation serves also to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen (Flick, 1998; Silverman, 1993; see also Smith, Chapter 12, Volume 3).

Comparisons

Researchers report their cases as cases, knowing they will be compared to others. They differ as to how much they will take responsibility for making comparisons, setting up comparative cases for the reader or acknowledging reference cases different for each reader. Most naturalistic, ethnographic, phenomenological researchers will concentrate on describing the present case in sufficient detail so that the reader can make good comparisons. Sometimes the researcher will point out comparisons that might be made. Many quantitative and evaluation case researchers will try to provide some comparisons, sometimes by presenting one or more reference cases, sometimes by providing statistical norms for reference groups from which a hypothetical reference case can be imagined. Both the quantitative and qualitative approaches provide narrow grounds for strict comparison of cases, even though a tradition of grand comparison exists within comparative anthropology and related disciplines (Ragin, 1987; Sjoberg, Williams, Vaughan, & Sjoberg, 1991; Tobin, 1989).

I see comparison as actually competing with learning about and from the particular case. Comparison is a grand epistemological strategy, a powerful conceptual mechanism, fixing attention upon one or a few attributes. And it obscures case knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison. Comparative description is the opposite of what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls "thick description." Thick description of a music program, for example, would include conflicting perceptions of the staffing, recent program

changes, the charisma of the choral director, the working relationship with a church organist, diverse interest in a critical vote of the school board, and the lack of student interest in taking up the clarinet. In these particularities lie the vitality, trauma, and uniqueness of the case. Comparison might be made on any of these characteristics, but it tends to be made on more general variables traditionally noted in the organization of music programs, such as staffing, budget, and tour policy. With concentration on the bases for comparison, uniquenesses and complexities will be glossed over. A research design featuring comparison substitutes (a) *the comparison* for (b) *the case* as the focus of the study.

Regardless of the type of case study—intrinsic, instrumental, or collective—readers often learn little from control or reference cases chosen only for comparison. When there are multiple cases of intrinsic interest, then, of course, it can be useful to compare them.[16] But more often than not, there is but one case of intrinsic interest, if any at all. Readers with intrinsic interest in the case learn more of it directly from the description, not ignoring comparisons with other cases but not concentrating on comparisons. Readers examining instrumental case studies are shown how the phenomenon exists within particular cases. As to accuracy, differences are fundamentally more inaccurate than simple measurements. Similarly, conclusions about the differences between any two cases are less to be trusted than conclusions about one. Still, illustration as to how a phenomenon occurs in the circumstances of several exemplars can provide valuable and trustworthy knowledge (Vaughan, in press).

Many are the ways of conceptualizing cases to maximize learning from the case. The case is expected to be something that functions, that operates; the study is the observation of operations. There is something to be described and interpreted. The conceptions of most naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological case studies need accurate description and subjective, yet disciplined, interpretation; a respect and curiosity for culturally different perceptions of phenomena; and empathic representation of local settings—all blending (perhaps clumped) within a constructivist epistemology.

◆ Arrangements for the Study

Perhaps the simplest rule for method in qualitative casework is this: Place your best intellect into the thick of what is going on. The brain work

ostensibly is observational, but, more basically, it is *reflective.*[17] In being ever reflective, the researcher is committed to pondering the impressions, deliberating recollections and records—but not necessarily following the conceptualizations of theorists, actors, or audiences (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Local meanings are important; foreshadowed meanings are important; and readers' consequential meanings are important. The case researcher teases out meanings of these three kinds and, for whatever reason, works on one kind more than the other two. In each case, the work is reflective.[18]

If we typify qualitative casework, we see data sometimes precoded but continuously interpreted, on first sighting and again and again. Records and tabulations are perused not only for classification and pattern recognition but also fot "crisscrossed" reflection (Spiro et al., 1987). An observation is interpreted against one issue, perspective, or utility, then interpreted against others. Qualitative case study is characterized by researchers spending extended time, on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on.

Teaming

Naturalistic, ethnographic, phenomenological caseworkers seek to see what is *ordinary* in happenings, in settings, in expressions of value. Blumer (1969, p. 149) calls for us to accept, develop, and use the distinctive expression (of the particular case) in order to detect and study the common. What detail of life the researchers are unable to see for themselves they obtain by interviewing people who did see it or by finding documents recording it. Part IV of this *Handbook* deals extensively with the methods of qualitative research, particularly observation, interview, coding, data management, and interpretation. These pertain, of course, to qualitative case study.

Documenting the ordinary takes a lot of time for data gathering, and more for arrangements, analysis, and write-up. In many studies, there are no clear stages: Issue development continues to the end of the study; write-up begins with preliminary observations. A speculative, page-allocating outline for the report helps anticipate how issues will be handled and how the case will become visible. For most researchers, to set out upon an unstructured, open-ended study is a calamity in the making. Still, the caseworker needs to anticipate the need to recognize and develop late-

emerging issues. Many qualitative field-workers invest little in instrument construction, partly because even the familiar case is too little known. And the budget is too quickly consumed by devising and field testing instruments to pursue what turn out to be too many foreshadowing questions, with some of them maturing, some dying, some moving to new levels of complexity. The ordinary is too complicated to be mastered in the time available.

When the case is too large for one researcher to know well or for a collective case study, teaming is an important option. The method requires integrated, holistic comprehension of the case, but in the larger studies, no one individual can handle the complexity. Coding can be a great help if the team is experienced in the process and with each other. But learning a detailed analytic coding system within the study period often is too great a burden (Smith & Dwyer, 1979), reducing observations to simple categories, eating up the on-site time. As much as possible, sites, key groups or actors, and issues should be assigned to single team members, including junior members. The case's parts to be studied and the research issues need to be pared down to what can be comprehended by the collection of team members. It is better to negotiate the parts to be studied and the parts not, and then do an in-depth study pursuing a few key issues. Each team member writes up his or her parts; other team members need to read and critique them. Usually the team leader needs to write the synthesis, getting critiques from the team, data sources, and selected skeptical friends.

Case Selection

Perhaps the most unique aspect of case study in the social sciences and human services is the selection of cases to study. Intrinsic casework regularly begins with cases already identified. The doctor, the social worker, the program evaluator receive their cases; they do not choose them. The cases are of prominent interest before formal study begins. Instrumental and collective casework regularly requires researchers to choose their cases. Understanding the critical phenomena depends on choosing the case well (Patton, 1990; Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 1989). Suppose we are trying to understand the behavior of people who take hostages and decide to probe the phenomenon using a case study. Hostage taking does not happen often—in the whole world there are few cases to choose. Current options, let us imagine, boil down to a bank tobber, an airline hijacker, an estranged father who kidnapped his own child, and a Shi'ite Muslim

group. We want to generalize about hostage-taking behavior, yet realize that each of these cases, each sample of one, weakly *represents* the larger group of interest.

When one designs a study in the manner advocated by Michael Huberman and Matthew Miles (1994) and by Gery Ryan and Russell Bernard in Chapter 7 of Volume 3, nothing is more important than making a proper selection of cases. For this design, formal sampling is needed. The cases are expected to represent some population of cases. The phenomenon of interest observable in the case represents the phenomenon writ large. For Huberman and Miles, Yin, and Malinowski, the main work is science, an enterprise to gain the best possible explanations of phenomena (von Wright, 1971). In the beginning, phenomena are given; the cases are opportunities to study the phenomena. But even in the larger collective case studies, the sample sizes are usually much too small to warrant random selection. For qualitative fieldwork, we draw a purposive sample, building in variety and acknowledging opportunities for intensive study.

The phenomenon on the table is hostage taking. We want to improve our understanding of hostage taking, to fit it into what we know about criminology, conflict resolution, human relations—that is, various *abstract dimensions.*[19] We recognize a large population of hypothetical cases, a small subpopulation of accessible cases. We want to generalize about hostage taking without special interest in any of those cases available for study. On representational grounds, the epistemological opportunity seems small, but we are optimistic that we can learn some important things from almost any case. We choose one or a small number of exemplars. Hostages usually are strangers to their captors who happen to be available. We might rule out studying a father who takes his own child as hostage. Such kidnappings may actually be more common, but we rule out the father. We are more interested in hostage taking accompanying a criminal act, hostage taking in order to gain refuge. The researcher examines various interests in the phenomenon, selecting a case of some typicality, but leaning toward those cases that seem to offer *opportunity to learn.* My choice would be to examine that case from which we feel we can learn the most.[20] That may mean taking the one most accessible, the one we can spend the most time with. Potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness. Isn't it better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a seemingly typical case?

Another illustration: Suppose we are interested in the attractiveness of interactive displays (which the visitor manipulates and gets feedback

from) in children's museums. We have resources to study four museums, to do a collective study of four cases. It is likely that we would set up a typology, perhaps of (a) museum types (namely, art, science, and history), (b) city types (namely, large and very large), and (c) program types (namely, exhibitory and participative), making a 12-cell matrix. Examples probably cannot be found for all 12 cells, but resources do not allow us to study 12 anyway. With four to be studied, we are likely to start out thinking we should have one art, one history, and two science museums (because interactive displays are more common in science museums), two located in large cities and two in very large cities, and two each of the program types. But when we actually look at existing cases, the logistics, the potential reception, the resources, and additional characteristics of relevance, we move toward choosing four museums to study that offer variety (falling short of structured representation) across the attributes, the four that give us the best opportunities to learn about interactive displays.[21] Any best possible selection of four museums from a balanced design would not give us compelling representation of museums as a whole, and certainly not a statistical basis for generalizing about interactions between interactivity and site characteristics. Several desirable types usually have to be omitted. Even for collective case studies, selection by sampling of attributes should not be the highest priority. Balance and variety are important; opportunity to learn is of primary importance.

Cases Within the Case

The same process of selection will occur as part of intrinsic case study. Even though the case is decided in advance (usually), there are subsequent choices to make about persons, places, and events to observe. Here again, training and intuition rell us to seek a good sample. Suppose that we are studying a program for placing computers in the homes of fourth graders for scholastic purposes.[22] The cases—that is, the school sites—have already been selected. Although there is a certain coordination of activity, each participating researcher has one case study to develop. A principal issue has to do with impact on the family, because certain expectations of computer use accompany placement in the home. (The computer should be available for word processing, record keeping, and games by family members, but certain time should be set aside for fourth-grade homework.) At one site, 50 homes now have computers. The researcher can get certain information from every home, but observation in the home can

occur only in a small number. Which homes should be selected? Just as in the collective case study, the researcher notes attributes of interest: gender of the fourth grader, siblings, family structure, home discipline, previous use of computers and other technology in the home, and so on. The researcher discusses these characteristics with informants, gets recommendations, visits several homes, and gets attribute data. The choices are made, assuring variety but not necessarily representativeness, without strong argument for typicality, again weighted by considerations of access and even by hospitality, for the time is short and perhaps too little can be learned from inhospitable parents.[23] Here, too, the primary criterion is opportunity to learn.

Ethics

Ethical considerations for qualitative research are reviewed by Clifford Christians in Chapter 5 of Volume 1 (and elsewhere by such as Coles, 1997; Graue & Walsh, 1998). Case studies often deal with matters of public interest but for which there is neither public nor scholarly "right to know." Funding, scholarly intent, or a passed preliminary oral does not constitute license to invade the privacy of others. The value of the best research is not likely to outweigh injury to a person exposed. Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict.

Along with much qualitative work, case study research shares an intense interest in personal views and circumstances. Those whose lives and expressions are portrayed risk exposure and embarrassment, as well as loss of standing, employment, and self-esteem. Something of a contract exists between researcher and the researched, a disclosing and protective covenant, usually informal, but best not silent—a moral obligation (Schwandt, 1993).[24] Risks to well-being cannot be inventoried but should be exemplified. Issues of observation and reportage should be discussed in advance. Limits to access should be suggested and agreements heeded. It is important (but never sufficient) for targeted persons to receive drafts revealing how they are presented, quoted, and interpreted and for the researcher to listen well for signs of concern. It is important that researchers exercise great caution to minimize the risks. Even with good information, the researched cannot be expected to protect themselves against the risks inherent in participation. Researchers must follow rules for protection of human subjects (yet should protest those rules when they serve only to

protect the institution from litigation). Researchers should go beyond those rules, avoiding low-priority probing of sensitive issues and drawing in advisers and reviewers to help extend the protective system.

Ethical problems arise (inside and outside the research topics) with nondisclosure of malfeasance and immorality. When rules of study are set that prevent the researcher from "whistle-blowing" or that limit the exercise of compassion, a problem exists. Where an expectation has been raised that propriety is being examined and no mention is made of serious impropriety observed, the report is deceptive. Breach of ethics is seldom a simple matter; often it occurs when two contradictory standards apply, such as withholding full disclosure (as per the contract) in order to protect a good but vulnerable agency (Mabry, 1999). Ongoing and summative review procedures are needed, with impetus from conscience, from stakeholders, and from the research community.

◆ Summary

The major conceptual responsibilities of the qualitative case researcher are as follows:

1. Bounding the case, conceptualizing the object of study;
2. Selecting phenomena, themes, or issues—that is, the research questions—to emphasize;
3. Seeking patterns of data to develop the issues;
4. Triangulating key observations and bases for interpretation;
5. Selecting alternative interpretations to pursue;
6. Developing assertions or generalizations about the case.

Except for the first of these, the steps are similar to those taken by other qualitative researchers. The more the researcher has intrinsic interest in the case, the more the focus of study will be on the case's uniqueness, particular context, issues, and story.

Some major stylistic options for case researchers include the following:

1. How much to make the report a story;
2. How much to compare with other cases;
3. How much to formalize generalizations or leave that to readers;

4. How much to include description in the report of the researcher interacting;
5. Whether or not and how much to anonymize.

Case study is a part of scientific methodology, but its purpose is not limited to the advance of science. Single or a few cases are poor representation of a population of cases and questionable grounds for advancing grand generalization. Yet, "because more than one theoretical notion may be guiding an analysis, confirmation, fuller specification, and contradiction all may result from one case study" (Vaughan, 1992, p. 175). For example, we lose confidence in the generalization that a child of separated parents is better off placed with the mother when we find a single instance of resulting injury. Case studies are of value for refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability.

Case study can also be a disciplined force in public policy setting and reflection on human experience. Vicarious experience is an important basis for refining action options and expectation. Formal epistemology needs further development, but somehow people draw, from the description of an individual case, implications for other cases—not always correctly, but with a confidence shared by people of dissimilar views.

The purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case. Criteria for conducting the kind of research that leads to valid generalization need modification to fit the search for effective particularization. The utility of case research to practitioners and policy makers is in its extension of experience. The methods of qualitative case study are largely the methods of disciplining personal and particularized experience.

◆ Notes

1. Many case studies are both qualitative and quantitative. In search of fundamental pursuits common to both qualitative and quantitative research, Robert Yin (1992) analyzed three well-crafted research efforts: (a) a quantitative investigation to resolve disputed authorship of the *Federalist Papers*, (b) a qualitative study of Soviet intent at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, and (c) his own studies of the recognizability of human faces. He found four common commitments: to bring expert knowledge to bear upon the phenomena studied, to round up all the relevant data, to examine rival interpretations, and to ponder and probe the degree to which the findings have implication elsewhere. These commitments are as important in case research as in any other kind of research.

2. Ethnomethodologists study *methods* as topics of inquiry, examining how certain things, such as work or play, get done (Garfinkel, 1967). Coming to understand a case usually requires extensive examination of how things ger done, but the prime referenr in case srudy is the case, not the methods by which cases operate.

3. Definition of the case is not independent of interpretive paradigm or methods of inquiry. Seen from different worldviews and in different situations, the "same" case *is* different. And however we originally define the case, the working definition changes as we study. And the definition of the case changes in different ways under different methods of study. The case of Theodore Roosevelt was not just differently portrayed but differently defined as biographer Edmund Morris (1979) presented him as "the Dude from New York," "the Dear Old Beloved Brother," "the Snake in the Grass," "the Rough Rider," and "the Most Famous Man in America."

4. The history of case study, like the history of curiosity and common sense, is found throughout the library. Peeps at that history can be found in the work of Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Delamont (1992), Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg (1991), Stake (1978), White (1992), and Wieviorka (1992), as well as throughout this volume.

5. Collective case study is essentially what Herriott and Firestone (1983) call "multisite qualitative research." Multisite program evaluation is another common example. A number of German sociologists, such as Martin Kohli and Fritz Schürze, have used collective case studies with Strauss's grounded theory approach.

6. In law, the *case* has a special definition; the practice of law itself could be called case study.

7. In a thoughtful review of a draft of this chapter, Orlando Fals Borda urged me to abandon the effort to promote intrinsic casework and the study of particularity. In persisting here, I think it important to support disciplined and scholarly study that takes up important questions but has no scientific aspiration.

8. In 1922, Bronislaw Malinowski said, "One of the first conditions of acceptable Ethnographic work certainly is that it should deal with the totality of all social, cultural and psychological aspects of the community" (1922/1984, p. xvi). Good spirit there, although totalities defy the acuity of the eye and the longevity of the watch.

9. Generalization from collective case study has been discussed by Herriott and Firestone (1983), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Vaughan (1992).

10. Malinowski (1922/1984) claims that we can distinguish between arriving with closed minds and arriving with an idea of what to look for. He notes: "Good training in theory, and acquaintance with its latest results, is not identical with being burdened with 'preconceived ideas.' If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him into the field, the more he is in the habit of moulding his theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped for the work. Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but *foreshadowed problems* are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies" (p. 9).

11. It appears I claim here there is no such thing as participatory evaluation (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Greene, Chapter 16, Volume 3) or participatory action research (Fals Borda, 1998; Heron, 1996; Whyte, 1991). There is. Shared responsibility for design, data

gathering, and interpretation are to be found, and can be what is needed. Most researchers make some effort to negotiate interpretations, but ultimately decide themselves what array of interpretations to present. However interactive the researcher is, there is an abiding professional responsibility for him or her to decide what will be included under his or her byline. In those situations where the values of the study have been collaboratively set, it is important for the reader to know it.

12. The case report is a representation of the case or, more considerately, a collection of representations. The presumptuousness of representations has been a "hot topic" in postmodern discussions (Clifford, 1983). Researchers need to locate themselves somewhere between extruding description from the template of their personal experience and saying nothing.

13. Among the earlier philosophers of science providing groundwork for qualitative contributions to theory elaboration were Herbert Blumer, Barney Glaser, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Robert Merton.

14. Sociologists have used the term *micro/macro* to refer to the leap from understanding individual cases or parts to understanding the system as a whole. Even without an adequate epistemological map, sociologists do leap, and so do our readers (Collins, 1981).

15. Creative use of "member checking," submitting drafts for review by data sources, is one of the most needed forms of validation of qualitative research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

16. Evaluation studies comparing the innovative program to a control case regularly fail to make the comparison credible. No matter how well studied, the control case too weakly represents cases currently known by the reader. By comprehensively describing the program case, the researcher should help the reader draw naturalistic generalizations.

17. I would prefer to call it *interpretive* to emphasize the production of meanings, but ethnographers have used that term to mean "learn the special views of actors, the local meanings" (see Erickson, 1986; Schwandt, Chapter 7, Volume 1).

18. Ethnographic use of the term *reflective* sometimes limits attention to the need for self-challenging the researcher's etic issues, frame of reference, cultural bias (see Tedlock, Chapter 6, this volume). That challenge is important, but, following Donald Schön (1983), I refer to a general frame of mind when I call qualitative casework *reflective*.

19. As indicated in a previous section, I call them issues or issue areas. Mary Kennedy (1979) calls them "relevant attributes." Spiro et al. (1987) call them "abstract dimensions." Malinowski (1922/1984) calls them "theories." In our research, these will be our "working theories" more than the "grand theories" of the disciplines.

20. My emphasis is on learning the most about both the individual case and the phenomenon, especially the latter if the special circumstances may yield unusual insight into an issue.

21. Firestone (1993) advises maximizing diversity and being "as like the population of interest as possible."

22. This in fact happened with the Buddy Project, a component of the Indiana public school reform effort of 1990-1993 (see Quinn & Quinn, 1992).

23. Patton (1990), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Firestone (1993) have discussed successive selection of cases over time.

24. A special obligation exists to protect those with limited resources. Those who comply with the researcher's requests, who contribute in some way to the making of the case,

should not thus be hurt—usually. When continuing breaches of ethics or morality are discovered, or are the reason for the study, the researcher must take some ameliorative action. Exposé and critique are legitimate within case study, but luring self-indictment out of a respondent is no more legitimate in research than in the law.

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