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## UNIT 14 CASE STUDY

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### 14.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the meaning of case study method of research;
- delineate the sources, procedures and steps involved in conducting the case study method;
- know the relation of case study method with other methods of research; and
- apply the case study method in library and information science research.

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### 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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Case study method is an important method of social research. This method is extensively used in sociology, education, political science, public administration, management and psychology. Library and information science is not an exception to it.

The staunch advocates of this method were Frederick Le Play (1806-1882) a French Social reformer and Dr. William Healey. Case study is a deep intensive study of particular social unit. It is recognised as a versatile device for research in providing

an insightful explanation about a phenomenon that other methods will find difficult to match. However it is often talked that the potential of case study has been over shadowed by lack of validity, reliability and generalisability. This method is also considered as a diagnostic study oriented towards finding out what is happening and why is it happening and what can be done about it. Further it enables to determine social process revealing the complexity of factors and indicate their sequence along with their inter-relationships.

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## **14.2 CASE STUDY**

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### **14.2.1 Definition**

Charles H Cooley says that ‘Case study deepens perception and gives a clear insight into life.’ Pauline Young opines that “it is a method of exploring and analyzing the life of a social unit-be it a person, a family, an institution, cultural group or even an entire community.” Goode and Hatt say “Case Study is a way of organizing social data so as to preserve the unitary character of social object being studied.” According to F.L. Whitney, “Case study is a complete analysis and report of the status of an individual subject with respect as a rule to specific phases of his total personality.” Another social scientist compares the case study as equivalent of the spotlight or the microscope that takes, as its subject, one or more selected examples of a social entity such as organisations, work team, events, and roles or relationships. Each case is studied using a variety of data collection techniques such as analysis of administrative records and documents, in-depth interviews, structured interviews etc.

The definitions stated above lead to suggest that the case study attempts to explain holistically the dynamics of certain historical periods of a particular social unit. Case studies are also useful in formulation of policies and procedures including planning for the enterprises, service sectors and organisations. Case study as a research strategy is considered as a vehicle in providing rich description of events from more than one perspective which other research strategy such as survey or experiment cannot possibly provide.

Library and information science like other disciplines of social sciences is having number of examples of case studies. The purpose of case studies on individuals and institutions is almost invariably fact finding. Normally case studies are helpful in providing the solutions to management problems and enable the researcher in planning new information services or remodeling the earlier ones.

### **14.2.2 Characteristics**

Some of the very important characteristics of the case study method are listed below:

- Case study is a deep, detailed and intensive study of a social unit;
- It is a method of qualitative analysis;
- It is a comprehensive study;
- In this study all the variables and traits are linked with one another;
- In case study, there are changes for wide variety of units to be selected;
- It preserves wholeness of the units i.e. it is an approach which views any social unit as a whole;
- In case study complex factors are studied; and
- Traits are the subject matter of the study.

### 14.2.3 Importance

Case study method is important in many ways. Some of them can be listed as follows:

- It helps in formulating valid hypothesis(es);
- It is of immense value in forming questionnaires and schedules;
- Discovering deviant units;
- It is intensive in nature; and
- It is very comprehensive.

### 14.2.4 Uses

- It helps to collect detailed information about the unit of study and gives clue to new ideas and further research;
- As a tool of analysis, it helps to ascertain a number and variety of traits, qualities and habits confined to a particular instance;
- It helps to identify the peculiarities of a case for observation;
- Case Study method shows the way to deepen our perception and sharpen insights to understand biographies; and
- It is often useful to advance a new interpretation.

### 14.2.5 Advantages, Disadvantages and Limitations

#### Advantages

Case Study is a deep and diagnostic study. It is acclaimed as a useful research technique. Many expert researchers in social sciences have assessed the importance of case study research. The following are some of the specific advantages of the case study:

- It helps to probe the entire life span of a social unit intensively and to analyse the complex factors that are influencing the social unit.
- Case data are vivid, absorbing and tend to reproduce a person's social attitudes and values.
- Case Study facilitates to understand every thing about a social unit and the variety of habits, traits and qualities combined in a social unit.
- Case Study helps to secure a detailed information about the growth of the unit, group structure, individual life pattern etc.,
- The relationship between individual and society is well brought out in the Case Study.
- Case Studies are indispensable for therapeutic and administrative purpose
- It is also easy to generalise cases with the case and helps prepare a plan of action for treatment.
- Case Study is followed for comparison, classification, and analysis and for the formulation of hypothesis leading to further research.

**Disadvantages**

Following are the few disadvantages of the Case Study method as stated by research experts:

- It is inefficient in situations, which are already structured where the important variables are identified.
- It often assumes that all the past experiences of the individual or past happenings in the situation have contributed to the final result.
- It depends upon the recall of others as to what had happened, thereby giving room for fallibility of memory.
- Usually undesirable traits being over-emphasised where by desirable characteristics given a low priority resulting in typical situation.
- There is possibility of getting disturbed due to incompleteness of data in certain circumstances.

**Limitations**

Case Study method has been criticised for several reasons. Numerous debates have taken place about case study as regards to its value and validity. Still the method has contributed considerably to the field of social research. Following are some of the limitations commonly attributed to case studies:

- Does not provide universal impersonal and common aspects of a phenomenon
- Tendency for a researcher to draw generalisation after studying a few cases, which may not be relevant to all situations
- Tendency to over-emphasise the unique or universal events which are seldom comparable
- Collected subjective data do not lend themselves to quantitative check
- Time consuming, costly and wasteful in certain cases
- Sometimes case study is loose and unsystematic and the generalisations drawn from few cases are not always accurate
- Temptation to ignore the basic principles of research design is often seen

**Self Check Exercise**

1) Explain the significance of case study method.

- Note:** i) Write your answer in the space given below.  
ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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## 14.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM APPROPRIATE FOR A CASE STUDY

Case studies in library and information science cover the varied category of library users, library personnel, institutional libraries like academic, research, and public libraries including national and children libraries. It is to be clearly understood that case studies allow close examination of unique problems of individual or group situations-which other methods do not readily permit. Library is a social institution with the committed societal responsibility. Case study approach to investigate related problems –that is, their social control, performance, and impact on society-is the appropriate approach. Number of researchers in the subject have employed case studies approach and achieved varying degree of success.

According to Busha and Harter, the case study is particularly suitable for gathering extensive data about a single research object and this allows a concentrated attention on a single phenomenon and the utilisation of a wide array of data gathering methods. Sometimes questionnaire, schedule and interviews including observation methods are used to gather the varied data in case studies. Case studies are also useful in studying the institution like University library, assessing the contributions of the persons to the growth and development of the library, also the mechanisms devised to maximise the use of collected resources.

Case study method is suitable to tackle the research question calling for a response to ‘how’ and ‘why’. And also considered appropriate if the research focuses on contemporary issues. In library and information science the most important current issues that are amenable to case study research are:

- Library Automation;
- Impact of IT on Library and Information Services;
- Performance of Library Consortia;
- Growth and Development of INFLIBNET ;
- Evolution of Library Professionals from Gatekeeper to Gateways;
- Growth and Development of Information Skills; and
- Information Literacy in the Information Society etc.,

Further, case study like other research strategies can be applied in all phases of research and for all purposes of exploring, describing and explaining.

Case Study serves a dual purpose. While intensive investigation of a single case is often made for the purpose of increasing general knowledge of a given area, perhaps, more often than not, it is carried out with the ultimate purpose of making a practical improvement in the specific instance examined and only incidentally it contributes to the general knowledge. As a research method, it is examined with respect to the way in which it can help to solve scientific problems.

## 14.4 RESEARCH DESIGN IN CASE STUDY

The successful conduct of case study research is mainly based on the clear research design. As we know the research design is an action plan or a ‘blueprint’ of research that guides the researcher to proceed smoothly and produce the expected results. It also helps to connect the empirical data to research questions and ultimately to its

conclusions. According to Yin (1994), the research design in case study contains the following component parts:

- 1) A study's questions in terms of who, what, where, how and why;

These components are argued to provide a clue to the type of research strategy, which can be used in case study research.

- 2) Its propositions, (if any);

Study propositions help to direct research attention to matters that ought to be examined closely. This will guide the research in the right direction by providing further clues to what data to collect and from where data may be obtained.

- 3) Its unit of analysis;

This helps to define what the 'case' is and further focuses on a precise research question.

- 4) The logic linking of data to the propositions 'pattern-matching approach'; and  
This is used for case study. This approach helps in putting together several pieces of information from the same case and relating to the some theoretical proposition.

- 5) The criteria for interpreting the findings;

There is no precise way of interpreting case study findings. Certain type of data in a case, such as statistical data, may be tested for its validity or variance. Other quantitative data such as independent and dependent variables may be analysed for their relationship. While time series data may be analysed for its trend quantitative data however, may require contextually innovative ideas for interpreting it. The nature of relationship between data such as 'positive' and 'negative' perhaps in one criterion and another would probably be in terms of its effects on the other such as sequential, circular, constant and temporal.

For the purpose of data collection and analysis Yin proposes two alternative strategies namely the strategy of relying on theoretical propositions and the strategy for developing a case description. The final part of the process is to prepare the report as the end product of the research. Thus produced report depicts the picture to the audiences or readers the contributions of the researcher to the field.

#### 14.4.1 Selection of an Object for a Case Study: Essential Precautions

It is known that, a case refers to a unit of study. Unit is understood to be a family or social group, a class of persons, a set of relationships or processes. There are some essential precautions to be taken while choosing the object for case study:

- Selection of typical and representative unit;
- Identification of situations and problems;
- Time to be covered-the phase of life cycle;
- Unitary character of the unit-breadth of data, levels of data, use of indices and types;
- Quality of data;
- Availability of data and its reliability;
- Cost to be incurred;

- Time to be spent;
- Researchers courage, interest, skill and training in research; and
- Possibility to repeat the case study.

These precautions are to be carefully taken note of by the researcher to conduct the Case Study method successfully.

#### 14.4.2 Sources of Data

Case studies are not limited to any single source of data. They employ a number of sources. The following are some of the identified sources of information for the case study method:

- Life histories;
- Personal records;
- Personal documents;
- Personal letters;
- Confessions;
- Biographies;
- Interviewing individuals; and
- Observations.

Life history is very essential in getting the actual experience and attitude of persons. The information collected may be cross-checked by conducting interviews and through observation. Briefly the entire life of an individual is studied, tested and enquired from the life history, letters including diaries, and correspondence. The hidden secrets of an individual, his way of life, the objects and the mode of life can be studied from these sources. Thus to collect reliable and accurate data researcher has to use various sources and techniques in case study method.

#### Self Check Exercise

- 2) What is the aim of case study?
- 3) Enlist the different sources of data for case study research.

- Note:** i) Write your answers in the space given below.  
 ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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### 14.5 STEPS INVOLVED IN CASE STUDY METHOD

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Generally the steps involved in the case study method are:

- **Determining the present status** - Collection of descriptive information which enables to determine the present status of the unit selected for the study.

- **Collecting background information** - Gathering the information and examining the circumstances leading to the current status and also to list the possible causes or problems in the present situation.
- **Testing the suggested hypothesis(es)** - Collecting specific evidence about each of the hypotheses from the background information gathered. Since the behaviour is varying, investigator is not able to come up with a single solution for the breakdown of the situation.
- **Instituting remedial action** - Subsequent to the existing situation, some corrective or improvement programme should follow to check what effect the change has brought about.

Busha and Harter (1980) have suggested the following steps to conduct the case study successfully:

- The research object is explicitly identified and described at a level of explanation commensurate with whatever pertinent knowledge has already been produced about it.
- Information about the research object and the investigative task are then assembled and analysed, and relevant terms and variables are defined and described.
- The research question is stated or hypotheses are formulated appropriately-based upon available information and the body of theory related to the topic of the study (More often than not, case studies are based upon research questions rather than hypotheses; in any event, the research problem should be examined within the context of existing theoretical knowledge).
- An entity (case) is chosen as the specific object to be studied with reference to the research problem.
- The object of the study is then carefully observed, and if necessary causal factors associated with the observed phenomenon are identified.
- If sufficient research data is collected, the hypotheses may be tested with some degree of certainty; however investigators can be more certain when they select and examine similar cases (i.e. conduct follow-up case studies in the same problem area).

#### 14.5.1 Skills Needed for a Researcher

Experts and scholar social scientists over a period of time have come to the conclusion that some specific skills are required to conduct the case study smoothly. They are listed as follows:

- Should be able to ask good questions and to interpret the answers;
- Should be a good listener and not be trapped by his or her own ideologies or preoccupations and be able to observe and sense more generally;
- Should be adaptive and flexible so that new encountered situations can be seen as opportunities, not as threats;
- Should have firm grasp of the ideas being studied whether it has a theoretical or policy orientation. Such a grasp reduces the relevant events and information to be sought to manageable proportions; and
- Should be unbiased by preconceived notions including those derived from theory. Thus person should be sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence.

## 14.6 CASE STUDY AND CASE WORK

The terms case study and case work are often used in the social research. It is essential here to know the distinction between these two terms. Case study refers to the intensive investigation of a particular unit where as case work relates to the developmental and adjustmental procedure that follows diagnosis. Of course, these two terms are different facets of the same approach to problems, and as such are interrelated and essentially complementary. As M H Gopal says Case study is often understood as a method and sometimes as technique, and sometimes as an 'approach' to a social reality and occasionally, a mode of organising data in terms of some chosen units. He further states that it is infact a technique which considers all pertinent aspects of a situation, employing as the unit of study –an individual, institution or group, and intensively investigating it.

## 14.7 CASE STUDY AND OTHER METHODS

Case Study as a method of research has a potential to stand along with other methods of research. It was George Lundburg who called it futile to consider superiority or inferiority of different methods of research. He holds the view that “each has its place, and for a particular purpose, or at a particular stage of investigation, is best.” In his opinion “Any method which achieves its purpose is valid for that purpose.”

Scholars have agreed that there is much the same connection between case study and statistical method. They are interdependent and complementary. In some areas of investigation especially when prediction must be made quickly, statistical techniques have to replace case study. Sometimes, case studies may supply the raw data for latter statistical study. When an overall generic picture of a problem is needed case study steps in and statistical tools become its handmaid for interpreting and analysing the data.

One of the noted Social Scientist states that, “Critical or rigorous statistics grew out of one form of Case Study, that of the general Survey.” Thus according to him, the general survey, one form of survey method is, but a type of case study. In fact the interview Schedule used to collect the data, sufficiently complete and detail, as well as arrayed with respect to some degree of unity is in a sense a case study. Therefore, case study method has a close relationship with survey method.

Case study, as a method of research, frequently employs more techniques than one. Thus for tracing the developmental process, it makes use of the historical method, wherever factual picture is needed it uses the descriptive method and it also relies on questionnaire, checklist and rating scales etc., to gather the data, and it looks to statistics at the classification and analysis stages. Even in the context of choosing the units for case study, the out come of the earlier case studies and the final processing and analysis of the material is to be treated by statistics. Thus, the case study has to go to statistics if its data are to reveal frequencies, types, trends, uniformities and patterns.

L.L. Bernard a noted authority in social science research expresses the view that “ the case method corresponds roughly to the laboratory experiment, except, that the social case describes situations as they are, while the laboratory case describes conditions under artificial controls. Therefore it can be concluded that case study is the first step in scientific method and leads directly into statistical, method forming

the basis for its generalisations. It is also very close to schedule, questionnaire as well as experimental and historical method.

**Self Check Exercise**

4) Discuss the complementary role of the case study and statistical technique.

**Note:** i) Write your answer in the space given below.

ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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**14.8 SUMMARY**

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Research goes beyond the securing of data for the purpose of information or publicity. It must help to explain causal relationships. Case study research involves an attempt to publish certain principles in the analysis of social situations, which the case studies will bring to light. In spite of the drawbacks of the case study method, research experts still use this method for conducting their research. Considerable attempts are being made by eminent research experts like Carl Rogers, Alfred Kinsey, John Dollard, Elton Mayo to improve the effectiveness of the method and to overcome those visible disadvantages and limitations. In library and information science the use of case study method in the contemporary research is increasing day by day. Goode and Hatt lament that “as against the analysis of individual traits alone, it is highly fruitful approach as yet insufficiently exploited by those who are currently doing research into research techniques”, M.H.Gopal rightly summarises the significance of case study method, that of given time, money and the right type of investigators, the potentialities of case study technique are immense, particularly in underdeveloped countries. If the ‘cases’ are chosen objectively, wherever possible by utilizing statistical devices and investigated intensively, it should be possible to formulate generalisations, whose validity would of course, depend on how representative the cases are. A wise combination of the case study and statistical techniques would perhaps make this tool highly significant in a vast country with multiple and inter related influences.

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**14.9 ANSWERS TO SELF CHECK EXERCISES**

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- 1) Case study method has been in use for many decades and has contributed to knowledge significantly. It is a viable strategy for research and can be versatile device for bridging the gap between the phenomenon and image that a researcher has about it. Case study is relevant in the situation where researcher has to answer for ‘why’ and ‘how’. It is considered appropriate if the research is focused on the contemporary events.
- 2) The aim of case study is to find out the factors that are account for behaviour pattern of the units and its relationships with the environment. In other words, the researcher using the case study method tries to understand the complex of factors that are operative within a social unit.

- 3) The possible sources of data for case study research are, life histories, personal documents of all types, confessions, biographies and interviewing individuals. Case studies are not limited to any single source of data collection. They employ a number of sources.
- 4) Case study and statistical approaches have been considered as rivals and not really mutually exclusive. They are in fact, complementary and both may be employed with advantage in the same project. While one analyses mass of data horizontally and otherwise, the other studies vertically a small number of individual cases in detail and as a whole-the number of units may be small but the total number of traits would be large. The two approaches have their significant role.

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## 14.10 KEYWORDS

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| <b>Case Study</b>      | : Intensive investigation of a particular unit.                      |
| <b>Case Work</b>       | : Developmental and adjunct mental procedure that follows diagnosis. |
| <b>Research Design</b> | : A plan of action or a blueprint.                                   |
| <b>Trait</b>           | : Distinguishing feature in character.                               |

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## 14.11 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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