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Module : 18 Case Study Method

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Contents:

1. Introduction
 2. Case Study
 - 2.1 Definition
 - 2.2 Characteristics
 - 2.3 Difference between Case study Vs Case history
 3. Techniques used for case studies
 4. Sources of data for case studies
 5. Types of case Studies
 6. Advantage and limitation
- Summary

Learning Objectives:

- To learn what is case study and distinction from case history; identify the application of case study;
- To discuss how to plan case study; and
- To understand the advantage and limitation of case study

1. Introduction

Among the various methods of data collection, case study is certainly one popular form of qualitative analysis involving careful and complete observation of a case. A case is a social unit with a deviant behavior, and may be an event, problem, process, activity, programme, of a social unit. The unit may be a person, a family, an institution, a cultural group, a community or even an entire society (Kothari, 2014). But it is a bounded system that has the boundaries of the case. Case Study therefore is an intensive investigation of the particular unit under consideration. It is extensively used in psychology, education, sociology, anthropology, economics and political science. It aims at obtaining a complete and detailed account of a social phenomenon or a social event of a social unit. In case study, data can be collected from multiple sources by using any qualitative method of data collection like interviews, observation and it may also include documents, artifacts etc. Case study method is a type of data collection that goes in depth understanding rather than breadth. Case study can be descriptive as we observe and write in description as well as it can also be an exploratory that is we wrote what was said. Pierre Guillaume Frederic Le Play (1855), a mathematician and natural scientist, is considered as the founder of case study method as he used it for the first time in his publication *Les Ouvriers Europeens*.

2. Case Study

2.1 Definitions of Case Study Methods

Case study has been defined differently by different scholars from time to time. Some of them are presented below.

1. Young, P.V. (1984): Case study is a comprehensive study of a social unit, be it a person, a group of persons, an institute, a community or a family.
2. Groode and Hatt (1953): It is a method of exploring and analyzing the life of a social unit
3. Cooley, C.H. (2007): Case study depends our perception and gives clear insight into life directory.
4. Bogardus, E. S. (1925): The method of examining specially and in detail a given situation

5. Robson C. (1993): A strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.

So critical analysis of these definitions, reveal that case study is a method of minute and detail study of a situation concerning a social unit in an intensive and comprehensive manner in order to understand the personal as well as hidden dimensions of human life.

2.2 Characteristics of Case Study

The main characteristics of the case study are (www.studylecturenotes.com):

+ A descriptive study:

- a. The data collected constitute descriptions of psychological processes and events, and of the contexts in which they occurred.
- b. The main emphasis is always on the construction of verbal descriptions of behavior or experience but rarely quantitative data may be collected. In short case study is more of a qualitative method rather than quantitative method.
- c. High levels of detail are provided.
- d. The behavior pattern of the concerned unit is studied directly wherein efforts are made to know the mutual inter-relationship of causal factors.

+ Narrowly focused:

- a. Typically a case study offers a complete and comprehensive description of all facets of a social unit, be it a single individual or may be a social group.
- b. Often the case study focuses on a limited aspect of a person, such as their psychopathological symptoms.

+ Combines objective and subjective data:

Researchers may combine objective and subjective data. Both the data are regarded as valid data for analysis. It enables case study to achieved in-depth understanding of the behavior and experience of a single individual.

✚ Process-oriented:

- a. The case study method enables the researcher to explore and describe the nature of processes, which occur over time.
- b. In contrast to the experimental method, which basically provides a stilled ‘snapshot’ of processes, case study continued over time like for example the development of language in children over time.

2.3. Difference between Case Study and Case History

The Case study method helps retaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events – such as individual life cycles, small group behavior, etc. It is like a case history of a patient. As a patient goes to the doctor with some serious disease, the doctor records the case history. Analysis of case history helps in the diagnosis of the patient’s illness (<http://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-case-study-and-vs-case-history>).

Although most of us confuse case study and case history to be the same, however, there exists a difference between these two terms. They are being used in many disciplines and allow the researcher to be more informative of people, and events. First, let us define the word case study. A case study refers to a research method where a person, group or an event is being investigated which is used by researchers whereas a case history, on the other hand, refers to a record of data which contributes to a case study; usually case history is used by doctors to investigate the patients. This is the main difference between a case study and case history.

(i) What is a Case Study?

A case study is a research method used to investigate an individual, a group of people, or a particular phenomenon. The case study has been used in many disciplines especially in social science, anthropology, [sociology](#), [psychology](#), and [political science](#). A case study allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic. To conduct a case study, the researcher can use a number of techniques. For example, [observation](#), [interviews](#), usage of [secondary data](#) such as documents, records, etc. It usually goes on for a longer period because the researcher has to explore the topic deeply.

The case study method was first used in the clinical medicine so that the doctor has a clear understanding of the history of the patient. Various methods can be used in a case study for example a psychologist use observation to observe the individual, use interview method to broaden the understanding. To create a clear picture of the problem, the questions can be directed not only to the individual on whom the case study is being conducted but also on those who are related to the individual. A special feature of case studies is that it produces [qualitative data](#) that are rich and authentic.

(ii) What is a Case History?

Unlike the case study that refers to a method, a case history refers to a record of an individual or even a group. Case histories are used in many disciplines such as psychology, sociology, medicine, [psychiatry](#), etc. It consists of all the necessary information of the individual. In medicine, a case history refers to a specific record that reveals the personal information, medical condition, the medication that has been used and special conditions of the individual. Having a case history can be very beneficial in treatment of disease. However, a case history does not necessarily have to be connected to an individual; it can even be of an event that took place. The case history is a recording that narrates a sequence of events. Such a narrative allows the researcher to look at an event in retrospect.

Table 1: Difference between Case Study and Case History

	Case Study	Case History
1	A case study is a research method used to investigate an individual, a group of people or a particular phenomenon.	A case history refers to a record of an individual or even a group.
2	Case study method is used by researcher in social sciences	Case history is used by doctors in medicals
3	Different research methodology like interview, questionnaire, schedule,	A case history can be based only on secondary source that can contribute to a case

	observation were used	history.
4	It is a method in which a number of techniques can be used for data collection.	It is a record of information

3. Techniques used for Case Studies

The techniques of case studies includes –

(i) Observation

It is a systematic data collection approach. Researchers use all of their senses to examine people in natural settings or naturally occurring situations. Observation of a field setting involves: prolonged engagement in a setting or social situation.

(ii) Interview

It is questioning and discussing to a person for the purpose of an evaluation or to generate information.

(iii) Secondary Data

Secondary data refers to data that was collected by someone through secondary sources.

(iv) Documents

Any writing that provides information, especially information which is of official in nature.

(v) Records

Anything that provides permanent information which can rely on or providing an evident officially.

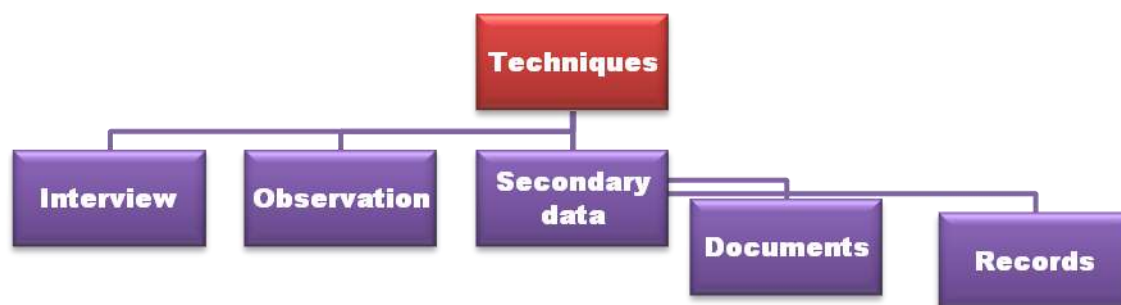


Figure 1: Techniques Used for Case Studies

4. Sources of Data for Case Study

In case study, information may be collected from various sources. Some of the important sources include:

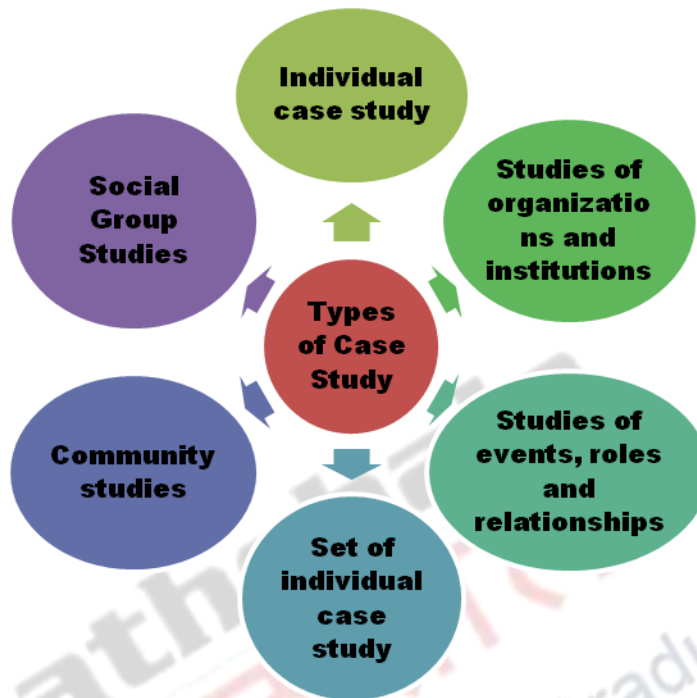
- Life histories
- Personal documents
- Letters and records
- Biographies
- Information obtained through interviews
- Observation

5. Types of Case Study

The following are the types of case study according to the Graham R Gibbs (2012) -

1. **Individual case study:** This study was first done by Shaw, Clifford R. (1930). In individual case study, life of a particular person, his activities and his totalities were accompanied.
2. **Set of individual case study:** Group of person that practice different culture was studied. As for instance those lives in rural area and those living in urban area there will be different cases between them.
3. **Community studies:** In community studies, it may include hundreds of people from a community that is picked upon for some reason.
4. **Social Group Studies:** Group of people that defined their social position, for example a group of musicians or a group of drug takers.
5. **Studies of organizations and institutions:** Study for a particular organization or an institution.
6. **Studies of events, roles and relationships:** Similar to individual case study but more focus on events, roles and relationships that are involved. For example we can take the role of a housewife.

Figure 2: Types of Case Study



Identifying a Case Study:

- Determine if a case study will answer your research question
- Identify the case and find out what type of case study method or technique will be employed
- When the researcher makes interpretations, the researcher should be able to learn the meaning of the case data while interpreting

How to plan a case study?

The following points are required to plan a case study such as -

- Conceptual Framework: based on the theory it displays the important features of a case study and show relationships between features.
- Research Questions: Consist of conceptual framework which is consisting of focused and answerable questions.
- Research Design: Plan out of what to include or what not to include before data collection

- Methods and Instruments: an appropriate method should be employed to answer the research question
- Analysis of Data and interpretation: Collected information should be analysed using statistical tools and interpret the findings incorporating the ideas and knowledge gathered during data collection

6. Advantages and Limitations

6.1 Advantages of Case Study

The following are some of the advantages of case study -

- a) It facilitates intensive study and in-depth analysis of a social unit which help in contradicting established theory.
- b) In-depth and comprehensive information are collected through this method which helps in stimulating new research.
- c) It is suitable for collecting data pertaining to sensitive areas of a social phenomenon.
- d) It helps to collect details regarding the diverse habits, traits and qualities of the unit under investigation (Kothari, 2014).
- e) The researcher can understand better the social change of different facets of a social unit every now and then.
- f) This study can be a means to understand the past of a social unit because of its emphasis of historical analysis.
- g) The researcher can use any type of methods like interview, questionnaire, documents, self-reports etc.
- h) Case study enables to generalize the knowledge arising from the information collected.
- i) A real personal experience can be recorded which enlighten and reveal the real man's inner determined.
- j) The data obtained through case study is useful for formulation of hypothesis and preparation of schedule and questionnaire for such types of study and for further research (Kothari, 2014).
- k) It helps in enhancing his/her experience, ability and skill in content analysis of the data.

- l) It is useful for therapeutic and administrative purposes, particularly in diagnosis, treatment and therapy etc.

6.2 Limitations of Case Study

- a) Case history records could be open to errors due to faulty selection of case and inaccurate observation (Kothari, 2014).
- b) There are chances of inaccuracy of the data as no uniform and standardized system of recording case histories has been developed.
- c) Data collected from case study usually based on several assumptions which may not be very realistic at times
- d) This method is mainly qualitative rather than quantitative, hence there may be question of subjectivity.
- e) It is very difficult to draw generalizations on the basis of a few cases.
- f) Sampling is not possible in case study as this method can be used only in a limited unit.
- g) The information collected from case study is incomparable since each informant gives his/her own opinion. Therefore, replication is not possible.
- h) Since this method is fully based on the informant, sometimes the informant himself thinks that he/she have the full knowledge and the information given by them may include some fake also.
- i) The investigator's bias might distort the quality of the case study (Kothari, 2014).
- j) Case Study is time-consuming and costly in certain cases.
- k) This method cannot be effectively used in big and complex societies (Kothari, 2014).

Summary

Case study is an important method employed for collection of qualitative data for an in depth, intensive and comprehensive scientific study of a social unit. This social unit can be an individual, a family, a community, a group or even an entire society. Case study is quite different from the case history which focuses on the recording of personal information. Different methods of case study such as individual, community, social group, organization and events using appropriate techniques (observation,

interview, secondary data like documents and records) are used based on the objectives of the research problem. The main sources of data in case studies includes life histories, personal documents, letters and records, biographies, information obtained through interviews and observation. Case studies facilitate intensive study and in-depth analysis of a social unit contradicting established theory. It helps in contradicting established theory and stimulating new research. However, difficulties arises in case studies due to a number of reasons which includes inconsistency in data, not possible to replicate the findings, interviewing key and right informants, expertise of the investigator, constant monitoring of interaction between the theoretical issues being studied and collected data, and interpretation of the data needs to be carefully considered.

