

Advantages and disadvantages of case studies psychology essay



Qualitative approach

Research methods are commonly divided into quantitative and qualitative research methods (Some researchers (Lee, 1991; Ragin, 1987) have suggested to combine these methods by triangulation). Qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live. Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) argue that the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and its particular social and institutional context is largely lost when textual data are quantified. The strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17). A key difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that quantitative researchers work with a few (quantifiable) variables and many cases, whereas qualitative researchers rely on a few cases and many (primarily qualitative) variables (Ragin, 1987). In this research a qualitative research approach is chosen for the following reasons. First, the nature of the research questions suggests a qualitative approach. They are as understanding of what are the factors that enable or inhibit people to share their knowledge. Second, the aim is to present a detailed understanding of the dynamics of sharing knowledge, requiring a focus on participants' perspectives and their meaning. Third, knowledge-sharing individuals are studied in their natural setting. Knowledge sharing is a situated process, so removing participants from their organizational context would lead to findings that are out of context. And these contexts which determine the factors that enable o inhibit knowledge sharing process.

The characteristics of qualitative methods are listed in Table 1

Characteristics 1, 2, 4 and 7 highlight the emphasis of qualitative data on providing richness of understanding of phenomenon in context (Duncan, 1979; Yin, 1989). Quantitative methods "...by themselves may ignore much of the process phenomenon associated with a particular research question so that a real understanding of what's happened may not exist" (Duncan, 1979, p. 424). The use of qualitative data collection and analysis methods increases the likelihood that the advantages of case study method can be obtained.

Table 1 Characteristics of qualitative methods

1. Qualitative research is inductive.
2. Researchers look at settings and subjects holistically.
3. The researchers are sensitive to their effects on subjects.
4. Researchers try to understand subjects from their own perspective.
5. Researchers try to set aside their own beliefs, perspectives and predispositions.
6. Researchers try to see all different perspectives of subjects as valuable.
7. Qualitative methods are humanistic.
8. Researchers emphasis validity as prime research criteria
9. Researcher sees all settings and subjects as worthy of study.

10. Qualitative research is a craft.

Source: This characteristics adapted from Taylor and Bogdan (1984, p. 5-8).

Interpretive research

All research is based on some assumptions with respect to methodology the most pertinent philosophical assumptions are those that relate to the underlying epistemology guiding this research. And it refers to the assumptions about knowledge and how it can be obtained. Different classifications of epistemological assumptions exist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). For explaining the underlying paradigm of this research, the three epistemological stands distinguished by Myers are used: positivist, interpretive and critical. Positivism claims that social life should be understood and analysed in the same way that scientists study the 'natural world'. Positivists generally assume that reality is objectively given and can be described by measurable properties independent of the observer and of one's instruments. Positivist studies generally attempt to test theory, in an attempt to increase the predictive understanding of phenomena. On the other hand the interpretive stand base is hermeneutics and phenomenology. Interpretive researchers start out with the assumption that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. They generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. Interpretive research does not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the full complexity of human sense making as the situation emerges.

Critical researchers assume that reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people. Although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, critical researchers recognize that their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural and political domination. The main task of critical research is seen as being one of social critique, whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are brought to light. Critical research focuses on the oppositions, conflicts and contradictions in contemporary society, and seeks to be emancipatory, that is, it should help to eliminate the causes of alienation and domination. Where this research does not interested to brought alienating conditions of the status quo to light and it emphasise the socially constructedness of reality, an interpretive approach is chosen.

CASE STUDY METHOD

This study used a single case study with embedded multiple units of analysis research design (Yin, 1983). Within this design primarily qualitative data collection and analysis techniques were used. A case study design was adopted, because it was a highly appropriate method for the research questions addressed

This Section will not attempt to review case study in depth. Instead, attention will be focused on the specific advantages and disadvantages of the method. Also, specific attention will be given to two major issues particularly relevant to the single case study with embedded multiple units of analysis design used (activity systems), the problems of the ability to generalize findings.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Case Studies

A first step in identifying the advantages and disadvantages of case study method is to clarify the major attributes of this research strategy. Normally, a definition would be expected to specify such boundaries. Unfortunately, most definitions in the literature are not useful in this regard as they concentrate more on the unique features of some subject of analysis, for example, a decision, organization, or process, than the unique features of case study method as a research technique (Yin, 1989). However, some major attributes of case study research method can be derived from the useful discussions provided by Mitchell (1983) and Yin (1989).

First, a case study usually investigates a contemporary phenomenon. While it is possible to talk of historical case studies, a significant attribute of case study research is the examination of a social situation as it unfolds. Second, however, a simple narrative account of any contemporary phenomenon is not case study research. The phenomenon examined should be of theoretical significance. It should be noted that this does not mean that a case study must always be based on a prior theory, only that it should be concerned with a subject of research interest. Third, case study method involves the detailed examination of the phenomenon within its real-life context. The aim is to provide depth of analysis, which includes not only the phenomenon itself but also the context within which it is located. This often involves a trade-off against breadth of analysis. Fourth, this recognition of context involves more than just the specification of antecedent and moderating variables, but the recognition that any phenomenon is embedded in its context. Thus, case study method gives attention to the intertwining of

phenomenon and context. However, such detailed examination can be applied only within the specified boundaries of the case. As Mitchell (1983) quite rightly emphasizes, all cases are themselves situated in some wider social context which cannot be directly taken into account. “ These contexts constitute some panoply of *ceteris paribus* conditions which the analyst will need to allow for.” (Mitchell, 1983, p. 192) by either controlling for them in case selection or by incorporating critical factors in the theoretical framework brought to bear on the case. Fifth, the detailed examination of the phenomenon and its context usually involves a longitudinal analysis. The concern with the unfolding of a social situation leads to an emphasis on the phenomenon in process, and thus the explicit attention to the time dimension in case study method. This can be manifested both in the continuing collection and analysis of data over the study time period, and in attention to history as part of the understanding of current context. Finally, case study research usually makes use of multiple sources of data. There is no prior fixed commitment to any particular form of data collection or analysis. Depending on the researcher’s theoretical and disciplinary commitment, the phenomenon, access and resources, data collection can involve some combination of qualitative and/or quantitative techniques applied to direct observations, archival material, artifacts, and/or interviews in an attempt to capture the complexity of the phenomenon and its context. However, the commitment to depth of analysis usually means that qualitative methods dominate. These six major attributes of case study method as a research strategy are summarized in Table1.

Table1 Major Attributes of Case Study Method

1. Subject is a contemporary phenomenon.
2. Subject must have theoretical significance.
3. Detailed examination within real-life context.
4. Phenomenon embedded in context.
5. Examination is usually longitudinal.
6. Examination uses multiple sources of data

If case study method involves the detailed examination of a contemporary phenomenon of theoretical significance embedded in its real-life context, usually by the use of multiple data sources in a longitudinal analysis, what are its specific advantages and disadvantages as a research strategy? Those traditionally identified are listed in Table 2.

The list of advantages in Table 2 illustrates that the primary strengths of case study method are the depth and flexibility of analysis of a social situation that it makes possible. By concentrating research effort on the detailed study of a specified occurrence of a phenomenon, the analysis can pay attention to context, consider a large range of variables simultaneously as they unfold in the situation, adapt the research design as understanding of both the questions and answers develop, and thereby provide a much richer explanation of the subject of interest.

Table 2 Traditional Advantages and Disadvantages of Case Study Method

Advantages

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Disadvantages

Holistic

- depth of analysis
- realistic
- attention to context
- extensive range of variables

Longitudinal

- develop history of case
- details of process
- causation and interactions
- situation as it happens

High Internal Validity

- more complete understanding
- direct observation of situation
- multiple sources of data
- triangulation of data
- meaningful to subjects

Adaptive

- questions can be changed as case develops
- methods can be changed
- data sources can be changed

Researcher Bias

- observation bias
- interpretation bias
- cannot see everything going on
- presence changes case
- acceptance by subjects

Low External Validity

- low generality
- little control over phenomenon
- comparative analysis difficult
- representativeness of case
- difficult to replicate

Costly

- research time

- volume of data

- analysis of data

Source: adapted from Duncan (1979), Isaac and Michael (1980) and Kerlinger (1973).

Common criticism of case study method

The problem of generalizing the findings of case studies has probably been the most common and most telling criticism of case study method. In part, this criticism is reasonable in that many early social science case studies, perhaps as an over reaction to natural science based research (Laughlin, 1990b), focused almost exclusively on the deep description of situations with little attempt to provide theoretical explanations. There was little ability to generalize such specific findings. However, where more general explanation is attempted, does this criticism still apply? The simple answer to this is no, as the criticism is based on the premises of a statistical sampling logic which is inappropriate to case studies (Mitchell, 1983; Scapens, 1990; Yin, 1989).

Why can't you generalize from a single case? The common criticism of this is that the case may not be representative of the population, or even if representative that the results are unique to this one instance. As Yin (1989) and Scapens (1990) point out, most experiments could be criticised on similar grounds, yet generalizing from experiments is more widely accepted. Scapens (1990) argued that the reason for this is that experiments are based on replication, not sampling, logic. The results of an experiment are

evaluated against theory and accepted if they are consistent. The more the results are replicated in other one-off cases, the more the theory is accepted as an explanation of the phenomenon. The emphasis here, which should also be applicable to single case studies, is on theoretical generalization, not statistical generalization.

Mitchell (1983) provides an extended discussion of a similar point. He also argues that the reason that people often criticise the specificity of case studies is that they fail to recognize that case studies have a different criteria of generality than traditional quantitative research methods. Traditional methods use a combination of statistical and causal or theoretical inference to argue generalizable results. First, statistical theory is used to design a representative sample of the population or situation. The findings from this sample or situation then can be extrapolated to the whole population. This is statistical inference. However, these results are only correlations between variables and all that can be generalized is that the same pattern of findings should exist for the population. To generalize about the nature of the relationships between variables, that is about causal or logical relationships, the researcher must use theoretical inference. By showing how the findings and research design relate to a body of theory, why the variables may be important, how and why they may be related, etc., the researcher can also generalize about the logical or causal relationships exhibited by the findings.

However, case studies rely only on theoretical inference for the generality of their findings. The criteria for generalizable findings from both single and multiple case studies should be, do they "...relate theoretically relevant
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characteristics reflected in the case to one another in a logically coherent way" (Mitchell, 1983, p. 200). The generality of case study findings then depends on the use of analytic induction that is the process of generalizing by abstracting from the specific, rather than the deductive logic of more traditional methods (see also Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Silverman, 1985a).

These two related arguments demonstrate that a strong case exists for the ability to generalize using even a single case study. There is no doubt that greater support for the generality of the explanation can be provided by comparative analysis through either multiple case study designs or replication of cases. However, the strength gained here is not from having a bigger or more representative sample, but from the demonstration of the theoretical relevance of the explanation. This is the primary criteria of the ability to generalize from case study method.

CASE STUDY DESIGN

This Section describes the major features of the case study design of this study. The description of the methods used in any case study is difficult. While some issues can be addressed before the study commences, others evolve or can only be addressed as the research progresses. This flexibility is one of the strengths of case a study method, but it also makes it difficult to detail the dynamics of the research methods employed. To simplify the discussion in this Section the case study design is described sequentially under three main steps; basic design, the boundaries of the case and the sources of data. Where necessary the development of the methods during the research process is detailed.

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Basic Design Type

In the introduction to this Chapter the type of case study design used in this study was stated to be a single case study with embedded multiple units of analysis (activity systems), using primarily qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. The use of qualitative data has already been addressed in the previous Section. Attention here is directed to the two other major features of the design, a single case and embedded multiple units of analysis.

The first research choice was between a single and multiple case design. Basically, this choice involved a trade-off of depth of analysis against greater generality of the findings through the use of comparative analysis. Depth of analysis via a single case design was chosen for two reasons. First, with the paucity of prior research on knowledge sharing process in Libyan organisations, it was felt that attention should be given to increasing depth of knowledge via a deep analysis. Second, as a research student with limited resources and needing to complete this study within a reasonable time span, it was not felt that it would be possible to do more than one organization in the required depth. Also, additional justification for a single case design is existed in the approach of this study which focuses on the effect of the cultural factors on knowledge sharing process and when there is more than one organisation, it will be there more than one organisational culture. Therefore, it was decided to focus effort on a single case study, the Libyan Iron and steel Company.

The second aspect of this design was the use of embedded multiple units of analysis. This involves the use of either vertical or horizontal or both subunits of the focal organization as activity systems.

Units of analysis

Although this research is conducted in a single case study, this case involves more than one unit of analysis, which is considered as mini cases within a single case study. Eisenhardt (1989, p. 545) argues that “ with fewer than four cases, it is often difficult to generate theory with much complexity, and its empirical grounding is likely to be unconvincing, unless the case has several mini-cases within it”. Within this research the unit is to be activity systems within a specified area of the company for describing organizational settings both horizontally (i. e. at the same level of responsibility) and vertically (i. e. at different levels of responsibility). Each activity system represents a particular organizational setting, with respect to the cultural factors, that affect knowledge is being shared within or between these settings (activity systems) within a single organizational context (the company). This makes the multiple-case design embedded in this research.