Methods Brief: Case Studies

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Introduction

The case study is a method or strategy that is commonly used in criminal justice research, but one that also is often misunderstood in terms of its potential applications and capacity for scientific rigor. This research methods brief presents the basic characteristics of a case study, and it sets out the ways case studies can be used. It also attempts to dispel common misperceptions about case studies and presents key factors to consider when planning and designing case study research. While this brief is written primarily for researchers, others who are interested in an introduction to case studies may also find the content informative.

Definition and Key Elements

In the social sciences, the term, “case study” refers to both a method of analysis and a specific research design for conducting empirical inquiry (USC Libraries, 2020). Some researchers refer to the case study as a research strategy rather than a design or method. Since any case study can involve a combination of methodologies, describing it as a strategy arguably better captures the full range of applications for which a case study can be used, as well as its unique value in relation to other approaches for answering research questions.

Yin (1990) has defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23). The phenomenon being researched is studied in its natural context, and typically there is a dedicated focus on the links between the phenomena and its contextual interrelationships, and what the links can tell us about either the uniqueness of the case or its generalizability to comparable relationships (Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). “In general, case studies are the preferred research strategy when ’how’ or ’why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1990, p. 13).

Case study research typically relies on multiple sources of evidence, including documents, direct observation, and systematic interviewing. It is richly descriptive because it is grounded in deep and varied sources of information and its “unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence” (Yin, 1990, p. 20). Information is explored and mined in the case study environment for a more thorough examination of the given phenomenon (Algozinne and Hancock, 2006). The methods used in a case study can rest within quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method investigative paradigms (Algozinne and Hancock, 2006).

A case study typically examines a program, place, event(s), or other phenomenon for exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory purposes.

An Exploratory Case Study is used to develop an initial understanding of the program or phenomenon of interest. The focus is on discovery for the purpose of obtaining an empirically based introduction to the structure, dynamics and context of the subject of interest. Exploratory case studies are particularly useful for developing hypotheses to be tested, research questions to be answered, and/or design options to be used in a more focused and in-depth subsequent study. In evaluation settings, an exploratory case study can be used to explore a program’s logic, theory of ac-
tion (or change), or expectations for results, as well as a program’s overall evaluability. While exploratory case studies probe into and shed light on what’s essentially unknown, they should be guided by a specific purpose or set of propositions that focus and frame the inquiry.

A **Descriptive Case Study** is used to describe a program, situation or phenomenon, and provide a clear picture of what is happening and who is involved. Sometimes referred to as an illustrative case study, it helps make the unfamiliar familiar, provide surrogate experience, avoid over-simplification of reality, and give the target audience for study findings a clear and common understanding of the “case” being studied. Arguably the most common type of case study used in criminal justice research, descriptive case studies are particularly valuable for documenting similarities and differences across multiple implementations of a program model or type.

An **Explanatory Case Study** is typically used to answer “how” and “why” questions about a particular phenomenon. As the name implies, the focus is on explanation rather than mere description, such as how and why a program’s expected outcomes were or were not attained. Explanatory case studies are particularly useful for discovering the reasons for a program’s success or failure. Yin (1990) has suggested that in an explanatory case study, competing explanations for the dynamics or events of interest should be posed and tested for best fit (p.16). While case studies have been viewed by some as lacking generalizability and the level of rigor needed to produce trustworthy conclusions about how and why particular events occurred, a properly designed and executed explanatory case study can indeed produce highly credible and generalizable conclusions (Yin, 1990, p. 21).

**Case Study Applications**

It is important to recognize that a case study can be undertaken for multiple or overlapping purposes, and that many different types of case study applications can fall into the exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory case study categories described above.¹ While presenting a comprehensive inventory of case study applications or types is beyond the scope of this report, several common applications are briefly described below.

A **pilot case study** is exploratory in nature and typically used in a formative manner to help plan a subsequent, more in-depth study. It can be used to inform or refine the scope, focus, and procedures of a future study, including the types of theories or hypotheses to be tested, the research questions to be answered, and the feasibility of using various research designs, data sources, or data collection methods.

A **program implementation case study** is used to determine whether a program has been properly or successfully implemented. These case studies typically attempt to identify factors that facilitated or hindered the program implementation process. These case studies can be used to determine whether a program is in compliance with legislative intent or has been implemented with fidelity to a specific program plan or model. Multiple cases or sites are often used to determine whether and to what degree variation has taken place across multiple implementations of a program model or type. Findings from these studies can be used to better understand variations in program outcomes discovered through other forms of inquiry.

A **program effects case study** is used to determine the effects or impacts of a program and illustrate reasons for successes or failures. Since other methods can be more adept at isolating effects and establishing causality in controlled situations, these case studies are often used to answer “how” and “why” questions about program effects. They attempt to unpack what’s inside the “black box” of a program and explain the mechanisms or actions through which program effects or impacts take place.

A **critical instance case study** examines one, or very few, instances of an event or phenomenon for a very specific purpose. The case study is used to thoroughly investigate the event, and great diligence is taken to ensure that important factors have not been overlooked, that the context for the event has been fully considered, and that the empirical findings from the study are not based on limited or biased information. The approach is well-suited for answering cause-and-effect questions, and providing a comprehensive, bal-

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¹Some scholars even expand upon these categories or focus on entirely different ones when describing case study types. Nevertheless, the categorization of case studies as exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory has a long history in the literature, and it can be helpful for understanding the nature of case study research and conceptualizing the purpose and focus of case study inquiry in practical settings.
anced, and accurate picture of how and why the event occurred. The instance may be something the researcher is called in to examine, rather than something the researcher has selected for inquiry. An example of this type of case study is the inquiry that takes place following an airplane crash, where the goal is to establish cause and effect, and learn how and why the event occurred so a similar event can be prevented from taking place in the future. Due to the nature of the event, and the diligence and in-depth nature of the inquiry and analysis, the resulting findings can be trustworthy and transferrable.

**Multiple Case Designs**

The diversity of applications found in case study research includes several types of case studies using one or more sites or cases. As mentioned above, program implementation case studies often examine a program's implementation in different sites to document and better understand variations in program delivery. Multiple case designs also are commonly used to take deeper dives into a sample or limited number of cases that simply are not possible with every site of interest in a larger study due to resource limitations or other constraints. Another application is the use of multiple cases for the purpose of replication. Following the same logic used when replicating experiments, each carefully chosen case is viewed as an individual study or test for the purpose of achieving direct or theoretical replication across sites (Yin, 1990, p. 53). Theoretical replication occurs when contrasting results are predicted and observed for anticipated reasons. Finally, another multi-case application is the Cumulative Case Study which synthesizes information collected from different cases or sites at different periods in time. The distinguishing feature is the retrospective analysis of previously collected information to save time and avoid the costs that would be incurred if the original investigations had to be repeated.

**Dispelling Common Myths About Case Studies**

Two of the most common myths about case studies are that they lack scientific rigor and that they lack the capacity for generalization. These broad-based criticisms arguably have diminished the standing that case studies have among strategies for empirical inquiry, and misconceptions about case studies can be reinforced when they are viewed using a rigid hierarchical framework that positions certain approaches as inherently superior to others without consideration of a study’s context. Decades of practice and numerous published examples of highly valid and impactful case study research have demonstrated that case studies can be highly rigorous. Moreover, there is widespread recognition today that the choice of method in research should always be driven by the questions the research will attempt to answer and the context in which the research will take place. All research strategies have strengths and weaknesses, and the best fit for any study depends on numerous factors. The rigor of any strategy also is contingent on the integrity of its execution in the field.

Finally, generalizing from a single case may seem counterintuitive, but as Yin (1990) points out, “case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions...(A)nd the investigator’s goal is to expand and generalize theories” (p. 21). Generalization, even with experiments, is also contingent on replication, and the same can be done with multiple case studies (see below).

**Case Study Planning and Design**

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has described a case study as “a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance, obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context” (1990, p. 15). Several features of a sound case study captured in the above description provide a framework for case study planning and design:

- **Comprehensive understanding.** The goal of a case study is to obtain as complete a picture as possible of what is going on in an instance, and why.
- **Extensive description and analysis.** Descriptive information is rich in detail and derived from multiple data sources. Data collection and analysis tends to be concurrent and interactive. The analysis is extensive and generally includes triangulation to identify common patterns and themes.
- **Context.** To understand what happened and
why, context is always considered. This helps
gives the case study its strength as a way of
understanding influences, relationships and in
some cases cause and effect (GAO, 1990, pp.
15–25).

Designing a case study is a complex process and
several textbooks addressing state-of-the art practice
are available.² Although it is beyond the scope of this
report to discuss case study design in detail, key issues
to consider include:

• **Purpose of the study and the research questions
to be answered.** Case studies may be used for
a variety of purposes that generally fall into
the categories of exploration, description, and
explanation. These categories, however, should
not be viewed as mutually exclusive. It is not
uncommon for a case study to be undertaken
for multiple or overlapping purposes. Moreover,
many different types of case studies that fall
into these categories can be found in the litera-
ture. Finally, case studies should not be thought
of primarily as a precursor for some other type
of research. While case studies can be explor-
atory in nature, they can serve other purposes
and stand alone as an independent study.

• **Site selection.** Decisions about site selection are
driven by the purpose and context of the in-
quiry. While it is common for the researcher to
be involved in the process, or even have direct
responsibility for site selection, in some situ-
tions site selection may occur independently,
and the researcher is called in to examine a
predetermined site. Site selection can also be
influenced by routine design considerations,
such as whether single or multiple sites are
needed. Case studies can be designed using a
single or multiple units of analysis during the
examination of a single case, and multiple-case
studies can be carried out following the logic of
replication or for other purposes. For example, a
multiple case approach can be used to conduct
a comparative investigation designed to discov-
er and document similarities and differences
between two or more cases or program imple-
mentations.

• **Data sources.** Case studies typically use multiple
data sources such as program records and doc-
uments, interview or survey responses provided
by those involved with and affected by the phe-
omenon being studied, and direct observation
of the phenomena in its real-world context.

• **Data collection.** Case studies use data collection
methods such as document review, interviewing
and surveying, and prolonged direct observa-
tion. On-site observations are often guided by
protocols or checklists designed to ensure that
key information is obtained, and that all infor-
mation is recorded accurately and in a manner
conducive to analysis. Case studies typically use
both qualitative and quantitative data. Despite
being richly descriptive, case studies should not
be viewed as strictly qualitative endeavors, as
they often include quantitative evidence (Yin,

• **Data analysis.** As mentioned above, multiple
sources of data are analyzed to develop a rich
and detailed picture of the phenomenon, its
dynamics or operations, those involved or af-
fected, and the real-world context. The analysis
process in a case study also typically involves
triangulation, or comparing information from
different sources to identify patterns, common
themes, and other characteristics and impacts
of the phenomenon and its context. Techniques
such as pattern matching, explanation building,
and thematic review are often employed. The
validity of findings, particularly validity regard-
ing cause and effect, is derived from agreement
among data obtained from disparate sources,
offered with the systematic ruling-out of alter-
native explanations and the explanation of “out-
lier” results. Depending on the study’s purpose
and research questions, the analysis might focus
on answering “how” and “why” questions about
the phenomena.

• **Reporting.** While case study reports should
always thoroughly document the inquiry’s
methods and cogently present study findings,
two common features of a case study report are

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the use of thick description and quotations or narratives.

**Thick Description**

Since thick description is highly relevant for case study research and a key indicator of scientific rigor in qualitative inquiry generally, its meaning and essential elements are summarized below.

Thick description provides a highly detailed account of the phenomenon being studied to enable a deep understanding of not only what took place and how it took place, but also of the broader context. It goes beyond the surface to portray “people, events and actions within their locally meaningful contexts” (Yin, 2011, p. 213). "A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83).

It is important to recognize that thick description is not achieved simply by presenting a sufficient level of detail. “Rather to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 255). Thick description provides the context for an act, “states the intentions and meanings that organize the action, traces the evolution and development of the act,” and “presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted” (Denzin, 1989, p. 33).

Building on the work of Denzin (1989), Schwandt (2001) and others,³ Ponterotto summarized the key elements of thick description in the following manner. Thick description accurately describes and interprets social interactions within the context in which they occurred. It captures participants’ thoughts and emotions and assigns motivations and intentions to social actions (2006, pp. 542-543).

Finally, thick description uses quotations and narratives (or vignettes) to explain situations and their context, and to give voice to the perceptions and feelings of those involved in the phenomenon being studied, and the meanings behind actions (Denzin, 1989, p. 83; Ponterotto, 2006, p. 540).

**Summary**

Case studies are a discrete and valuable form of research, with a variety of approaches that serve different purposes. Having a clear understanding of the purposes, elements, and strengths of each form can maximize the value of this methodology.

**References**


³The concept of thick description can be traced to the work of British philosopher Gilbert Ryle in the 1960s. Ryle first used the term as a philosophical construct to describe the importance of context when attributing intentions to behavior. American anthropologist Clifford Geertz subsequently borrowed the term in the early 1970s to describe ethnography in his field. Norman Denzin is often credited with introducing the term and concept to other disciplines and explaining what thick description entails in his 1989 publication Interpretive Interactionism.
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