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APPLICATIONS
OF CASE
STUDY
RESEARCH
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BOX 1
Six Different Types of Case Studies

Theory and theoretical constructs are useful in all kinds of case studies, when case studies are used for research and not teaching or dissemination purposes.

For research, at least six kinds of case studies can be identified, based on a 2 x 3 matrix. First, case study research can be based on single- or multiple-case studies; second, whether single or multiple, the case study can be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (causal). The present chapter covers three of these six types.

In a nutshell, the 2 x 3 dimensions may be characterized as follows. A single-case study focuses on a single case only; multiple-case studies, however, include two or more cases within the same study. These multiple cases should be selected so that they replicate each other—either predicting similar results (literal replication) or contrasting results for predictable reasons (theoretical replication). An exploratory case study (whether based on single or multiple cases) is aimed at defining the questions and hypotheses of a subsequent study (not necessarily a case study) or at determining the feasibility of the desired research procedures. A descriptive case study presents a complete description of a phenomenon within its context. An explanatory case study presents data bearing on cause-effect relationships—explaining how events happened.

(For more information, see Yin, 2003, Chapter 1, sections on “Comparing Case Studies With Other Research Strategies in the Social Sciences” and “Variations in Case Studies.”)

BOX 13
Replication, Not Sampling Logic, for Multiple-Case Studies

The selection of the eight case studies in the present chapter followed a replication, not sampling, logic. This means that all eight cases were chosen because they were claimed to have had positive outcomes beforehand. The case studies and the ensuing evaluation then predicted that similar processes would be found to account for these outcomes (direct replications). If such replications are indeed found for several cases, you can have more confidence in the overall results. The development of consistent findings, over multiple cases or even multiple studies, can then be considered a more robust finding.

Sampling logics are entirely different. They assume that an investigation is mainly interested in representing a larger universe. The selected cases are therefore chosen according to preidentified representation criteria. These logics do not work well with multiple-case studies; they distort the benefits of using the case study method in the first place. In fact, if sampling logic is important to an inquiry, survey methods are more likely to satisfy an investigation’s needs than is the case study method.

(For more information, see Yin, 2003, Chapter 2, section on “What Are the Potential Multiple-Case Designs?”)

BOX 15
The Unit of Analysis: A Critical Concept in Doing Case Studies

The eight case studies in this chapter are about organizations providing technical assistance to health agencies in eight states. However, the unit of analysis for the cases is neither the organizations nor the agencies. Rather, each case focuses on a specific technical assistance engagement, which is the actual unit of analysis.

No issue is more important than defining the unit of analysis. “What is my case?” is the question most frequently posed by those doing case studies. Without a tentative answer, you will not know how to limit the boundaries of your study. Because case studies permit you to collect data from many perspectives—and for time periods of undetermined duration—you must clearly define the unit of analysis at the outset of your study.

The unit of analysis has another critical significance in doing case studies. The findings of the case study will pertain to specific theoretical propositions about the defined unit of analysis. These propositions will later be the means for generalizing the findings of the case study—to similar cases focusing on the same unit of analysis. Thus, the entire design of a case study as well as its potential theoretical significance is heavily dominated by the way the unit of analysis is defined.

(For more information, see Yin, 2003, Chapter 2, section on “Components of Research Design.”)