

Mini cases vs. Full length case studies: advantages and disadvantages

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, I focus on advantages and disadvantages between mini cases and full length case studies. I distinguish what is a case study, the approach towards it and philosophical underpinnings. I then presents different case study research designs, address trustworthiness, lack of resources, and some advantages and disadvantages already conducted related to case studies. At last I clarifies some advantages and disadvantages with focus on mini cases, and present my recommendation based on the data. This paper can provide an valuable input to researcher trying to understand case studies in its entirety.

Keywords: *Case Study Methods, Mini Cases, Advantages, Disadvantages*

Introduction

Stories has since the dawn of time been a tool for teaching. Tales has since far back in time meant a great deal to human identity. The experienced and oldest in the tribe told their tale to the youngest, around the campfire, to prepare them for the challenges of life. A similar process represent the heart of case studies (Huber & Solberg Søylen, 2006). A particular social context or phenomenon can be illustrated by the powerful story of a case study (Grbich, 1999). Far and wide people uses the case study methods. However no proper definition has emerged, either of a case or a case study (Levy, 2008). The case study method does not have a legitimate status as social science research strategy even though it is one of the most frequently used qualitative research methodologies. The situation appear to be such since case study methods do not have well-defined and well-structured protocols (Yin, 2002). Thus, this scientific article is written with the aim of comparing mini cases with full length case studies by examined some of their advantages and disadvantages. This paper attempts to determine and is mainly focusing on advantages and disadvantages of mini cases.

You can come across a mini case in your typical school textbook. A mini case is a shortened case study and it can be as short as half a page. Although the amount of

pages varies between case studies, the general case study is five to fifteen pages. A case study should not take too long to read. When you can not establish a qualified discussion based on a case study is it too short, in that case it does not present an sufficient amount of background information. On the other hand, if the case study is too long it misses largely the intention of creating it in the first place (Huber and Solberg Søilen, 2006).

Methodology

This qualitative article is an attempt to simplify exploration and writings of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is explored through a variety of lenses which allows for multiple dimensions of it to be revealed and understood. The data which consist of secondary sources has been collected through systematic literature study. Within the framework of references there are scientific articles that has been located by using databases such as Web of Science, Google Scholar and Scopus. Robert K. Yin, Sharan Merriam and Robert E. Stake are three methodologists who I have selected based on their seminal authorship. They have provided procedures to follow when conducting case study research (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). Their methodological recommendations has largely made an impact on educational researchers' choices concerning case study design and they are seen as foundational methodologists in the field of case study research (Yazan, 2015).

To describe the method I followed in this paper, my initial inquiry of some scientific article, and knowing that you should give the reader sufficient amount of background information led me to start with some guidelines to focus on while collecting information . This set of guidelines is as follow: The case study approach, Philosophical Underpinning, Research design, Trustworthiness and resources, Some advantages and disadvantages. There are already research conducted about advantages and disadvantages on case studies as shown in figure 2, and I have needed to limit my analysis considering my lack of time and resources. Therefore, in the analysis a comparison between mini cases and full length case studies is being presented with focus on mini cases.

The case study approach

A case study is an opportunity for the beginner researcher to gain enormous insight into a case (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Case study methods are generally beneficial when you want to gain insights and understanding of phenomena that are “new, not-understood, or unexamined” (Yin, 2008). Questions such as who, what and where can be investigated as illustrated in figure 1 (based on Yin, 1994, p.6) through documents, archival analysis, surveys and interviews. Figure 1 summarises the

different kinds of research questions and methods that are most appropriate for the questions. It presents that case study research is suitable when “a how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control.” (Yin, 1994, p.9) Case studies can be especially practical in explaining cases that is not adaptable with a current theory. Additionally, they can help refine existing hypotheses in any research strategy involving an ongoing dialogue between theory and evidence. A theory is used as a guide for the empirical analysis of a case, which in turn is used to suggest refinements in the theory. The new theory can then be tested on other cases (Levy, 2008).

Yin (2002, p. 13) defines case as “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context”. Therefore, case study is an empirical probe that investigates the case or cases that is in line with the above mentioned definition by addressing the “how” or “why” questions regarding the phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2002). While Stake explains (1995, p. xi) that “Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.” Moreover, he tells us that the complexity of a single case is expected to be captured in a case study. We do not study one case primarily for understanding other cases. We study a case to understand this particular case (Stake, 1995).

Figure 1: Choosing a Research Strategy	
<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Form of research question</i>
Experiment	How, why
Survey	Who, what, where, how many, how much
Archival analysis	Who, what, where, how many, how much
History	How, why
Case study	How, why

Philosophical Underpinnings

“How case study researchers should contribute to reader experience depends on their notions of knowledge and reality” (Stake, 1995, p. 100). Stake emphasizes that “most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 99). He primarily thinks of the qualitative case study researchers as interpreters. They gather interpretations and are in consequence required to “report their rendition or construction of the constructed reality or knowledge that they gather through their investigation.” (Yazan, 2015, p. 137) Stake explains that qualitative researchers should expect the readers of their report to reach

another level of reality in addition to the ones mentioned before (Yazan, 2015). He states that “there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view” (Stake, 1995, p. 108). From Merriam's viewpoint, “the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (1998, p. 6). Stake shares the same ideas as Merriam “that reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality” (1998, p. 22). Bringing this philosophical foundation up to light discloses the main interest of qualitative researchers which is “to understand the meaning or knowledge constructed by people. In other words, what really intrigues qualitative researchers is the way people make sense of their world and their experiences in this world.” (Yazan, 2015, p. 137)

Research design

Yin (2002, p. 26) has identified five components of research design that are important for case studies:

- a study's questions
- its propositions
- if any; its unit(s) of analysis
- the logic linking the data to the propositions
- and the criteria for interpreting the findings.

Units of analysis are considered as mini cases within a single case study (UK Essays, 2013). Contrary to Yin, Stake (1995) is a spokesman for flexible design which allows researchers to make extensive modifications during the work progress. His advice about research questions indicates that case study researchers need a set of two or three sharpened or evolved study questions that will “help structure the observation, interviews, and document review” (p. 20). Merriam (1998) complements the two, she is a combination of both approaches. She informs us that literature review is an important phase contributing to theory development and research design. The theoretical framework which emerges from the literature review, helps mold research questions and points of emphasis. According to her there are five steps of research design:

- conducting literature review
- constructing a theoretical framework
- identifying a research problem
- crafting and sharpening research questions
- and selecting the sample (purposive sampling) (Yazan, 2015, p. 149)

Trustworthiness and resources

Strategies for establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability have over the years been extensively written about across fields (e.g. Krefting, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986, 1993) and a great deal of frameworks have been elaborated to grade the trustworthiness of qualitative data (e.g., Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

There are at least two problematic reason for the lack of rigor. First of all, case studies represent a methodology that is useful for creating managerially relevant knowledge because they deal with real management situations, and they are often made in a close interaction with practitioners (Amabile et al., 2001; Gummesson, 2000; Leonard- Barton, 1990). Even so “without rigor, relevance in management research cannot be claimed” (Scandura and Williams, 2000, 1263). Second, case studies are recognized most appropriate to use in the early stage of theory development when key variables and their connection to each other are being explored (Yin, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, a rigor problem in the early phase of theory development would consequently have effect when relationships between components are tested and elaborated in the later stages (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Eisenhardt (1989) argues that the theory is empirically valid when theory and data match closely, which occurs through constant comparison between the two. This is most observed in the part when she explains the development of hypotheses (Ravenswood, 2011). 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".

However from Yin's (2002, p.19) perspective case study researcher is expected to “maximize four conditions related to design quality: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. How investigators deal with these aspects of quality control” (Yin, 2002, p. 19) is extremely essential in every step of the case study research, especially under the inquiry process, to ensure the quality in their investigation. Case study researchers are required to guarantee these four condition. Construct validity refers to the extent to which a procedure leads to an accurate observation of reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), and can be guaranteed through the triangulation of multiple sources of evidence, chains of evidence, and member checking (Yazan, 2015). The relationships between variables and results refers to internal validity (Yin, 1994), and this can be guaranteed through the use of established analytic techniques such as pattern matching (Yazan, 2015). The issue here is whether the paper provides a credible argument and logical reasoning that is compelling enough to support the conclusion of the research (Yin, 1994). External validity is based on the belief that theories should be applicable for phenomena not only in the

context in which they are studied, but also in other contexts (e.g., Calder, Phillips, and Tybout, 1982; McGrath and Brinberg, 1983). External validity can be guaranteed through analytic generalization, and reliability through case study protocols and databases (Yazan, 2015). Reliability is related to the absence of random error. A following researcher should be able to gain the same insights if they proceed the study along the same steps (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

There is no right number of interviews or observations that should be conducted in a qualitative research project because it is dependable on what question the researcher seek to answer (Pratt, 2009). Researcher using the case study methods requires to understand the case in context where information and context of the case is collected over considerable time and following considerable engagement (Carroll and Johnsson, 1990). Our time and access for fieldwork are almost always limited (Stake, 1995). Nonetheless, according to Kardos and Smith (1979) a good case has four features: (1) It is taken from real life examples but true identities may be concealed. (2) The case includes many components and each component normally ends with problems and questions for discussion. (3) It consists of sufficient information for the reader to discuss issues. (4) It is trustworthy for the reader.

Some advantages and disadvantages

The mini case studies presented by Project Management Institute (2016) learn students to develop problem solving skills by critically analyzing the various scenarios. Students need to understand how theory and practice work together to solve real world project management problems (Project Management Institute, 2016). In figure 2 are traditional advantages and disadvantages of case studies listed.

Figure 2 Traditional Advantages and Disadvantages of Case Study Method

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Holistic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - depth of analysis - realistic - attention to context - extensive range of variables <p>Longitudinal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop history of case - details of process 	<p>Researcher Bias</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - observation bias - interpretation bias - cannot see everything going on - presence changes case - acceptance by subjects <p>Low External Validity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - low generality

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - causation and interactions - situation as it happens <p>High Internal Validity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more complete understanding - direct observation of situation - multiple sources of data - triangulation of data - meaningful to subjects <p>Adaptive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - questions can be changed as case develops - methods can be changed - data sources can be changed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - little control over phenomenon - comparative analysis difficult - representativeness of case - difficult to replicate <p>Costly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - research time - volume of data - analysis of data
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Source: adapted from UK essays (2013).

Analysis

I am going to focus this analysis on mini cases cause the traditional advantages and disadvantages of case study method is extensively presented in figure 2. One thing to have in mind, if it is not a mini case it is a full length case study because mini cases are shorted case studies (Huber and Solberg Søilen, 2006).

Merriam concludes a good point, “that reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality” (1998, p. 22). This is connected to what Stake (1995, p.108) enlightens us, “there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view” (Stake, 1995, p. 108). We can learn that there are not a definitive answer of which of mini cases or full length case studies that are best to use considering what these authors have presented to us. Additionally, there is no right number of interviews or observations that should be conducted in a qualitative research project because it is dependable on what question the researcher seek to answer (Pratt, 2009). The study questions should be investigated in the case study (Yin, 1994) and will “help structure the observation, interviews, and document review” (Stake, 1995, p. 20). The consequence, the length of the case study is also dependable on the research question.

On one hand, one thing that definitely talks for the choice of mini case is the almost always lack of resources, such as time and access for fieldwork (Stake, 1995). Therefore, the task of understanding the case in context which takes a great deal of time and engagement, as Carroll and Johnsson(1990) put it, will probably be more

effective carried out if the case study has its limitations. On the other hand, if you reduce the amount of pages then you may miss some of the criteria for making it a good case study. As Kardos and Smith (1979) communicates, a good case should be taken from real life examples, and include a lot of components which usually ends with problems and points for discussion. Furthermore, it should consist of sufficient information for establishing a qualified discussion which are strengthened by Huber and Solberg Søilen (2006; Kardos and Smith, 1979). If the case study can not cause a qualified discussion it is too short (Huber and Solberg Søilen, 2006). And the fourth criteria, it has to be believable for the reader (Kardos and Smith, 1979).

The trustworthiness of a case study is complex, and is naturally related to the rigor of the case study. I will point at two reasons for question the rigor in a case study. I believe there are even more to it than what I am conveying because it have been written a lot of strategies (e.g. Krefting, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986, 1993) and frameworks related to it (e.g., Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Yet, I will not dig any further, I let that to others because stating more reasons is not relevant to the purpose of this paper. First reason, case studies deal with real management situations, and they are often made in a close interaction with practitioners. Take this into consideration and you may understand the usefulness of case studies for creating managerially relevant knowledge (Amabile et al., 2001; Leonard- Barton, 1990). Like the mini case studies presented by Project Management Institute (2016) which learn students to develop problem solving skills by critically analyzing the various management scenarios. However, as Scandura and Williams remind us of, “without rigor, relevance in management research cannot be claimed” (2000, p. 1263). Second reason, case studies are recognized most appropriate to use in the early stage of theory development when key variables and their connection to each other are being explored (Yin, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, a rigor problem in the early phase of theory development would consequently have effect when relationships between components are tested and elaborated in the later stages (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

To ensure quality in the case study, researcher are expected to “maximize four conditions related to design quality: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability.” (Yin, 2002, p. 19) To deal with these conditions right researcher may have to elaborate which would influence the size of the case study. For example, to guarantee construct validity through triangulation of multiple sources of evidence researcher evidently have to find more sources of evidence. This leads to, if nothing else, a longer list of sources and in consequence a longer case study. An additional example is the guarantee of internal validity. The issue here is whether the paper provides a credible argument and logical reasoning that is compelling enough to support the conclusion of the research (Yin, 1994). Obviously, the smaller scope, the less developed explanations and arguments can the case study contain. Therefore, researcher which want to ensure quality in their case study are recommended to not focus on the length but on the content of it.

Even though you manage to include all four of Kardos and Smiths (1979) criterias, Yins (2002) four conditions, and taken research design into consideration in the mini case there are still more issues. The theory is empirically valid when theory and data match closely (Eisenhardt, 1989). If the data is larger consequently the case study must be longer to contain suitable information for the reader to understand the theory and the genesis of the case study.

Conclusion and implications

To conclude, one advantages with mini cases is how the almost always lack of resources can likely be more effectively used compared to full length case studies. The task of understanding the case in context takes a great deal of time and engagement. Mini cases is shorter than case studies and should obviously use less resources. But as you are restricted to a fewer number of pages in a mini case you will have to be careful of not missing the opportunity to make it a good case according to Kardos and Smiths (1979) four criterias and to ensure quality in your work according to Yin (1994, 2002). To include these aspects you may have to rethink your limitations. For example the question of internal validity. Obviously, the smaller scope, the less developed explanations and arguments can the case study contain to support the conclusion of the research. Therefore, researcher which want to ensure quality in their case study are recommended to not focus on the length but on the content of it. Although, mini cases can be useful for students studying management to develop problem solving skills, the mini case can not have lack of rigor cause “without rigor, relevance in management research cannot be claimed” (Scandura and Williams, 2000, p. 1263). Considering this researcher have to think of quality in their work and examine if the theory is empirically valid. The theory is empirically valid when theory and data match closely (Eisenhardt, 1989). If the data is larger consequently the case study must be longer to contain suitable information for the reader to understand the theory and the genesis of the case study. Because when it does not present an sufficient amount of background information the students can not establish a qualified discussion, it is too short (Huber and Solberg Søylen, 2006). The length of the case study is dependable on the research question, I recommend researcher to choose these wisely and adapt according to desired length.

An implication is that the philosophical underpinnings are influencing researchers writing. As Stake (1995) explains, researchers are interpreters and gather interpretings to later report. Additionally, when I read researchers studies I reaches another level of reality. This could have influenced the assignment. Another implication, among the wide range of studies produced that lightly touches this topic there is no way of come into contact with them all, especially when some are costly. My lack of time and resources restricts me from digging further.

Directions for further research

Although, this study is based on mini case and full length case studies there are one more option that Eisenhardt presents: a case which has several mini-cases within it. 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". This could potentially be an area for future studies.

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