



The Case Study Method: A Paradoxical Research Specificity and Multiplicity

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Abstract: *The case study method remains one of the most debated yet widely employed qualitative research strategies across disciplines. Its strength lies in its capacity to explore complex phenomena within real-life contexts, yet it is often critiqued for lacking generalizability and methodological rigor. This paper interrogates the paradoxical nature of the case study method, examining how it simultaneously embodies research specificity through in-depth focus on a single or bounded case and multiplicity by offering rich, transferable insights applicable across contexts. Drawing on key theoretical perspectives and methodological debates, the study explores the dual identity of the case study as both a unit of analysis and a research design. Through illustrative examples from social sciences and humanities, the paper reveals how the method's flexibility challenges rigid research classifications while enabling profound contextual understanding. The conclusion advocates for a more nuanced appreciation of the case study method's potential, calling for clearer methodological frameworks that embrace its paradoxes rather than obscure them.*

Keywords: *Research, Specificity, Multiplicity, Case Study*

I. Introduction

The case study method has long stood as a prominent and indispensable approach in qualitative research, widely employed across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines including social sciences, education, psychology, anthropology, business, and health studies. Its hallmark lies in its capacity to explore phenomena within their natural, real-world contexts with a high degree of depth and detail. Rather than seeking broad generalizations through large sample sizes and statistical metrics, the case study method focuses on understanding the particular be it an individual, an institution, an event, or a community thereby emphasizing rich contextual analysis and nuanced interpretation. This makes the method particularly valuable for answering “how” and “why” questions about contemporary social issues, human behavior, institutional dynamics, and policy impacts.

Despite its widespread use and recognition, the case study method is marked by a profound paradox: it is simultaneously specific and multiple. On one hand, the method is deeply rooted in the specificity of cases bounded, contextualized units of analysis that offer intricate portrayals of real-life phenomena. On the other hand, it often seeks to generate insights that extend beyond the singular, enabling cross-case comparisons, theoretical generalizations, or transferable understandings. This duality presents both strength and a methodological challenge. The specificity of the case study allows researchers to delve into unique experiences, uncover hidden meanings, and analyze interactions in fine detail. Yet, the multiplicity embedded within the method enables the drawing of broader conclusions, especially when multiple sources of evidence or comparative case designs are employed.

The paradox of specificity and multiplicity is not merely a technical concern; it raises significant epistemological and ontological questions about how knowledge is produced, validated, and applied. Traditional positivist research frameworks, which prioritize objectivity, replicability, and generalizability, often view the case study method with skepticism due to its subjectivity and context-dependency. However, interpretivist and constructivist paradigms embrace the case study's emphasis on meaning-making, situated understanding, and the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the researched. This tension reflects broader debates within the philosophy of science, highlighting the case study method's capacity to challenge binary oppositions: objectivity versus subjectivity, general versus particular, single versus multiple, and qualitative versus quantitative.

In many ways, the case study method defies strict categorization. It is not bound to a single epistemology or methodological tradition. Rather, it can be designed as exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive; it can draw on ethnographic immersion, narrative analysis, statistical modeling, or mixed methods. As Robert K. Yin notes, case studies can be employed for different purposes depending on the research questions, the level of control the researcher has over events, and the focus on contemporary versus historical phenomena (Yin 17). Thus, the case study method offers a pluralistic approach to inquiry, accommodating multiple data types, analytical strategies, and theoretical lenses.

This methodological flexibility allows the case study method to engage deeply with the complexities of lived experiences, institutional processes, and social interactions. For instance, in education research, a case study might investigate how a new curriculum reform is implemented in a specific school, taking into account the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, and administrators. In organizational studies, a case study might analyze how a company navigates a crisis, drawing on interviews, documents, and performance data. In health research, a case study might explore the care journey of a patient with a rare condition, combining clinical records, patient narratives, and observations. Each of these examples highlights how the case study method facilitates a holistic understanding of phenomena by incorporating diverse perspectives and evidence.

However, this richness comes at a cost. Critics argue that case studies are inherently limited in their ability to support generalization due to their focus on the particular. Moreover, the subjective nature of data collection and interpretation in case studies may lead to researcher bias, selective reporting, and challenges in reproducibility. These criticisms are often grounded in a misunderstanding of the purpose of case studies. As Bent Flyvbjerg asserts, the value of a case study lies not in its capacity to generalize statistically, but in its ability to generate insights that are analytically or theoretically transferable (Flyvbjerg 71). By illuminating patterns, processes, or causal mechanisms within a single case, researchers can contribute meaningfully to theory-building and policy design.

Indeed, the specificity of case studies does not preclude their contribution to broader knowledge. A well-documented case can serve as an exemplar, an outlier, or a critical case that tests or refines theoretical propositions. For example, a case study on grassroots political mobilization in a marginalized community might reveal dynamics that challenge dominant models of civic engagement. Similarly, a case study on a high-performing school in a low-income area might offer lessons for educational equity and reform. These insights are not meant to be universally applicable in a statistical sense, but rather to inform broader understandings, provoke new questions, and guide practical interventions.

The paradox of specificity and multiplicity becomes especially salient in the selection and design of case studies. Researchers must make deliberate choices about what type of case to study whether it is typical, deviant, critical, or revelatory and how the boundaries of the case are defined. These decisions influence not only the scope of inquiry but also the interpretive possibilities of the findings. A single-case design may provide deep insight into a phenomenon, while a multiple-case design can enable comparative analysis and thematic synthesis. Either way, the strength of the case study lies in its capacity to generate rich, detailed, and context-sensitive knowledge.

Furthermore, the case study method often blurs the boundaries between disciplines and methods. It borrows from ethnography, grounded theory, narrative analysis, and even statistical methods to construct a comprehensive account of the case under study. This interdisciplinarity enhances the method's capacity to address complex, multifaceted research questions that do not lend themselves to reductionist analysis. It also reinforces the method's multiplicity not only in terms of data and theory, but also in terms of voice and perspective. Case studies frequently incorporate the narratives and experiences of participants, giving voice to those who are often marginalized in conventional research paradigms.

In this sense, the case study method aligns with democratic and emancipatory goals of research, particularly within critical and feminist methodologies. By foregrounding the lived experiences of individuals and communities, the case study method can expose inequalities, amplify silenced voices, and challenge dominant narratives. It invites reflexivity on the part of the researcher, recognizing that knowledge is situated, partial, and constructed through interaction. This ethical dimension further complicates the method's status within positivist frameworks, but it also underscores its value in producing socially relevant and transformative knowledge.

This paper seeks to interrogate and appreciate the paradoxical nature of the case study method. It examines how the dual forces of specificity and multiplicity interact within the logic and practice of case-based research. In doing so, it explores the implications of this duality for knowledge production, particularly in terms of balancing depth and breadth, addressing complexity, and contributing to theory and practice. By drawing on foundational texts, empirical illustrations, and critical perspectives, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive account of the strengths, challenges, and potentials of the case study method.

II. Research Methods

2.1 The Case Study Method

A case study is a research strategy focused on the in-depth investigation of a particular phenomenon, entity, or system over time. Unlike other methodologies that rely heavily on large sample sizes and statistical generalizations, case studies aim to explore the nuanced and contextualized nature of a single or small number of cases. Researchers may study organizations, communities, events, or individuals through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, depending on the research question.

A central strength of the case study lies in its ability to capture the richness of real-world contexts. Case studies often employ multiple data sources such as interviews, archival records, and observations which allows for a holistic understanding of the subject under investigation.

According to Stake; case study researchers may focus on a program, event, or activity involving individuals rather than a group per se (Qtd in Nasir, 36).

Case study research may concentrate on an individual who embodies a larger group's characteristics, but more frequently, it examines a specific phenomenon, like an event, situation, program, or activity. For instance:

- A school administrator might investigate the impact of transitioning from traditional to block scheduling in their district (event).
- A classroom teacher may explore the factors contributing to student attrition at their school (situation).
- A nurse may seek to understand the employment practices in their hospital (program).
- A technology specialist may aim to gain insight into the decision-making processes that influence software adoption in their organization (activity).

These phenomena are the primary focus of most case studies, and they often overlap or intersect with one another. This means that there is a particular or specific findings that need to be done by the researcher, so the researcher is streamlined to an event, program or activity, even when there are other available data during the research, the researcher only select those that will contribute to his/her research, but case study research represents a much broader view than that. Yin explains case study method to be a research that conduct an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence (23). Therefore, Case study method does not only use single data collection for a case study but also multiple data collections.

Case study research is richly descriptive, because it is grounded in deep and varied sources of information. It employs quotes of key participants, anecdotes, prose composed from interviews, and other literary techniques to create mental images that bring to life the complexity of the many variables inherent in the phenomenon being studied.

The instances given above will surely go through the process below to gather and analyze data.

- A school administrator who is investigating the impact of transitioning from traditional to block scheduling in their district will need to use school records, focus groups, and surveys to illustrate a scheduling transition.
- A classroom teacher who want to explore the factors contributing to student attrition at their school will have to interview specific/ particular number of students and parents to understand school dropout reasons in the school.
- A nurse seeking to understand the employment practices in their hospital will have to search/ make findings into the narrative stories of employment procedures in the hospital to understand the employment practices.
- A technology specialist whose aim is to gain insight into the decision-making processes that influence software adoption in their organization will have to search into other organizations and cite examples of organizational practices influencing software adoption.

Case study research is often exploratory, seeking to identify themes and categories rather than prove relationships or test hypotheses. It involves collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources, requiring more time in the research environment than other methods. This approach also opens up opportunities for researchers to explore additional questions in-depth.

Some of the features of Case study methods includes the following:

1. A single case or a small number of cases are studied in great detail.
2. The case is studied within its real-life context, taking into account various factors and influences.
3. Data is often collected through qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis.
4. The case study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the case, including its complexities and nuances.
5. Identifying new research questions through in-depth investigation

Disadvantages of using Case study method is research are:

1. Findings may not be applicable to other cases or contexts.
2. Researcher bias and interpretation can influence the findings.
3. Can be a time-consuming and resource-intensive method.

2.2 Types of Case Study

1. Intrinsic case study: The case is studied for its own sake, to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. (Nasir, 37).
2. Instrumental case study: The case is studied to gain insight into a broader issue or phenomenon. (Nasir, 37).
3. Collective case study: Multiple cases are studied to identify patterns and themes. (Merriam, 56).

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Paradox of Specificity and Multiplicity

The paradox in the case study method arises from its capacity to offer highly specific insights while simultaneously accommodating diverse perspectives and complex realities. The case study method is a research approach that has been employed across various disciplines which presents a paradoxical dualism of specificity and multiplicity. On one hand, case studies are characterized by their in-depth examination of a single phenomenon, event, or entity, providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of a specific context. This specificity allows researchers to capture the complexity and uniqueness of the case, revealing insights that might be obscured by more generalizable methods. (Hatch, 20). Case studies also embody multiplicity, as they often involve the integration of diverse data sources, methods, and perspectives. This multiplicity enables researchers to triangulate findings, identify patterns and themes, and develop a richer comprehension of the case. Moreover, the case study method's flexibility and adaptability allow it to be applied to a wide range of research questions and topics, further underscoring its multiplicity.(25) The following are the paradoxical ways of case study method:

a. Contextual Specificity vs Transferability

Case studies provide detailed, context-dependent knowledge. However, the insights gained from a specific case often have broader implications, contributing to theory development or practical applications. While case studies are not designed for statistical generalization, they can offer analytical generalizations by identifying patterns or theories that may apply to other contexts.

b. Focus vs Holism

Case studies require a focused examination of a particular phenomenon but are not limited to a single perspective. Researchers often integrate multiple viewpoints, capturing the

dynamics between individuals, organizations, and environments. This multiplicity allows for a comprehensive understanding of the case but introduces challenges in maintaining coherence and focus.

c. Qualitative-Quantitative Integration

Although case studies are typically associated with qualitative research, they are not confined to qualitative methods. The method's flexibility enables the integration of quantitative data, producing a richer understanding of the phenomenon. However, balancing qualitative depth with quantitative breadth can be challenging.

This paradoxical interplay between specificity and multiplicity is both a strength and a challenge for case study research. It enables researchers to delve deeply into complex phenomena while also acknowledging the diversity of contexts and perspectives. However, it also requires researchers to navigate the tensions between depth and breadth, particularity and generalizability, and rigor and flexibility.

3.2 Methodological Implications of the Paradox

The coexistence of specificity and multiplicity in case study research has several methodological implications:

1. **Theory Development and Testing:** Case studies are often used for theory building, as they uncover new insights and generate hypotheses. However, they can also serve as a means for testing theories in real-world settings, especially through comparative or multiple-case studies.
2. **Challenges of Data Management:** Multiplicity in case studies requires careful management of diverse data sources and perspectives, making data collection and analysis complex and time-consuming.
3. **Epistemological Flexibility:** Researchers must embrace an epistemological stance that allows for both subjectivity and objectivity. Reflexivity becomes essential, as the researcher plays an active role in interpreting the case.

IV. Conclusion

The case study method embodies a paradoxical duality of specificity and multiplicity, making it a distinctive and flexible research approach. This duality allows for the exploration of complex, context-specific phenomena while generating broader insights that contribute to theory and practice. However, the method also presents challenges in balancing depth with breadth and managing multiple perspectives. Understanding this paradox is essential for researchers seeking to leverage the strengths of case studies and navigate their complexities effectively. Ultimately, the case study method serves as a powerful tool for producing nuanced knowledge that reflects the complexities of real-world phenomena.

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