



Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education

*Revised and Expanded from Case Study Research
in Education* ❁ Sharan B. Merriam

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Study Research in Education*

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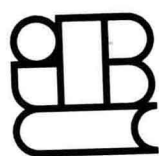
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Preface

Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education is the second edition of *Case Study Research in Education*. As evidenced by the titles, the primary focus of this second edition is on qualitative research in general, with applications to case study as a secondary emphasis. This change is appropriate because the first edition was widely used as a basic introductory text by qualitative researchers in education. Indeed, much of the content of the first edition—data collection techniques, data analysis and the reporting of findings, and concerns about validity, reliability, and ethics—was presented as germane to all forms of qualitative research. This material has been revised, updated, and retained in the second edition. Also corresponding with the shift in focus are expanded discussions on the nature of qualitative research, on the different types of qualitative research (including case study) commonly found in education, and on how to design a qualitative study, including problem formation and sample selection.

The first edition of this book also proved useful to qualitative researchers interested in conducting case studies. In fact, at the time of its publication in 1988, the book was one of the very few detailed resources available on qualitative case study research. Several publications on case study have appeared within the last ten years, but resource material is still less available for case study than for other types of research. Moreover, there is still some confusion as to what a case study is and how it can be differentiated from other types of qualitative research. These considerations contributed to the decision to make case study a secondary focus in this edition.

The combination of a primary emphasis on qualitative research with applications to case study makes this book unique among the burgeoning literature of qualitative research. The book can be

used by those who are interested only in qualitative research in general, or it can be consulted for assistance in conducting a case study in particular. To that end, Chapters Two and Seven cover case study research; sections at the ends of other chapters apply the chapter content to case studies. In addition, general points and issues throughout the book are often illustrated, when appropriate, with reference to specific case studies.

Another defining characteristic of this book is its how-to, practical focus, wherein the mechanics of conducting a qualitative study are presented in a simple, straightforward manner. Designing a qualitative study, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the research report are topics logically presented and liberally illustrated to assist the researcher desiring some guidance in the process. The revisions related to this aspect of the book have greatly benefited from ten years of additional resources, my own research, and my supervision of dozens of qualitative dissertations. The intended audiences for this book, then, are teachers, researchers, and graduate students in education who are interested in understanding qualitative research and perhaps in conducting a qualitative case study.

Overview of the Contents

The organization of this text reflects the process of conducting a qualitative research investigation. Part One contains three chapters. The first is on the nature of qualitative research, the second covers the case study as one common type of qualitative research, and the third explains the procedure for setting up a qualitative study, including selecting a sample. Part Two consists of four chapters that detail data collection techniques. The four chapters in Part Three deal with analyzing the data collected, handling concerns about reliability, validity, and ethics, and writing the final report.

Chapter One introduces qualitative research as it contrasts with positivist (or quantitative) and critical research traditions. The essential characteristics of qualitative research are presented, as are brief overviews of several types of qualitative research commonly found in education. In particular, the basic or generic qualitative study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and qualitative case study are reviewed. Chapter One also includes a

discussion of the investigator characteristics and skills needed to conduct a qualitative study.

Case study is a term used by many people in many different ways to mean many different things. The purpose of Chapter Two is to define and further differentiate case study from other qualitative approaches to a research problem. A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit. Most case studies in education draw from other disciplines for both theory and method. Chapter Two explains how concepts, theories, and techniques from anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology in particular have influenced case studies in education. Irrespective of disciplinary orientation, case studies can also be described in terms of their overall intent, whether it be to describe, to interpret, or to evaluate some phenomenon or to build theory. This chapter also reviews the strengths and limitations of qualitative case studies.

Knowledge of previous research and theory can help a researcher focus on the problem of interest and select the unit of analysis most relevant to the problem. Chapter Three explains what a theoretical framework is and shows how reviewing relevant literature can contribute not only to identifying the study's theoretical framework but also to shaping the problem statement. The problem statement lays out the logic and purpose of the study and is critical to making informed decisions regarding sample selection (also covered in this chapter), data collection, and data analysis. A separate section at the end of Chapter Three discusses sample selection in case study research.

Data collection techniques are covered in the four chapters in Part Two. Chapters Four, Five, and Six examine the three primary means of collecting data in qualitative research. Interviews, discussed in Chapter Four, can range in structure from a list of predetermined questions to a totally free-ranging interview in which nothing is set ahead of time. The success of an interview depends on the nature of the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent and on the interviewer's skill in asking good questions. How to record and evaluate interview data is also covered in Chapter Four. Observations differ from interviews in that the researcher obtains a first-hand account of the phenomenon of interest rather than relying on someone else's interpretation. Chapter Five discusses what to

observe, the interdependent relationship between observer and observed, and how to record observations in the form of field notes. Chapter Six presents the third primary source of case study data: documents. The term *document* is broadly defined to cover an assortment of written records, physical traces, and artifacts. Although some documents might be developed at the investigator's request, most are produced independently of the research study and thus offer a valuable resource for confirming insights gained through interviews and observations. Chapter Six covers various types of documents, their use in qualitative research, and their strengths and limitations as sources of data. The application of all three data collection strategies to case studies is the focus of Chapter Seven. Here, three case studies demonstrate the interactive nature of data collection using all three techniques.

Many texts on qualitative research devote more space to theoretical discussions of methodology and data collection than to the management and analysis of data once they have been collected. This book redresses that imbalance with two full chapters on data analysis. First reviewed in Chapter Eight are six strategies for analyzing qualitative data. Next, the importance of analyzing data *while* they are being collected is underscored; some suggestions for analysis early in the study during data collection are included. Management of the voluminous data typical of a qualitative study is another topic addressed in this chapter. Finally, a major section addresses the increasing role of computers in both management and analysis of qualitative data. Chapter Nine, which also focuses on data analysis, explains the several levels of analysis possible—ranging from developing a descriptive account of the findings to developing categories, themes, or other concepts, to interpreting the meaning of the data in even more abstract terms in the form of models or theories. The last section of Chapter Nine speaks to within-case and cross-case analysis common to case studies.

All researchers are concerned with producing valid and reliable findings. Chapter Ten explores the issues of validity and reliability in qualitative case study research. In particular, internal validity, reliability, and external validity are discussed, and strategies are offered for dealing with each of these issues. Also of concern to researchers is how to conduct an investigation in an ethical manner. Chapter Ten closes with a section on ethics, paying particular attention to ethical dilemmas likely to arise in qualitative research.

Many an educator has been able to conceptualize a study, collect relevant data, and even analyze the data, but then has failed to carry through in the important last step—writing up the results. Without this step, the research has little chance of advancing the knowledge base of education or having an impact on practice. Chapter Eleven is designed to help qualitative researchers complete the research process by writing a report of their investigation. The first half of the chapter offers suggestions for organizing the writing process—determining the audience for the report, settling on the main message, and outlining the overall report. The rest of Chapter Eleven focuses on the *content* of the report—its components and where to place them, how to achieve a good balance between description and analysis, and how to disseminate the study's findings. At the end of the chapter is a discussion of special considerations in writing a case study report.

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SHARAN B. MERRIAM

The Author

Sharan B. Merriam is professor of adult and continuing education at the University of Georgia in Athens, where her responsibilities include teaching graduate courses in adult education and qualitative research methods and supervising graduate student research. She received her B.A. degree (1965) in English literature from Drew University, her M.Ed. degree (1971) in English education from Ohio University, and her Ed.D. degree (1978) in adult education from Rutgers University. Before coming to the University of Georgia, she served on the faculties of Northern Illinois University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Merriam's main research and writing activities have focused on adult education, adult development and learning, and qualitative research methods. She has served on steering committees for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference, the Qualitative Research in Education Conference held annually at the University of Georgia, and the Commission of Professors of Adult Education; she is an active member of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education and the Postsecondary Division of the American Educational Research Association. For five years she was coeditor of *Adult Education Quarterly*, the major research and theory journal in the field of adult education. She is also coeditor of the 1989 *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*.

Merriam's other books include *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education* (with J. Elias, 1994), *Coping with Male Mid-life: A Systematic Analysis Using Literature as a Data Source* (1980), *Adult Education: Foundations of Practice* (with G. Darkenwald, 1982)—winner of the 1985 Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education—*Themes of Adulthood Through Literature* (1983), *A Guide to Research for Educators and Trainers of Adults* (with E. L. Simpson, 1995, second edition)—first published in 1984 and winner of the 1984 Phillip E.

Frandsen Memorial Award for Literature in Continuing Education—*Selected Writings on Philosophy and Adult Education* (editor, 1995, second edition), *Lifelines: Patterns of Work, Love, and Learning in Adulthood* (with M. C. Clark, 1991), *Learning in Adulthood* (with R. Caffarella, 1991), and most recently, *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction* (with R. Brockett, 1997).

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Part One

The Design of Qualitative Research

Few areas of practice offer as many opportunities for research as does the field of education. To begin with, education is a familiar arena. Potential researchers have had personal experience with formal schooling, usually through college, and everyone has learned in informal ways throughout their lives. Having an interest in knowing more about the field and in improving the practice of education leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design. In fact I believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education.

Choosing a study design requires understanding the philosophical foundations underlying the type of research, taking stock of whether there is a good match between the type of research and your personality, attributes, and skills, and becoming informed as to the design choices available to you within the paradigm. Part One of this book provides the conceptual foundation for doing this type of research and lays out some of the choices and decisions you will need to make in conducting a qualitative study.

The qualitative, interpretive, or naturalistic research paradigm defines the methods and techniques most suitable for collecting and analyzing data. Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Humans

are best suited for this task, especially because interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research.

While all of qualitative research holds a number of assumptions and characteristics in common, there are variations in the disciplinary base that a qualitative study might draw from, in how a qualitative study might be designed, and in what the intent of the study might be. Thus a qualitative ethnographic study that focuses on culture could be differentiated from a life history study or from a study that is designed to build a substantive theory. Some major types of qualitative studies commonly found in educational research are differentiated in the first chapter.

Because of its prevalence in educational research and some general confusion surrounding its nature and use, one design in particular—the qualitative case study—has been selected for an extended discussion in Chapter Two. Definitions, types, and uses of case studies are discussed, as are the design's strengths and limitations.

Other considerations have to do with identifying the theoretical framework that forms the scaffolding or underlying structure of your study. Reviewing previous thinking and research found in the literature can help illuminate your framework as well as shape the actual problem statement and purpose of the study. Further, how you select your sample is directly linked to the questions you ask and to how you have constructed the problem of your study.

The three chapters that make up Part One of this book are thus designed to orient you to the nature of qualitative research and to qualitative case studies in particular, as well as how to frame your question or interest, state your research problem, and select a sample. Part One paves the way for subsequent chapters that focus on data collection and data analysis.