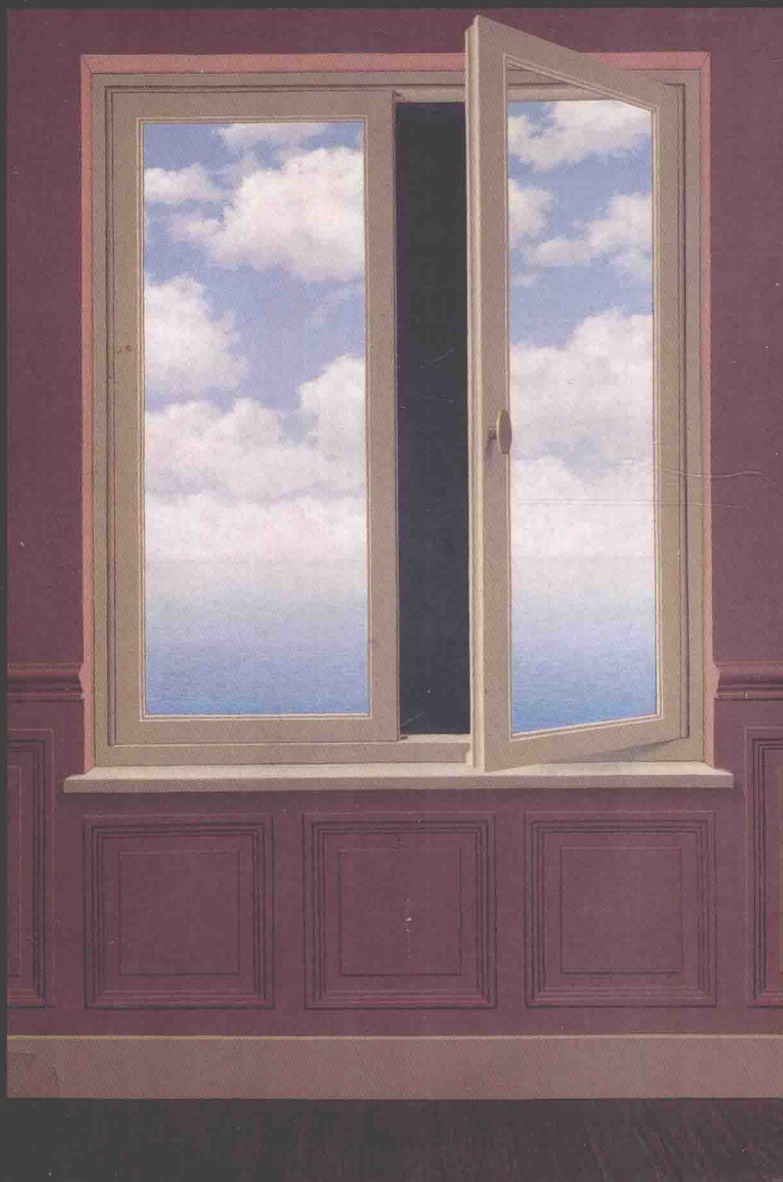


Robert E. Stake



The Art Of  
Case Study  
Research

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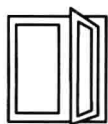
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# Introduction

## An Intensive Study of Case Study Research Methods

A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case. A single leaf, even a single toothpick, has unique complexities—but rarely will we care enough to submit it to case study. We study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its contexts. Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.

In this book, I develop a view of case studies that draws from naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic research methods.<sup>1</sup> I do not pay as much attention to quantitative case studies that emphasize a battery of measurements

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1. These philosophical and methodological traditions can be studied in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994).

of the case, a collection of descriptive variables, common in medicine and special education. Nor do I orient much to the creation of case studies for instructional purposes, those commonly used in colleges of business and law. Those are special topics deserving books of their own.<sup>2</sup> Here I briefly present a disciplined, qualitative mode of inquiry into the single case. The qualitative researcher emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, the wholeness of the individual.<sup>3</sup>

I present the ideas here as I do in my classes, with some sense of advocacy. I believe we have found effective ways of studying educational programs, particularly adaptable to program evaluation,<sup>4</sup> my area of specialization, but of general use to those who study education and social services. I prefer certain ways of proceeding, such as organizing the study around issues. Many with experience in case study research do things differently. I will try to emphasize the arbitrariness of the methods from chapter to chapter, but I encourage you readers to be alert for tactics that do not fit your style of operation or circumstances. Before you is a palette of methods. There are many, many ways to do case studies. I like those described here.

While starting this book, I am presenting a two-week workshop on case study research methods at the University of Umeå in northern Sweden. It is June and the nights are short. Given the rigors of winter, the Nordics have a reverence for summer. I know some workshop participants would like me to send them to fieldwork in the mountains and sailing the coast, at least their spirits

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2. An excellent guide for a more quantitative approach (see Chapter 3, this volume) is Yin (1994). To get acquainted with case study as an instructional device, see Blomeyer and Martin (1991).

3. Getting comfortable about the distinction between qualitative research methods is important. It will be discussed in Chapter 3. The reader may want to go farther into Denzin and Lincoln (1994) and other chapters of their *Handbook*. I also suggest readings for further study of naturalistic fieldwork, some illustrating alternative uses of case study.

4. An illustration of a case study used in a meta-evaluation study is my book *Quieting Reform* (Stake, 1986).

plead not to keep them fixed into books. But we have work to do, methods to rethink, some counterintuitive ideas to develop—our own rigors. In a short two weeks, we can neither try out our ideas in the field nor explore the many reports of fieldwork that exist.

The workshop participants are mature graduate students in education, some of them faculty members, most already experienced in research. I will tell you a bit about them as I get acquainted myself. Their observations and puzzlements can help make the major points of this book: the commitment to interpretation, an organization around issues, the use of stories, the risks of violation of privacy, the need for validation, the aim toward naturalistic generalization.

While writing this book, I was thinking mostly of case study that would require a few weeks of fieldwork and an additional few months for planning, management, analysis, and writing. Its report might run from 10 to 60 pages. But I thought also of studies running well over a year as well as those capable of being completed in a week or so. This latter span is more likely if each case is to get but a few pages in a larger report. I saw conceptualization of case study as pretty much the same, regardless of time at work and length of report.

One of the first assignments, as it was for my Umeå students, is for you to read a short case study report. In Chapter 10 is a report I wrote as part of an evaluation of Chicago School Reform at the end of its first year. It appeared among other case studies and data analyses in a final report presented to the Chicago Finance Authority by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (Nowakowski, Stewart, & Quinn, 1992). I wrote this report of Harper School (a pseudonym) after spending a little over 10 days in the school, working too hurriedly under a final report deadline of 6 weeks. This study should be read carefully because it will be referred to repeatedly in the chapters of this book. Don't pay attention to the marginal commentary this first time through. Just read it as you would if you worked for the Chicago public schools.

**Note to instructors.** I have written this book with a student reader in mind but not necessarily someone taking a course. I realize, of course, that this can be a textbook for a short course, the textbook for a field activity course, or part of the broad readings for a general research methods course. I would encourage the instructor of such a course to consider assigning the Workshop activities which I have placed at the end of each chapter. When I use this text in my future classes, I expect to get the students into extended observations of various cases and to write at least a little almost every week, usually to keep a journal. I have regularly been pleased with the intellectual exploration graduate students exhibit in journals, much more than in the papers they hand in.

**Suggestions for reading assignments.** For the coursework, it is important for everyone to read the Harper School case report in Chapter 10 before they read Chapter 1; in other words, the first assignment should be the Introduction and Chapter 10 and possibly some more. I urge you to supplement these readings with reports of fieldwork of your own—giving the students opportunity to understand you better. If you feel you need to get into the literature a bit more before the course starts, I suggest you read Erickson (1986), Peshkin (1978, especially Appendix 1), and Simons (1980). I hope you have a good course. When it's over, I encourage you to let me know about it, perhaps to suggest how the book can be improved. My address is in the AERA Directory.

**Acknowledgments.** My own understandings of case study research were born, I think, with participation in the first Cambridge conference (see Hamilton, Jenkins, King, MacDonald, & Parlett, 1977), the brainchild of Barry MacDonald, an experience and a companionship for which I remain ever in gratitude. Working on *Case Studies in Science Education* (Stake & Easley, 1979), with Jack Easley, Lou Smith, Rob Walker, Terry Denny, Beth Dawson, Gordon Hoke, actually a list of colleagues and friends running on and on, we had opportunity to realize how right and how wrong



we were. Fifteen years more of collaboration with many others, especially Linda Mabry, Jim Rath, David Jenness, Cynthia Cole, Doug McLeod, again, with many more, opened new venues, new problems. The many graduate students in CIRCE have been instructors too. To all and for all, I acknowledge my debts and thanks. For this book, Inger Andersson and her Umeå students were a creative force. I have appreciated the supportive and corrective views of reviewers Michael Huberman, Corrine Glesne, and Linda Mabry, and the splendid editorial counsel of C. Deborah Laughton. And most of all, it has been Bernadine who has observed, cajoled, and enriched my re-education, glacial, personal, political, far more than she, or even I, can tally. Thanks.

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# 1



## The Unique Case

*Intrinsic and instrumental study • Selection of cases • Producing generalizations • Emphasis on interpretation*

For the most part, the cases of interest in education and social service are people and programs. Each one is similar to other persons and programs in many ways and unique in many ways. We are interested in them for both their uniqueness and commonality. We seek to understand them. We would like to hear their stories.<sup>1</sup> We may have reservations about some things the people (I will call them *actors*) tell us, just as they will question some of the things we will tell about them. But we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn.

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1. Much of our gathering of data from other people will take the form of stories they tell and much of what we can convey to our readers will preserve that form. One of the choices each of us will make in presenting the case is how much we will use a story form. John Van Maanen's (1988) book, *Tales of the Field*, although recent, is already being treated as a classic.

The case could be a child. It could be a classroom of children or a particular mobilization of professionals to study a childhood condition. The case is one among others. In any given study, we will concentrate on the one. The time we spend concentrating on the one may be a day or a year, but while we so concentrate we are engaged in case study.

Custom has it that not everything is a case.<sup>2</sup> A child may be a case. A teacher may be a case. But her teaching lacks the specificity, the boundedness, to be called a case. An innovative program may be a case. All the schools in Sweden can be a case. But a relationship among schools, the reasons for innovative teaching, or the policies of school reform are less commonly considered a case. These topics are generalities rather than specifics. The case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing.

Louis Smith, one of the first educational ethnographers, helped define the case as “a bounded system,” drawing attention to it as an object rather than a process.<sup>3</sup> Let us use the Greek symbol  $\Theta$  (theta) to represent the case, thinking all the while that  $\Theta$  has a boundary and working parts. In our work in social sciences and human services,  $\Theta$  is likely to be purposive, even having a “self.” The case is an integrated system. The parts do not have to be working well, the purposes may be irrational, but it is a system. Thus people and programs clearly are prospective cases. Events and processes fit the definition less well, and studies of them are less likely to capitalize on the methods discussed in this book.

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2. We cannot make precise definitions of cases or case studies because practices already exist for case study in many disciplines. I could be more precise and title this book *Naturalistic Case Study* or *Case Fieldwork in Education*, but conflicting precedents exist for any label. It is important for us to recognize that others will not use the words or the methods as we do.

3. More about definition of the case can be found in my chapter entitled “Seeking Sweet Water” (Stake, 1988; see also Stake, 1994). There I emphasized learning all of the case out to its boundaries, tracking its issues, pursuing its patterns of complexity.



## Intrinsic and Instrumental Study

It is not unusual for the choice of case to be no “choice” at all. Sometimes, we are given  $\Theta$ , even obligated to take it as the object to study. It happens when a teacher decides to study a student having difficulty, when we get curious about a particular agency, or when we take the responsibility of evaluating a program. The case is given. We are interested in it, not because by studying it we learn about other cases or about some general problem, but because we need to learn about that particular case. We have an intrinsic interest in the case, and we may call our work *intrinsic case study*.

In a different situation, we will have a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case. For example, Swedish precollege teachers have a year to begin using a new student marking system passed by the Parliament. How will that work? The system is to have a criterion-reference orientation<sup>4</sup>; will that orientation change the way teachers teach? We may choose a teacher to study, looking broadly at how she teaches but paying particular attention to how she marks student work and whether or not it affects her teaching. This use of case study is to understand something else. Case study here is instrumental to accomplishing something other than understanding this particular teacher, and we may call our inquiry *instrumental case study*.

In the same situation, we may feel that we should choose several teachers to study rather than just one. Or we might choose to use schools as our cases and choose several schools. Each case study is instrumental to learning about the effects of the marking regulations but there will be important coordination between the indi-

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4. A criterion reference orientation focuses attention on the quality of student performance on tasks chosen because they are important in and of themselves, such as following instructions for assembling an appliance or locating a place on a map. It contrasts with a norm-reference orientation which treats tasks more as bases for ranking students as to a particular ability, such as spelling or map-reading ability.