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Case Study Research

It has become increasingly popular in the research of ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR to study phenomena in large numbers (*see* RESEARCH METHODS). The advantage of such a large sample size is greater reliability, but the cost can be a loss of richness, due to a certain detachment or distance from the phenomenon. For example, the work of a large number of managers can be studied by the diary method, in which they fill out forms of predetermined categories for each of their activities (e.g., Stewart, 1967) (*see* MANAGERIAL BEHAVIOR). But when the pace of their work gets hectic, or their work itself is highly nuanced, managers may have difficulty filling out such forms. The difficulties may become even more severe when a mailed questionnaire is

used, which seeks to reduce all of the manager's work to some broad overall categories (*see* SURVEYS).

Case study research forfeits large sample size for greater sample depth. The researcher selects one or a few sites ("cases") and probes into each thoroughly. Data collection may be somewhat systematic – certain aspects of the phenomenon can be documented carefully, such as the contacts a manager has with his or her people – but never so structured that the researcher cannot probe aspects of the phenomenon that did not occur to him or her before the work started. In other words, case study research always maintains a certain flexibility. Another way of putting this is that the research tends to be significantly, if not primarily, inductive, developing its interpretations from its findings and, in some of the best of this work, often surprising the researcher. Often, though by no means necessarily, case study research tends to be largely qualitative as well, and focused on the processes people in organizations engage in more than the contents of their results.

The researcher may be physically present to watch behavior as it unfolds, which is known as "participant observation" (*see* RESEARCH DESIGN; ETHNOGRAPHY) of managerial work (e.g., Mintzberg, 1973, 1993). Alternatively, the researcher may study the case through documents, which is necessary when the behavior in question is either historical or simply inaccessible to an observer, such as tracking the strategies of organizations across decades (e.g., Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985). Such studies may be supported by interviews or, of course, be based on interviews in the first place.

What distinguishes case study research is the probing in depth into particular situations. Nuances can be appreciated; the experiences of the actors can be recounted, in their own terms; unanticipated lines of inquiry can be pursued; complex connections can be made; so that situations can be described holistically. But all of this works only so long as the researcher is sensitive to what he or she hears, reads, sees, or otherwise uncovers.

In effect, this is fundamentally idiosyncratic research, for better and for worse. It all depends on the personal capabilities of the researcher (as, of course, does any research, only more transparently so here, since there can be no hiding behind "sophisticated" techniques). The result, therefore, cannot be predictable – it is not as if once the data goes into the computer, it will get processed in a predetermined way.

That is why case study research tends to produce the best and worst of results. A number of our most famous studies – the classics, that truly endure – are of this form, for example, Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), participant observation of a street gang during the 1930s, with some wonderful insights on LEADERSHIP, or Chandler's *Strategy and Structure* (1962), which described the evolution of the major American corporation by studying the histories of four firms in particular; and Crozier's *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (1964, in English), an intense probe into two agencies of the French government (*see* BUREAUCRACY). Needless to say, the failures of this method are not well known. But, tricky though it may be, this is an exciting way to do research, and arguably the source of many, if not most, of our really significant conceptual advances.

A final word is necessary on what case study research is not. If true research marries empirical data with conceptual insight, then, on one side, the so-called "case study method," in which experiences from practice are written up for the pedagogical purposes of the classroom, is not research. Data may be collected, sometimes even as much as in case study research, but there is no intent to draw the conceptual lessons of the experience. On the other side, conceptual interpretations of experience per se cannot be labeled case study research either. Such works can be greatly insightful, as in Barnard's classic *The Functions of the Executive* (1938) about his own experiences as President of the New Jersey Bell Telephone Company. But these are not usually based on probes into cases per se so much as the drawing on general experience. Of course, when the author relates the conceptual interpretation to his or her own experiences directly and somewhat systematically, then the label case study research may well apply.

But in research, the object of the exercise is understanding, not methodological elegance and so it hardly matters what the approach is called, so long as it is applied carefully and honestly, nor where the ideas come from, so long as they are insightful.

See also **Generalization; Levels of analysis; Validity**

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Centralization

see ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN; RESTRUCTURING

CEOs

The chief executive officer, or CEO, is the executive who has overall responsibility for the conduct and performance of an entire organization, not just a subunit. The CEO designation has gained widespread use since about 1970, as a result of the need to draw distinctions among various senior executive positions in today's elaborate corporate structures. For example, sometimes a chief operating officer (COO) who is responsible for internal operational affairs is among the executives who reports to a CEO, who in turn is responsible for integrating internal and external, longer-term issues such as acquisitions, government relations, and investor relations.