Comparing Case Study and Ethnography as Qualitative Research Approaches

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Abstract: This article reviews several differences between case study and ethnography in terms of definitions, characteristics, strengths and limitations. It provides current information by comparing these approaches from various social researchers' perspectives. Although each method has strong points, they both have differences in conducting observation and interview as data collection techniques; choosing the length of time of data gathering and reporting details of a particular reality.

Key words: qualitative research approach, case study, ethnography.

Case study and ethnography are two of the most popular qualitative research approaches. As more scholars have interests in researching social phenomena, the application of case study and ethnography are growing rapidly. For instance, most of interpersonal communication and marketing communication research tend to apply case studies, while several intercultural communication research prefer to employ ethnography. It is important to understand the background of each method before choosing which technique that will appropriate to our research. This article firstly describes several concerns about case study, followed by ethnography and some conclusions.

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CASE STUDYDEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

There are several definitions of case study as a research approach. First, case study is defined as a method to deeply observe the characteristics of individual unit such as a person, a group or a community, in order to analyse various phenomena in relation to that unit of study (Cohen & Manion, 1989 as cited in Bassey, 1999). Another description is written by MacDonald & Walker (1975) that case study is '*the study of the instance in action'*.

In response to this argument, Kemmis (1980 as cited in Bassey, 1999) explains that '*case studies consist in the imagination of the case and the invention of the study…*which are*… cognitive and cultural processes.'* In addition, Stenhouse (as cited in Bassey, 1999) states that the task of case study is to produce reports of experience and to offer evidence, not to deal with generalisation.

In his review, Robert Yin's identifies a case study as an '*empirical enquiry to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'.* (2003:13). Yin also describes that case studies can be qualitative or quantitative. Supporting this idea, Stake (2005) adds that qualitative case study often focuses on experiential knowledge of a certain case and closely related to the social, political influences. Moreover, the credibility of a case study might be obtained through continuously making descriptions and interpretations during the period of the study.

As a qualitative research approach, a case might be an individual or a group/collective; it might also be simple or complex. Some examples of individual case might be a child, an adult, a student, a teacher, a person's experience or phase in life. On the other hand, a collective or complex case might be in the form of working environment, campaign program, organization culture, neighbourhood, or region.

According to Stake (2005) there are three different types of case study. The first type, *intrinsic case study,* is undertaken because of intrinsic interests, for example, particular curriculum, classroom, or book. Furthermore, the researcher aims to get deep understanding of a certain case. The second category is *instrumental case study* which provides a base to understand other issues. Usually this case is a secondary interest of

the researcher and used to support other interest. The last category, *multiple case study* or *collective case study*, is like the extension of instrumental study. This study consists of several cases in order to explore a certain phenomenon. In addition, the researcher tries to investigate whether there are similarities or differences among the cases' characteristics to get better understanding of particular interests.

In this approach, Patton (2002) classifies some characteristics of a well-constructed case study, which are *holistic* and *context sensitive*, *comprehensive* and *systematic*. He also explains that a case might be *layered*. It is possible to combine studies of individuals into studies of program or organizations, but we have to collect data on the lowest level unit of analysis which is possible. For instance, if we want to investigate how culture of a school influences a teachers' motivation, we can start collecting data about the teacher's motivation through interview. This process refers to an individual level. Then we continue by observing the school's culture such as regulations, learning environment, and formal-informal communication patterns between students-teachers, among teachers and among students. After gathering all data, we can analyse the possible relationships between the school's culture and teachers' motivation.

It is clear that sometimes social issues around us seem to be complex, situational and problematic. The question is how to choose a case or which case that can be explored? To answer this question, researchers usually look at various issues in the realities and select particular cases that may attract their interest and offer opportunity to learn (Stake 2005). Most qualitative researchers believe that people's interpretation of realities have a tendency to be social, cultural, situational and contextual. This is the reason why the researchers emphasize the interactivity of functions and contexts through comparing and contrasting. In data collection stage, the researchers in a qualitative case study tend to spend more time on research locations, have personal interest and contact with the case or participants, as well as make reflection and certain meanings about the natural phenomenon. Furthermore, in reporting the case, researchers try to write details of the case in order to provide comparison for the readers.

One important concept of the case study is *triangulation*. Stake (2005) defines it as '*a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation.*'

This principle is necessary to avoid misinterpretation. In addition, triangulation can be achieved through redundancy of data gathering and procedural challenges to explanations.

Finally, there are six stages in conducting qualitative case study. First, the researchers should make conceptualizations of the topic. Second, they select and emphasize a particular phenomenon, and decide the research questions. After this stage, the researchers collect all the raw data from interviews, observations or documents such as program files or reports, articles, and proposals. The next steps are organising, classifying and editing the raw data into an accessible file; also searching patterns from data related to the topic. Then the researcher formulates triangulation of observations and develops interpretation. In the fifth stage, they select an alternative interpretation followed by writing a report in holistic and systematic forms.

Strengths

There are some advantages in using a case study as a qualitative research approach. First, a case study may offer larger details about a particular phenomenon. For instance, it may include narrative and a specific description about a particular activity, personal relationship or a group interpretation.

Second, as mentioned by Stake and Trumbull (1982 as cited in Stake, 2005) the readers of a case study may obtain *naturalistic generalizations* from personal or *vicarious experience*. In other words, people can share and understand others' social experience.

The third strength is that a case study provides a holistic interpretation and always refers to a social context. Additionally, it does not involve any treatments, experiments or manipulated social settings. Consequently, the data will be considered as natural phenomena in people's real lives. Finally, I think a case study will probably not spend much budget as other methods such as experiments and surveys do, but it depends on the type and the period of the research.

Weakness

According to Yin (2003) there are some limitations of a case study approach. First, people may think that case study researchers do not follow systematic procedures and may have biased views that probably influence the findings and the conclusions. From my point of view, case study researchers should stay in a neutral position in reporting the facts or at least triangulating the data to ensure that the claims are supported.

Another limitation of case studies is that the researchers may not be able to cover all issues and offer a *scientific generalization* because they tend to have limited evidence, not as many as quantitative research. In responding to this issue, the researchers may use multi-case studies approach so the findings will clarify whether there is similarity or a pattern among cases.

The third limitation is case studies often rely on *subjective data*, such as the participants' statements or the researchers' observations, because most case studies focus on human experiences. Consequently, data will vary based on the participant's description, opinion, and feeling. As suggested by Stake (2005), to avoid subjectivity and to increase the objectivity of data, a researcher should use *replicative, falsification and triangulating methods.*

When we discuss about limitation, I think there are some ethical issues related to a case study. Like other qualitative researchers, most case study researchers collect data from people as participants or *human subjects*. Therefore, it is important to be aware of participant's rights, such as keep the participant's identities and data confidentially and be ready if the participant refuses to answer certain questions. Furthermore, researcher should be careful in reporting participant's experience, opinion, or personal view that might offend the participant.

ETHNOGRAPHY: DEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

In his article, *Ethnography: problems and prospects,* Hammersley (2006) states that ethnography is a *study at first hand* about what people do and say in a particular context. Most researchers collect data through participant's observation and/or open-ended interviews, also from various documents to understand and explain the participant's perspectives,

activities, and behaviours. Another reference defines ethnography as a method to explore the nature of a certain social phenomenon and it tends to use unstructured data (Flick, 2002). Similar definition expressed by Honer (1993 as cited in Flick et.al., 2004) that ethnographies usually focus on a specific culture, characteristics and all information embedded in it.

The term ethnography was firstly introduced by anthropologists. As Zaharlick (1992) states, an ethnography originally came from anthropology with aims to analyse human's ways of life (or culture) *holistically*, *relativistically* and *comparatively*. Furthermore, the anthropologists have developed two different methods to investigate social phenomena, which are *ethnographic research* and *ethnological research* (Agar, 1980; Berreman, 1968 as cited in Zaharlick, 1992).

Previous scholars have discussed the differences between these two methods (Edgerton & Langness, 1974; Peoples and Bailey, 1988). On one hand, *ethnographic research* contains the collection and analysis of descriptive socio cultural data or the way of life from a single social group, society or some related societies. On the other hand, *ethnological research* tends to test a hypothesis concerning relationship between and among the components of socio-cultural systems by comparing relevant ethnographic data from a number of different societies.

The ethnographic researchers obtain information about certain socio-cultural phenomena through the members of the society or documents about those phenomena. Observation and interview are two important data collection methods, which are known as *ethnographic fieldwork.* Another data collection technique is using earlier written records, which is known as *ethno-historic research.*

There are several characteristics of ethnography. First, the researcher creates *social relationship with the participants* (Zaharlick, 1992). The other characteristics are *firsthand observation* and *participant observation.* Some people think that researchers should stay inside a community of people being studied for a period of time. Moreover, long-term involvement and observation are considered necessary to understand the complexity of people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Supporting this idea, Zaharlick argues that

> "*A year is ordinary considered a minimum, because a year usually allows people to go through their regular routine, patterns of work and play and special activities…*" (1992:119).

On the contrary, Hammersley comments that recently ethnographers in other social sciences, including educational research, do not have to stay with the participants during certain length of time. He claims,

> "*Most ethnographers do not actually live with the people they study…instead, many social ethnographers focus on what happens in a particular work locale or social institution when it is in operation, so that in this sense their participant observation is part-time*" (2006:4).

In another article, *Ethnography in action*, Larsson (2006) does not specifically state the length of time, but he emphasizes that the ethnographer's presence in the research field is necessary in order to build valid claims. Furthermore, the participant observation in the field is recommended as a data collection technique. However, Hammersley (2006) mentions that the use of technologies such as portable audio and video recording devices may rapidly provide large amounts of data and support researcher in understanding the phenomena of the study. From these different perspectives, I think it is important for the ethnographers to collect data directly in the research location but its duration depends on the research purposes and needs.

The third characteristic of ethnography is that *the ethnographers play important role as research instrument*. The depth of information depends on the researcher's sense of what is considered relevant and irrelevant to the topic. The fourth feature is that ethnography involves *naturalistic observation* which means the location of the study is not under controlled. In other words, it is rare for an ethnographer to make experiment or create social settings.

The fifth aspect of ethnography is an *electric approach.* The researcher may use various data collection techniques in order to cross-check the accuracy of data. Because the ethnographer is the only observer

of the phenomena being studied, this way is recommended to get a clear construct and to avoid bias. However, the main data collection technique is based on the participant observation and to capture the participants' perspectives it may be useful to conduct interviews.

The sixth characteristic is that ethnographer can make modification to the research questions, design and technique from the beginning until the completion of the study. Zaharlick (1992) describes this feature as an *interactive-reactive approach*.

Related to the context in ethnography research, it is debatable whether this approach should be *holistic,* or it can be *micro analysis* (Hammersley, 2006). On one hand, it is important to understand a certain phenomenon related to other cultural aspects or social contexts. On the other hand, the increasing uses of technologies such as audio and video recording enable us to have detailed micro analysis of a particular situation. In responding to this issue, I think both holistic and micro analyses depend relatively on the topic and purpose of the research: the extent to which the researcher wants to develop a clear description about a particular phenomenon.

The last characteristic of ethnography is *cross-cultural frame of reference*. The ethnographers were suggested to explore certain topic based on various cultural perspectives because cross cultural comparisons may enhance the breadth and the depth of data interpretation.

Strengths

Several cultural anthropologists believe that ethnographic fieldwork provides the best opportunity to collect current, reliable, complete and specific data to answer the relevant questions (Agar, 1980; Bernard, 1988; Ellen, 1984 as cited in Zaharlick 1992). Moreover, ethnographic work is also considered as the best source of data for comparative study and analysis (Edgerton & Langness, 1974).

Since this approach uses participant observation as the main data collection technique, I suggest that it is necessary to discuss the main features of participant observation. Flick et.al. (2004) explain that social scientists have been arguing about the standard procedure of participant observation. Some researchers recommend using participant observation as a supplementary data collection technique and tend to apply it together

with interviews, group discussion and document analysis. They also accept participant observation as a *flexible, methodologically plural and context related strategy* that could integrate with various procedures.

In order to obtain accurate data, Amann and Hirschauer (1997 as cited in Flick, 2004) suggest an *extended participation*. Supporting this idea, Hammersley and Atkinson (1993) agree that *'ethnographer can participate in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data available…'*

Weakness

One aspect of ethnographic research is that it investigates only a few cases or one case (Flick, 2002). The ethnographers should mention this limitation, and perhaps the findings cannot be generalized to other social contexts. Sometimes the ethnographers tend to assume that their observation in particular social context is typical of what *always* happens all the time. In fact, the phenomenon they have observed during a period of time might be different from what normally happen.

Another limitation is that ethnography emphasizes the researcher as primary instrument in data collection. Therefore, selecting information that relevant to the topic of study is depending on the researcher's argument. Concerning this issue, Hammersley (2006) suggests to use *'the radical critique of interviews'*, recommends the researchers not to observe themselves and make inferences only from what participants do and say during interview.

Finally, I think it is necessary to discuss some ethical issues related to ethnography, although some concerns such as confidentiality and voluntary participation might be similar to the ethical issues in case study research as I have mentioned before. The most important is that the ethnographers should present details about the observed phenomena, be careful in selecting and reporting evidence, and secure the participants' identities especially the gate keepers.

CONCLUSIONS

There are at least two differences between a case study and ethnography. First, the ethnography may require certain periods of time in the 'field' and emphasize details of observational evidence. The ethnographer may use an interview as an additional technique to capture whole participant's perspective. On the other hand, the case study does not only depend on participant-observer data but mainly uses interviews. Recently, it has become possible to conduct a valid and high quality case study by using Internet and telephone interviews.

Second, the case study researchers tend to follow ethnographic methods by providing detailed observations about reality and trying to avoid former commitment to any theoretical frameworks (Yin, 2003). In contrast, the ethnographers do not always produce case studies. Moreover, the case study does not have to present direct and detailed observations, but it can be based on any quantitative or qualitative data.

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