Encyclopedia of Case Study Research

Contribution, Theoretical

In contrast to quantitative research, which aims to generate numerical conclusions based on statistically significant data, a crucial contribution of case studies is the affirmation or development of theory, which can then be generalized or transferred to other settings.

Conceptual Overview and Discussion

The term *theory* does not have a fixed, universal meaning. Reflecting the competing research paradigms, the word evokes various meanings: the term theory might suggest a determining law, or system of laws, as in the natural sciences, or a construct or set of constructs for ordering and understanding phenomena. Irrespective of the different principles informing the term, theory usually has a central role in case study research. In all but descriptive case studies, the fundamental purpose concerns theory: Case studies either test a particular theory, develop theory, or both. It has been argued that developing theory inevitably involves an element of testing and therefore the two are interlinked. It is by means of this process that a theoretical contribution might be made.

Research projects usually begin with a review of the relevant literature. It is by means of the literature that the researcher will engage with the existing theoretical explanation of the topic in question. For example, if the topic is the incidence of teenage pregnancy, then the range of theories explaining the occurrence of this phenomenon might be ascertained and evaluated. With the exploration of the current strengths and limitations of explanations, the theoretical approach to be tested or developed can be identified. The theory or construct to be tested or developed will inform the choice of case or cases to be studied, the data to be gathered, the methods by which the data will be gathered, as well as the way in which the data will be analyzed. The project will conclude by discussing the original research question in light of the theory and the empirical evidence gathered.

During the progress of the project, the researcher applies a process of deductive and inductive reasoning. Although often thought of as separate, it has been argued that in case study research, the two processes are blurred and mutually beneficial. Similarly, it has been argued that theory testing and theory development are inevitably associated,

and that the interplay of both is implicated. The term *retroduction* has been coined as a means of describing this interplay. Retroduction is therefore the circular process by which the researcher tests his or her theoretical ideas against the emerging data, reframes the ideas, and retests until the conclusions reached are deemed trustworthy. Multiple cases might improve claims to trustworthiness in that the research can be replicated. The replication may facilitate confirmation of the emergent theory, but if not, the theory itself will be redeveloped to take account of the new data. The process of replication may continue as long as is necessary and/or feasible.

The conclusions of multiple cases or even a single case study are generalizable, or at least transferable to a similar context, providing that the research process is trustworthy (measures of trustworthiness depend upon the paradigm in which the research has been located). Two examples of the way in which case study research has contributed to theory are provided below.

Application

In the 1990s, Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson became dissatisfied with the level of knowledge on the fear of crime in the United Kingdom. Knowledge that had predominantly been produced by large surveys measured the level of fear in specific populations (such as men or women) without examining or theorizing what was meant by the fear of crime for specific individuals, or by accounting for the difference in levels of fear between individuals who shared similar social circumstances. For Hollway and Jefferson, the knowledge base was **[p. 237 ↓]** weak because most previous research had assumed individuals behaved in accordance with the principles of cognitive psychology or were wholly determined by their social environment. Furthermore, survey-based methodologies had not facilitated an understanding of the individuals' lived experience.

Following the literature, Hollway and Jefferson tentatively proposed an alternative theory that challenged the idea that fear of crime resulted from each individual's rational assessment of risk. This theory relied on a different understanding of the human subject: a psychosocial understanding that took into account unconscious processes concerning anxiety. Hollway and Jefferson set about testing their ideas and developing

their theory by means of interpretive research that involved the analysis of interviews with individuals or "cases."

Hollway and Jefferson recruited 37 individuals who were different in age, sex, and residential location—that is, they lived in either a high or low crime area. These characteristics informed their recruitment (or selection of cases) as the existing literature identified them as significant. Each individual was interviewed twice, in accordance with the principles of biographical narrative technique. While each respondent's biographical account was interpreted as an individual case study, a comparative analysis was also undertaken.

Hollway and Jefferson were able to show, by means of their empirical evidence, that fear of crime might have different meanings for different people, irrespective of their social characteristics or rational risk of becoming a crime victim. Further, they were able to offer a theoretical explanation of why this was so. In consequence, by testing and developing their theoretical ideas by means of case studies, these researchers have made a rich theoretical contribution to the already established body of knowledge on the fear of crime.

Like Hollway and Jefferson, M. N. Ravishankar and Shan L. Pan have also undertaken interpretive case study research. Rather than undertake a comparison of multiple cases, however, Ravishankar and Pan have examined the single case of India Inc., a global business organization selling a range of services, but most specifically information technology (IT) solutions. Over recent years India Inc. has achieved success and rapidly expanded the number of its employees. It has a complex organizational structure that involves not only the central structure, which is based in India, but also India Business Units (IBUs). IBUs are decentralized structures staffed with India Inc. employees (outsourced ven-dors), but located within organizations of their long-term customers.

To improve its performance, the company has invested in the development of a knowledge management (KM) strategy. This strategy is multifaceted, but most important is a portal that enables the sharing of knowledge and expertise, and in which all staff members are expected to participate. This portal has been successful in many respects, but staff members based in IBUs are less likely to comply with the expectation to

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participate in knowledge sharing. It is to this problem that researchers Ravishankar and Pan turned their attention.

The implementation of the strategy on knowledge management was explored in the light of the distinctive organizational structure. Literature on organizational identity and organizational identification was explored and the case study was designed to answer two research questions: First, how do dual organizational identifications influence compliance with an organizational KM initiative, and second, how are dual organizational identifications managed in a context of organizational KM initiatives? Multiple sources of qualitative data were drawn upon and the resulting materials interpreted by means of an iterative process: Data were read and reread in the light of the pertinent theoretical concepts drawn from the literature.

The case study conducted by Ravishankar and Pan contributes to knowledge in the fields of knowledge management research, business strategy, and management practice. In terms of its main theoretical focus, it offers empirical insights that contribute to the development of theory on organizational identity and organizational identification. According to the authors, as the research was conducted in one particular industry, the theory may be transferred only to a similar setting. For the theory to be widely generalizable, replication of the project in a range of industrial settings would be required.

Critical Summary

The potential to make theoretical contributions is a particular strength of case study research. In a **[p. 238 ↓]** new and unexplored area, contributions can be original. In established areas, contributions are more likely to be incremental developments of the work of previous theorists: New empirical evidence from case study research can provide theoretical insights that can confirm or challenge existing theory. In this way theoretical contributions, which have to be appreciated in terms of the competing research paradigms, develop the knowledge base of a range of disciplines.

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See also

- Deductive–Nomological Model of Explanation
- Generalizability
- Inductivism
- Theory, Role of
- Theory-Building With Cases
- Theory-Testing With Cases

Further Readings

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