

Rhee, Y. (2004). The EPO chain in relationships management: a case study of a government organization. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park.

What Is a Case Study?

Mitchell (1983) defined a case study as a “detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principles” (p. 192). Yin (1994) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident...[and] relies on multiple sources of evidence” (p. 13). As Yin said, one should use a case study strategy because he or she deliberately wants to study contextual conditions. According to Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000), case study refers to research that investigates a few cases in considerable depth.

Most scholars agree that a case study is not a particular method but a strategy (Stoecker, 1991, Yin, 1994). Stake (2000) also argued that a case study is not so much a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. Yin (1994) argued that a case study should not be confused with qualitative research. Gomm et al. (2000) argued that a case study implies collection of unstructured data and qualitative analysis of data. However, most case study researchers (Yin, 1994; Stake, 2000; Stoecker, 1991) explained that a case study can employ the best of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Yin (1994) explained that a case study is a comprehensive research strategy that deals with situations “in which there will be more variables of interest than data points,” “relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to be converged in a triangulating fashion,” and that “benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p. 13). Stoecker (1991) explained that

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case studies allow researchers to explore different outcomes of general processes suggested by theories depending on different contexts.

Ragin (1992) explained that in the social sciences, researchers seldom define what they mean by a case in case studies and that there is no agreement about what a “case” is. Ragin explained that in conventional “variable-oriented” comparative work, investigators begin by defining the problem in a way that allows examination of many cases. Data on specific variables are collected and the focus of the research process is on explaining relations among these variables. However, in “case-oriented” work, individual cases are the focus of research, not variables. On the other hand, Stake (1995) defined a case as “a bounded system” that has working parts. In this research, I take Stake’s approach in defining the case. The participating organization is the bounded system of interest and the working parts that are of particular interest are the employees and members of community who engage in public relations processes.

Types of Case Studies

Stake (1995) distinguished different types of case studies as follows. An intrinsic case study is carried out when one wants to understand a particular case. When one has a research question and wants to get insight into the question by studying a particular case, instrumental case study is conducted. A collective case study refers to extension of an instrumental study to several cases (pp. 3-4). Yin (1994) suggested three different types of case studies. Depending on the type of research question, there are exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory case studies. He explained that if the research is mainly focused on “what” questions, it may call for exploratory study. An explanatory case study

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deals with “how” or “why” questions. A descriptive study focuses on covering the background information and accurate description of the case in question.

Because this study seeks to answer questions that arise from a conceptual review of theories and tries to understand the theoretical framework within a specific setting, it can be considered as an instrumental case study. As for Yin’s typologies, this study can be considered as an explanatory case study because it attempts to answer how the relational theories play out in the real life context.

Question of Generalizability in Case Studies

Case studies have been criticized for lacking the grounds for generalization (Stake, 2000; Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) argued that case studies are only “generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (p. 10). Yin explained that the purpose of case studies is in “analytical generalization” to expand theory and not in statistical generalization. Stake (1995) also argued that with case studies researchers make “naturalistic generalizations,” which are different from deductive generalizations based on statistical analysis. He added that naturalistic generalizations develop by recognizing similarities of objects and issues within a context and “by sensing the natural covariations of happenings” (Stake, 2000, p. 22).

Donmoyer (2000) also argued that thinking of generalizability “solely in terms of sampling and statistical significance is no longer defensible or functional” (p. 46). He explained that human beings act toward things that are meaningful to them and because meanings are generated by social interaction rather than external causes, “to expect Newton-like generalizations describing human action is to engage in a process akin to ‘waiting for Godot’ (Cronbach, 1982)” (p. 48).

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However, for Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000), the issue of generalization should not be dismissed as irrelevant. Gomm et al. maintained that boundary of cases should be clarified in order to make appropriate generalizations. They explained that the selection of cases should be carefully carried out depending on whether the researcher hopes to claim “significant likely dimensions of heterogeneity of a population” or to provide evidence “in support of claims that the case(s) studied are typical (or atypical) in relevant aspects” (p. 111). In this research, I will not attempt to make statistical generalizations to a larger population. Rather, as Yin (1994) explained, I will try to make analytical generalization to expand theory. However, as Gomm et al. (2000) pointed out, I believe results of this research can provide grounds for generalizations about the case under study and to other similar cases. In this study, I am conducting a single case study. In the following, I will discuss how a single case study can be justified.

A Word on a Single Case Study

According to Hamel (1992), an individual case is the “*mandatory* intermediary in attempting to grasp the common nature of individual actions and behaviors” (p. 104). Hamel explained that a singular feature of some phenomenon can be considered as part of a whole. He further stated that singularity can be defined as “accentuating generality” (p. 108). For Stoecker (1991), single case studies allow us to “see variables operating that are lost in cross-sectional quantitative research (Scranton, 1986)” (p. 94).

In this study, I do not believe the chosen single case will be one that accentuates generality. What I am attempting in this study is “a detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which [I] believe exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principles” (Mitchell, 1983, p. 192). According to Mitchell

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(1983), the validity of the case study depends “not on the typicality or representativeness of the case but upon the cogency of the theoretical reasoning” (p. 207).

Although the quote is lengthy, Homans (1950, as cited in Gouldner, 1954) aptly described how a single case study could be viewed in a social scientific research context:

Sociology may miss a great deal if it tries to be too quantitative too soon. Data are not nobler because they are quantitative... Lord Nelson, greatest of all admirals, after explaining to his ship captains the plan of attack he intended to use at the battle of Trafalgar, went on to say ‘No Captain can do very wrong who places his ship alongside that of an enemy.’ In the same way, no one who studies a group will go far wrong if he gets close to it, and by whatever methods are available, observes all that he can... The statistician might find fault with the passages for not letting him know the relation between the ‘sample’ and the ‘universe,’ that is, the number of groups directly observed and the larger number for whose behavior the average is supposed to hold good... His criticisms are good, and they can be answered only by raising new questions: How much more effort, in men, time, and money, would be needed to get the kind of data he wants?... These are questions not of scientific morality but of strategy... (p. 33)

The case of this study was chosen based on the fact that it was an exemplary case of how to use employee communication and involvement in its community relations practice. In addition, as this research attempted to investigate relationship management between an organization and its non-consumer publics, the organization was an appropriate case for exploration of the research questions posed.

Strengths of Case Study Strategy

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According to Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000), in-depth research of specific instances in case studies can actually show causal processes in context, which allows researchers to see which theoretical perspectives provide the best explanations. Stoecker (1991) added that a case study has the ability “to explain idiosyncrasies, which make up the ‘unexplained variance’” (p. 94).

A case study is intensive research in which interpretations are given “based on observable concrete interconnections between actual properties and people within an actual concrete setting” (Stoecker, 1991, p. 95). Stoecker said a “case study is the best way by which we can refine general theory and apply effective interventions in complex situations” (p. 109). In other words, case studies allow researchers to explore different outcomes of general processes suggested by theories depending on different contexts, which suits public relations research that seeks application of theories to practice.

Walton (1992) explained, “cases are wrapped in theories” (p. 122). According to Walton, cases are “embodiments of causal processes operating in microcosm,” and case studies are used “to demonstrate a causal argument about how general social forces take shape and produce results in specific settings” (p. 122). Walton said that understanding a specific case by applying available knowledge is an important intellectual task for social scientists. He maintained that understanding a particular empirical instance in its own right and contrasting it with other cases, are “practical steps toward constructing theoretical interpretations” (p. 128). For this reason, Walton claimed, case studies are likely to produce the best theory. Another unique strength of a case study is its ability to deal with a variety of evidence collected from documents, interviews, and observations.