

The Case Study Method in Social Inquiry¹

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It is widely believed that case studies are useful in the study of human affairs because they are down-to-earth and attention-holding but that they are not a suitable basis for generalization. In this paper, I claim that case studies will often be the preferred method of research because they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization.

Experience. We expect an inquiry to be carried out so that certain audiences will benefit — not just to swell the archives, but to help persons toward further understandings. If the readers of our reports are the persons who populate our houses, schools, governments, and industries; and if we are to help them understand social problems and social programs, we must perceive and communicate (see Bohm, 1974; Schön, 1977) in a way that accommodates their present understandings.² Those people have arrived at their understandings mostly through direct and vicarious experience.

And those readers who are most learned and specialized in their disciplines are little different. Though they write and talk with special languages, their own understandings of human affairs are for the most part attained and

amended through personal experience. I believe that it is reasonable to conclude that one of the more effective means of adding to understanding for all readers will be by approximating through the words and illustrations of our reports, the natural experience acquired in ordinary personal involvement.

At the turn of the century, German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1910) claimed that more objective and "scientific" studies did not do the best job of acquainting man with himself.

Only from his actions, his fixed utterances, his effects upon others, can man learn about himself; thus he learns to know himself only by the round-about way of understanding. What we once were, how we developed and became what we are, we learn from the way in which we acted, the plans which we once adopted, the way in which we made ourselves felt in our vocation, from old dead letters, from judgments on which were spoken long ago. . . . we understand ourselves and others only when we transfer our own lived experience into every kind of expression of our own and other people's lives.

He distinguished between the human studies and other kinds of studies.

The human studies are thus founded on this relation between lived experience, expression, and understanding. Here for the first time we reach a quite clear criterion by which the delimitation of the human studies can be definitively carried out. A study belongs to the human studies only if its object becomes accessible to us through the attitude which is founded on the relation between life, expression, and understanding.

Dilthey was not urging us merely to pay more attention to humanistic values or to put more affective variables into our equations. He was saying that our methods of studying human affairs need to capitalize upon the natural powers of people to experience and understand.

Knowledge. In statements fundamental to the epistemology of social inquiry, Polanyi³ distinguished between propositional and tacit knowledge. Propositional knowledge — the knowledge of both reason and gossip — was seen to be composed of all interpersonally sharable statements, most of which for most people are observations of objects and events. Tacit knowledge may also dwell on objects and events, but it is knowledge gained from experience with them, experience with propositions about them, and rumination.

Through reason man observes himself; but he knows himself only through consciousness. (Tolstoy, *War and Peace*)

Tacit knowledge is all that is remembered somehow, minus that which is remembered in the form of words, symbols, or other rhetorical forms. It is that which permits us to recognize faces, to comprehend metaphors, and to "know ourselves." Tacit knowledge includes a multitude of unexpressible associations which give rise to new meanings, new ideas, and new applications of the old. Polanyi recognized that each person, expert or novice, has great stores of tacit knowledge with which to build new understandings.

It is a common belief that these ordinary understandings, both new and old, are merely the pieces from which mighty explanations are made. And that explanation is the grandest of understandings. But explanation and understanding are perhaps not so intimately interwoven.

Practically every explanation, be it causal or teleological or of some other kind, can be said to further our understanding of things. But "understanding" also has a psychological ring which "explanation" has not. This psychological feature was emphasized by several of the nineteenth-century antipositivist methodologists, perhaps most forcefully by Simmel who thought that understanding as a method characteristic of the humanities is a form of *empathy* or re-creation in the mind of the scholar of the mental atmosphere, the thoughts and feelings and motivations, of the objects of his study. . . . Understanding is also connected with *intentionality* in a way that explanation is not. One understands the aims and purposes of an agent, the meaning of a sign or symbol, and the significance of a social institution or religious rite. This intentionalistic . . . dimension of understanding has come to play a prominent role in more recent methodological discussion. (Von Wright, 1971)

Explanation belongs more to propositional knowledge, understanding more to tacit.

Philosophers of the positivist school, Carl Hempel and Karl Popper particu-

larly, have posited that propositional statements of lawful relationship are the closest approximations of Truth — whether we are talking about physical matter or human. They would have us speak of attributes and constructs, such as energy and mass or work-ethic and masculinity, and the relationships among them. Antipositivists such as Dilthey, Von Wright, and William Dray have claimed that Truth in the fields of human affairs is better approximated by statements that are rich with the sense of human encounter: To speak not of underlying attributes, objective observables, and universal forces, but of perceptions and understanding that come from immersion in and holistic regard for the phenomena.

In American research circles most methodologists have been of positivistic persuasion. The more episodic, subjective procedures, common to the case study, have been considered weaker than the experimental or correlational studies for explaining things.

When explanation, propositional knowledge, and law are the aims of an inquiry, the case study will often be at a disadvantage. When the aims are understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction in that which is known, the disadvantage disappears.

Generalizations. The scientist and the humanist scholar alike search for laws that tell of order in their disciplines. But so do all other persons look for regularity and system in their experience. Predictable covariation is to be found in all phenomena. In 1620 Francis Bacon said:

There are and can be only two ways of searching and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms . . . this is now the fashion. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way, but as yet untried.

He claimed that Truth lies in the most general of axioms, a far and labored trek from experience.⁴

Another point of view holds that Truth lies in particulars. William Blake offered these intemperate words:

To generalize is to be an idiot. To particularize is the lone distinction of merit. General knowledges are those that idiots possess.

Generalization may not be all that despicable, but particularization does deserve praise. To know particulars fleetingly of course is to know next to nothing. What becomes useful understanding is a full and thorough knowledge of the particular, recognizing it also in new and foreign contexts.

That knowledge is a form of generalization too, not scientific induction but *naturalistic generalization*, arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings. To generalize this way is to be both intuitive and empirical, and not idiotic.

Naturalistic generalizations develop within a person as a product of experience. They derive from the tacit knowledge of how things are, why they are, how people feel about them, and how these things are likely to be later or in other places with which this person is familiar. They seldom take the form of predictions but lead regularly to expectation. They guide action, in fact they are inseparable from action (Kemmis, 1974). These generalizations may become verbalized, passing of course from tacit knowledge to propositional; but they have not yet passed the empirical and logical tests that characterize formal (scholarly, scientific) generalizations.

Sociologist Howard Becker⁵ spoke of an irreducible conflict between sociological perspective and the perspective of everyday life. Which is superior? It depends on the circumstance, of course. For publishing in the sociological journals, the scientific perspective is better; but for reporting to lay audiences and for studying lay problems, the lay perspective will often be superior. And frequently that everyday-life perspective will be superior for discourse among scholars for they too often share among themselves more of ordinary experience than of special conceptualization. The special is often too special. It is foolish to presume that a more scholarly report will be the more effective.

The other generalizations, i.e., rationalistic, propositional, law-like generalizations, can be useful for understanding a particular situation. And they can be hurtful. Obviously, bad laws foster misunderstandings. And abstract statements of law distract attention from direct experience. Good generalizations aid the understanding

of general conditions, but good generalizations can lead one to see phenomena more simplistically than one should.

It is the legitimate aim of many scholarly studies to discover or validate laws. But the aim of the practical arts is to get things done. The better generalizations often are those more parochial, those more personal. In fields such as education and social work, where few laws have been validated and where inquiry can be directed toward gathering information that has use other than for the cultivation of laws, a persistent attention to laws is pedantic.

Cases. The object (target) of a social inquiry is seldom an individual person or enterprise. Unfortunately, it is such single objects that are usually thought of as "cases." A case is often thought of as a constituent member of a target population. And since single members poorly represent whole populations, the case study is seen to be a poor basis for generalization.

Often, however, the situation is one in which there is need for generalization about that particular case or generalization to a similar case rather than generalization to a population of cases. Then the demands for typicality and representativeness yield to needs for assurance that the target case is properly described. As readers recognize essential similarities to cases of interest to them, they establish the basis for naturalistic generalization.

The case need not be a person or enterprise. It can be whatever "bounded system" (to use Louis Smith's term) is of interest. An institution, a program, a responsibility, a collection, or a population can be the case. This is not to trivialize the notion of "case" but to note the generality of the case study method in preparation for noting its distinctiveness.

It is distinctive in the first place by giving great prominence to what is and what is not "the case" — the boundaries are kept in focus. What is happening and deemed important within those boundaries (the emic) is considered vital and usually determines what the study is about, as contrasted with other kinds of studies where hypotheses or issues previously targeted by the investigators (the etic) usually determine the content of the study.

Case studies can be used to test hypotheses, particularly to examine a single exception that shows the hypothesis to be false. Case studies can be highly statistical; institutional research and vocational counseling case studies often are. But in the social science literature, most case studies feature: descriptions that are complex, holistic, and involving a myriad of not highly isolated variables; data that are likely to be gathered at least partly by personalistic observation; and a writing style that is informal, perhaps narrative, possibly with verbatim quotation, illustration, and even allusion and metaphor. Comparisons are implicit rather than explicit. Themes and hypotheses may be important, but they remain subordinate to the understanding of the case.⁶

Although case studies have been used by anthropologists, psychoanalysts, and many others as a method of exploration preliminary to theory development,⁷ the characteristics of the method are usually more suited to expansionist than reductionist pursuits. Theory building is the search for essences, pervasive and determining ingredients, and the makings of laws. The case study, however, proliferates rather than narrows. One is left with more to pay attention to rather than less. The case study attends to the idiosyncratic more than to the pervasive.⁸ The fact that it has been useful in theory building does not mean that that is its best use.

Its best use appears to me to be for adding to existing experience and humanistic understanding. Its characteristics match the "readinesses" people have for added experience. As Von Wright and others stressed, intentionality and empathy are central to the comprehension of social problems, but so also is information that is holistic and episodic. The discourse of persons struggling to increase their understanding of social matters features and solicits these qualities. And these qualities match nicely the characteristics of the case study.⁹

The study of human problems is the work of scientists, novelists, journalists, everybody of course — but especially historians. The historian Howard Butterfield (1951) recognized the centrality of experiential data and said:

... the only understanding we ever reach in history is but a refinement,

more or less subtle and sensitive, of the difficult — and sometimes deceptive — process of imagining oneself in another person's place.

Case studies are likely to continue to be popular because of their style and to be useful for exploration for those who search for explanatory laws. And, moreover, because of the universality and importance of experiential understanding, and because of their compatibility with such understanding, case studies can be expected to continue to have an epistemological advantage over other inquiry methods as a basis for naturalistic generalization. Unlike Bacon's "true way" of discovering Truth, this method *has been* tried and found to be a direct and satisfying way of adding to experience and improving understanding.

Notes

¹Written at the Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, as part of an assignment for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris.

²In this paper I am writing about the formal inquiry to be done by people, on or off the campus, who are subject to greater rewards for scholarly work and knowledge production and to lesser rewards for professional support and problem solving. In the USA there are few civil service or applied research agencies which validate their inquiries according to its service value more than to its "internal and external validities," as defined by Campbell and Stanley (1966). I see it as unfortunately necessary to overstate the distinction between academic research and practical inquiry as a step toward improving and legitimizing inquiries that are needed for understanding and problem solving but which are unlikely to produce vouchsafed generalizations.

³I am indebted to statements by Harry Broudy (1972) and Andrew Ortony (1975) for helping me understand the educational relevance of the writing of Polanyi.

⁴But he noted that at least before 1620 *that* was not the way humans reached understanding.

⁵Howard Becker (1964). Important ideas about the special use of case study as precursor to theoretical study are found in his "Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation," (1958).

⁶This is not to say that all case studies are as described here. Medical "write-ups" for example are very different. But these characteristics are commonly expected and little different than those specified by Louis Smith (1973), for example, to be: credible, holistic, particularistic, individualizable, process-oriented, ego-involving, and blending of behavioral and phenomenological methodologies.

⁷In Julian Simon, (1969), for example.

⁸Harry MacDonald and Rob Walker have made the strongest case I know for using idiosyncratic instances to create understanding of more general matters, as in "Case Study and the Social Philosophy of Educational Research" (1975).

⁹It would be of interest to get empirical data on the perceived utility of case studies. It can be

presumed, I fear, that some respondents, having heard objections to the case study method from such authorities as Julian Stanley and Donald Campbell and thinking more of political value than informational value, would underrate their utility for understanding and generalization.

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