Methodological issues in case-study approach in evaluation and survey

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Extensive research

Extensive research is concerned with:

- collecting information about the relevant properties of a large number of instances of a phenomenon
- drawing conclusions by calculating and interpreting correlations between the properties of these examples

Its dominant strategy is large-scale statistical surveying

Intensive research

Intensive research focuses on only one [or few] specific instance[s] of the phenomenon to be studied, in order to study a phenomenon in depth

Its dominant strategy is case-study

Many scholars perceived this research approach as less scientifically and procedurally sound, reliable, verifiable, and communicable than extensive research

Why perform case-studies

- They are, possibly, the basic method of science
- They are more suitable to face complex problems in complex context

Choice of the research method

It is a matter of:

- logic
- empirics

Statistical methods are optimized for assessing correlations and establishing their probabilistic levels of confidence

Case-studies have comparative advantages in developing and testing explanations and in analysing causal mechanisms

Case studies strengths

Case studies are strong in testing hypotheses and in theory development due to their:

- Potential for achieving high conceptual validity
- Capacity for fostering new hypotheses
- Capacity for examining hypothesized causal mechanisms in a specific context
- Capacity for addressing causal complexity

Case-study's common sense definition

Case-study is an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as an event, phenomenon, process, behaviour, activity, project, plan, program, person, community, etc.) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment

Case-study's features

Case-study is characterized by:

- uniqueness and complexity of the object of study
- depth and flexibility of contextual analysis
- holistic approach

NB: the analysis method is not relevant, as it can be either quantitative or qualitative, analytical or interpretive, or mixed

When to perform a case-study

The decision to develop a case study depends on:

- form of the research question
- control over behavioural events
- focus on contemporary or historical phenomena

A case study is most suitable when a “how” or “why” question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control

How to provide case-study with sound scientific foundation

To produce a research aspiring to cumulative and progressive generalizations of knowledge you should:

- explain the reason for choosing the case-study approach
- Implement a research design: *"the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions"*

Components of case-study research design

The main components of case-study research design are:

- Case-study's questions
- Case-study's propositions
- Case-study's unit[s] of analysis
- Collection and Analysis of case study evidences
- Criteria for interpreting case-study findings

Computer assisted tools in Collection and analysis of case-study evidences

The use of multiple data sources as well as of qualitative and quantitative data is a hallmark and a strength of case-study

In this component you may use computer assisted tools to process quantitative data (in evaluative o multiple case studies) as well as qualitative data coding and categorizing large amounts of narrative text through pre-packaged software (such as Atlas.ti, HyperRESEARCH, NVivo, or The Ethnograph)

Main criticisms of the case-study

The 2 main criticisms of the case-study method relate to:

- lack of rigour in method and execution
- capacity to generalize case-study findings

Lack of rigour of case-studies

The lack of rigour is not due to an innate shortcoming of case study approach and it may be overcome following a well structured case-study research design and, possibly, improving it

Incapacity to generalize case-study findings

Critics also claim that especially single case-study provides little basis for scientific generalization

This is a false concern because it is true that in case-study you cannot make statistic generalization, but you can perform *analytic generalization* rooted in analytical induction

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