

# Qualitative Case Study Research as Empirical Inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of qualitative case study research as empirical inquiry. It defines and distinguishes what a case study is, the purposes, intentions, and types of case studies. It then describes how to determine if a qualitative case study is the preferred approach for conducting research. It overviews the essential steps in designing qualitative case study research, including the role of literature and theory, approaches for collecting data and analyzing it, as well as how to write up and present case study findings. It articulates how to avoid common pitfalls when engaging in qualitative case study research and concludes with the strengths and limitations associated with this form of empirical inquiry.

## KEYWORDS

Case Study Research, CAQDAS, Phenomenological Case Study, Qualitative Case Study Research

## INTRODUCTION

Case study, as a “distinctive form of empirical inquiry,” (Yin, 2014, p. 19) is a popular and prevalent form of social science research that is widely used in many disciplines including psychology, sociology, anthropology, social work, nursing, education, business, community planning, economics and political science (Baskarada, 2014; Merriam, 1998; 2009; Thomas, 2011; Stake, 1995, 2010; Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2003, 2012, 2014). Yet, despite its prevalence, there remain misconceptions, misunderstandings, along with concerns associated with rigor (da Mota Pedrosa, Naslund, & Jasmand, 2012; Ellram, 1996; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; Tetnowski, 2015; Rule & John, 2015; Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2014). In terms of misconceptions, Ellram (1996) has indicated that some of the common misconceptions are that case study research and the use of teaching cases are closely related, that case studies are only appropriate at the exploratory phase of an investigation and cannot be used to describe or test propositions (Yin, 2014), case studies lack rigor and require large numbers to provide meaningful results which are not generalizable, and that anyone can do a case study (p. 94).

Similarly, Flyvbjerg (2006) has acknowledged that there are five common misunderstandings about the nature of case study research: that context-independent knowledge is more valuable than context-dependent knowledge, that individual case studies cannot be generalized and therefore do not make contributions, that they are most useful for generating hypotheses, not for hypotheses testing and theory building, that they tend to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions, and that it is challenging to develop general propositions and theories from specific case studies (p. 221). Lastly,

case study research is often critiqued for a lack of attention to rigor regarding issues associated with validity and reliability (Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012). Yet, despite these issues, some scholars contend that “case studies have provided the management field with some of its most ground-breaking insights” (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010, p. 711). Further, Siggelkow (2007) suggested that there are three valuable uses of cases which include, “the immersion in rich case data enables... inspiration for new ideas... can also help sharpen existing theory by pointing to gaps and beginning to fill them... and, in the context of making a conceptual contribution is to employ them as illustration” (p. 21).

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to define what case study is, and is not, the purposes, intentions, and types of case study research, when case study is the preferred approach, and the roles of literature and theory in case study research. It will also address issues associated with rigor, considerations for how to design case studies, how to collect and analyze case study evidence, the use of technology to assist with data management, and how to report findings. In particular, a qualitative perspective will be undertaken with regard to case study research to enable students, researchers and practitioners to more effectively and rigorously develop and evaluate qualitative case study research.

## **DISTINGUISHING AND DEFINING CASE STUDY IN GENERAL AND QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY IN PARTICULAR**

Scholars contend that there is often confusion about what a case study is and suggest that case study research is distinct from case studies used for teaching and case study records (Ellram, 1996; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Yin, 2012, 2014). Case study research is designed to “explain, explore, or describe a phenomenon of interest” (Ellram, 1996, p. 94) whereas the use of case study in teaching refers to the provision of cases that enable students to engage in discussions and debate as well as make decisions and solve problems in a real-life context. Further, case records used as a form of recordkeeping in the social work and medical contexts are not reflective of case study research. While case records may be developed for case study research, the criteria for doing so differs from that of practice (Yin, 2014).

There are many definitions that have been developed for case study in general and qualitative case study in particular. According to Meredith (1998), case study research “typically uses multiple methods and tools for data collection from a number of entities by a direct observer(s), in a single, natural setting that considers temporal and contextual aspects of the contemporary phenomenon under study, but without experimental controls or manipulations” (pp. 442-443). Yin (2014) offered a two-fold definition that captures both the scope of case study research and its features which he contends “comprises an all-encompassing method” and one that is applicable to different epistemological orientations. For Yin (2014), “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). Further, he suggested that “a case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p. 17).

Yin (2014) contended that this definition of case study research can be oriented toward a realist perspective but can also accommodate a relativist perspective. A realist perspective “assumes the existence of a single reality that is independent of any observer” whereas a relativist perspective acknowledges that there are “multiple realities having multiple meanings” (p. 17). Therefore, case study research can be quantitative, qualitative and mixed-design, and may also be used for conducting evaluations (Ellinger, Watkins, & Marsick, 2005; Tetnowski, 2015; Yin, 2014). White, Drew, and Hay (2009) suggested that Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) paradigm positions placed case study “at the conservative end of the qualitative research continuum” (p. 21). However, they noted that Willis (2007) considered case study to be used by critical and interpretivist researchers. According to Willis

(2007), “case studies are about real people and real situations... [they commonly] rely on inductive reasoning...[and] illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” (in White et al., 2009, p. 21). According to Merriam (1998, 2009), qualitative case studies can be defined as processes, a unit of analysis, or as the output or product of the research. She suggested that qualitative case studies can be further distinguished by special features: Particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. In terms of particularistic, such case studies have a “specificity of focus” (1998, p. 29). Further, “rich, ‘thick’ description is provided about the phenomenon. Lastly, case studies “illuminate the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” (1998, p. 30).

## **PURPOSES, INTENTIONS, TYPES OF CASE STUDIES, AND WHEN CASE STUDY RESEARCH IS THE PREFERRED APPROACH**

Scholars have acknowledged that there are different purposes of case studies (Yin, 2003, 2012, 2014). For example, case studies can be explanatory which seek to “understand and explain presumed causal links between events” (Tetnowski, 2015, p. 40). According to Yin (2014), explanatory case studies explain how or why a condition exists or a sequence of events may or may not have occurred which reflects attempts to engage in causal reasoning (Yin, 2012; for additional insight about qualitative research and causality, please refer to Bennett & McWhorter, in press, 2016). Case studies can also be exploratory when limited research exists on a phenomenon, and descriptive. Descriptive case studies provide rich description of a phenomenon (Tetnowski, 2015). Merriam (1998) identified different types of case studies in education research which include: ethnographic, historical, psychological, sociological case studies which respectively focus on the culture of a group, a focus on primary and secondary historical sources and may involve more than a chronology of an historical event, the individual, and constructs of society respectively. More recently, the use of phenomenological case study has become prevalent in the literature (Creswell, 2013; Dowling, 2007; Slavin, 2007). In addition to types of case studies, Merriam acknowledged that case studies can be described in terms of their intentions: descriptive, interpretive, or evaluative case studies. Descriptive case studies present detailed description of the phenomenon and are not typically guided by established or hypothesized generalizations. Interpretive case studies also provide description but “are used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to data gathering” (1998, p. 38.). Evaluative case studies provide “description, explanation and judgement” (1998, p. 39). For Stake, (1995; 2006; 2010) case studies can be intrinsic or instrumental. They are intrinsic if the researcher has an interest in studying a specific case, and instrumental if the intention of the researcher is to understand more than just the selected case.

In addition to understanding the various purposes, intentions, and types of case studies, it is important to ascertain when case study research should be undertaken. Scholars contend that case study research presents a preferred approach when three conditions are satisfied: when the research being undertaken is focused on descriptive or explanatory questions such that the need to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions is necessary, when contemporary events are being examined in their real world settings and data can be collected in such settings, and when the researcher cannot manipulate or exert control over behavioral events (Yin, 2012; 2014).

## **DESIGNING CASE STUDY RESEARCH**

Following the determination that case study research, and particularly qualitative case study research, is the appropriate approach, Yin (2012, 2014) and others suggested that attention should be focused on the research design – the “blueprint for your research” (Yin, 2014, p. 29) or the “logical plan for getting from here to there” (p. 28). Some of the steps involved include defining and selecting the case, identifying the type of case study design to be used, considering the role of theory in the research, along with issues associated with reliability and validity, collecting data, analyzing data

and presenting the findings from the research. It should be noted, however, that various scholars have articulated specific steps or phases that should be followed when engaged in case study research.

Yin (2014) acknowledged that case study research is a linear but iterative process and has provided a six-stage conceptual depiction of the various stages involved in case study research: plan, design, prepare, collect, analyze, and share, with arrows among these stages. Baskarada (2014) offered a modification of Yin's (2014) stages to account for some of the dependencies between the stages. Ellinger et al. (2005) overviewed general components and process of case study research design which included: identifying the problem, purpose, and research questions, using the literature, selecting and bounding the case, designing the study, considering issues of validity and reliability in designing case study research, collecting and analyzing the data, and integrating the findings of the study (p. 333). Lastly, Merriam (1998) suggested an approach for qualitative case studies that begins with designing the study and selecting the sample, which involves consideration of the theoretical framework, and reviewing the literature, and the research problem, then collecting the data, analyzing and reporting qualitative data. She also addressed validity, reliability and ethics. Each of these are recommended sources for further guiding researchers in the pursuit of case study research, and particularly qualitative research. Our intent below is to provide an overview of some of these important steps when conducting qualitative case study research.

### **The Role of the Literature**

As part of the planning process, we assume that the researcher has been somewhat immersed in the scholarly literature to the extent that a research problem has been sufficiently identified and case study research has been deemed the most appropriate approach for studying the phenomenon of interest. We appreciate that the role of the literature and how it should be reviewed and incorporated into the study is a contentious issue among scholars. The literature reviewed is often comprised of theoretical and conceptual contributions along with empirical studies that have been previously conducted on the phenomenon of interest. A thorough review of the literature will enable the researcher to establish what is known and not known about the phenomena of interest such that the contribution of the study can be compelling articulated. Such a review may also influence the type of qualitative case study being undertaken. The literature reviewed is also used to situate the study's findings. In other instances, for example, phenomenological and grounded theory case study research, the literature review may be suspended until after the data is collected and analyzed.

### **The Role of Theory**

As with conducting a review of the literature, scholars also disagree about the role of theory within case study research (Merriam, 1998; Rule & John, 2015; Yin, 2012, 2014). It is often thought that qualitative research is "designed to inductively build rather than to test concepts, hypotheses, and theories" (p. 45). Because of this, Merriam (1998) acknowledged that "many believe that theory has no place in a qualitative study" (p. 45). However, she suggests that "it would be difficult to imagine a study without a theoretical or conceptual framework" (p. 45). She indicated that the theoretical framework is the "orientation or stand that you bring to your study" (p. 45) and "is the lens through which you view the world" (p. 45). Even in grounded theory research, which is designed to develop new theory from the data collected, some scholars suggest that "Even those who set out to develop a grounded theory do not enter the study with a blank mind, with no notion of what to think about or look for" (Merriam, 1998, p. 49). For Yin (2012), "a case study that starts with some theoretical propositions or theory will be easier to implement than one having no propositions" (p. 9). More recently, Rule and John (2015) have 're-imagine[d]' the relations between theory and case study research" (p. 1). They suggested that theory is related to case study research in several ways: the theory of the case, the theory for the case, the theory from the case, and their proposed theory-case interaction approach. In terms of the theory of the case, Rule and John (2015) suggested that this is often neglected and "informs how the case is constructed and selected" (p. 4). They indicated that

the theory of the case originates from theory and literature and helps the researcher to conceptualize about the bounded nature of the case, what it constitutes and what is included and excluded. With regard to theory for the case, deduction is not limited to quantitative research, but for example, explanatory and instrumental qualitative case studies often begin with “a particular theory and seek to apply it to one or more cases and sometimes in different contexts” (p. 5). In contrast, theory from the case is reflective of an inductive approach in which theory is generated from the case. For example, exploratory, intrinsic, and grounded theory qualitative case studies are not intended to test or apply existing theory, but to generate theory (Rule & John, 2015).

A number of scholars have written about theory building from cases (Dooley, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). However, despite the “utility of case study research as a means of building theories, there appears to be no clarity as to the role case study research plays within the process of theory building” (Dooley, 2002, p. 346). Dooley (2002) acknowledged that case study research can “logically fulfill four specific roles in meeting the phase requirements of the general method of theory building in applied disciplines” (p. 349). These four roles are:

1. Case application of an already conceptualized and operationalized theory (single or multiple cases)
2. Confirmation or disconfirmation of an already conceptualized and operationalized theory (single or multiple cases)
3. Case application for the purpose of creating or advancing the conceptualization and operationalization of a theory (single or multiple cases)
4. Continuous refinement and development of a fully developed theory (single or multiple cases) (pp. 349-351)

Rule and John’s (2015) dialogical model between theory and case acknowledged that “theory influences research in all its aspects... [from the research purpose, use of literature, selection of the case, etc.] On the other hand, research in all these phases can have implications for developing and modifying or revising theory” (p. 7).

Following the articulation of the problem, considerations regarding the roles of the literature and theory, and justification for the use of case study research, it is important to define and bound the case and then consider the type of case study design.

### **Defining and Bounding the Case**

Defining what the case is, or the main unit of analysis is important but can also be challenging. According to Yin (2012), a case is a “bounded entity” (p. 6) but “the boundary between the case and its contextual conditions – in both special and temporal dimensions – may be blurred (p. 6). Cases can be organizations, processes, programs, individuals, neighborhoods, institutions, events, and there can be nested units within the main unit (Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), “As a general guide, the tentative definition of your case (or of the unit of analysis) is related to the way you define your initial research questions. It is also possible that your case may consist of single or multiple cases (Stake, 2006).

### **Selecting the Type of Case Study Design**

Yin (2014) proposed four types of case study designs and indicated that all of the designs will “include the desire to analyze contextual conditions in relation to the ‘case’...” (p. 50). He indicated that the determination of the type of design is dependent upon whether the case is a single case or multi-case study, and noted that within these two variants, there can be single or multiple units of analysis. For example, it is possible to have a single-case (holistic) design [Type 1] or a multiple-case (holistic) design [Type 3] – an organization as a single case or several organizations as a multiple-case study. It is also possible that a single-case (embedded) study design [Type 2] can be undertaken, or a multiple-case

(embedded) design [Type 4]. For example, it might be that the researcher is interested in participants' perspectives about their involvement in a unique training program being offered by an organization. In this instance, this might suggest that the individuals are embedded within the program, which is embedded within the organization, which suggests a single-case [embedded] study. It might also be possible that the researcher is studying work teams within two different organizations. The individual members of the team are embedded within the work team, the work team is embedded within the organization, and there are multiple organizations, suggesting a multiple-case study (embedded) design. Yin (2014) likened the single-case study and multiple-case study designs to single and multiple experiments and articulated the strengths and weaknesses associated these varied designs. He noted that single-case study designs are appropriate when the case itself is critical, or unusual, or common, or revelatory, or longitudinal. These five distinct rationales can result in a single-case study that makes a significant contribution. But, Yin (2014) also acknowledged potential limitations. Multiple-case study designs contain more than a single case and suggest the importance of replication logic in selecting the cases to be studied. He indicated that the evidence from multiple-case studies is often considered more compelling, but, that often the rationale for selecting a single-case study cannot be satisfied by multiple cases. Holistic case studies focus on the global nature of the case, whereas embedded case studies focus on more than one unit of analysis. Again, both have strengths and limitations and the selection of the type of design is a critical one in qualitative case study research.

## **DESIGNING RIGOR INTO CASE STUDY RESEARCH**

Case study research is often criticized for lacking rigor, yet, there are approaches to enhancing rigor that can be incorporated into the research design for case study research, and particularly qualitative case study research. Validity and reliability are terms that are used in quantitative research and, while relevant for qualitative research, do have distinct meanings. For instance, validity in quantitative terms is concerned whether an indicator is developed to gauge a concept really measures that particular concept (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In qualitative research, validity is concerned with whether research findings are sufficiently authentic so that the reader can act on their implications (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Reliability in quantitative research has been defined as "how consistent a measure is" (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2013, p. 303), in qualitative research, reliability is concerned with "whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (Merriam, 1998, p. 206) and the dependability of the results obtained from the data are the focus of this measure.

Bazeley (2012) observed that the reader is more likely to be convinced about the reliability and validity of researchers' conclusions by examining the strength of their argument and also the "clarity and comprehensiveness of evidence" (p. 151). This clarity is accomplished by carefully designing an organizing structure for the primary and supporting data that utilizes an audit trail (the data collection and coding decisions that are linked to the research documents). Also, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that qualitative research that exhibits internal validity (how closely findings match reality) is a strength if it includes these four characteristics: data collection conducted over long periods of time that promotes continued data analysis and refining of constructs, the data collection is framed from the informant's viewpoint, observations and other data is collected in the natural setting of the participants; and, data analysis utilizes the researchers' reflection, introspection, that the researcher for self-monitoring for continued reevaluation.

Triangulation is also crucial for enhancing rigor through the use of multiple sources of data, multiple methods, team of researchers, and the use of multiple theories for confirming emergent findings (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Similarly, the utilization of multiple cases (i.e. comparison of similar or contrasting cases) is also a strategy for enhancing rigor in case study research. It was noted that the "inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing external validity or generalizability of your findings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 40) in qualitative case study research.

## **APPROACHES FOR COLLECTING DATA**

There are many approaches for collecting case study research data in general, but specific approaches are recommended for qualitative case study research. The choices for selecting specific approaches will be dependent upon the nature of the case and the units of analysis to be examined. Yin (2014) acknowledged that there are six sources of case study evidence: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts (p. 98). He and other scholars recommended that multiple sources of evidence be used so that triangulation of the data can be achieved. Within qualitative case study research, interviews, observations, and documents are the prevalent approaches for collecting data (Merriam, 1998, 2009). Other authors suggest that images, webpages and social media are appropriate sources for data collection (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers utilizing a phenomenological case study may choose journals and other writings from participants as data sources that can be examined as primary sources for capturing the lived experiences and changes in thinking over time by participants (Creswell, 2013).

## **APPROACHES FOR ANALYZING DATA**

As with collecting data, there are also many approaches for analyzing case study evidence, although this aspect of case study research is the least developed (Yin, 2014). Therefore, having an analytic strategy at the onset of the qualitative case study research is necessary. Yin (2014) identified five analytic techniques: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis (p. 101).

Other strategies for analysis include thematic analysis which is the most common type of analysis in basic qualitative research and familiar to experienced researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and is applicable for looking for patterns and themes in qualitative case study data. Also, Bazeley (2012) advocated for comparative analyses, relational analyses (including cross-case analyses) including visual strategies for cross-case analyses appropriate for case study research. Further, Bryman and Bell (2015) offered qualitative content analysis, semiotics, and historical analysis for examining and interpreting existing available documents such as personal documents, public documents, organizational, mass media, visual, and virtual documents for qualitative case study research. And, for phenomenological case studies, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was suggested by Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) for giving voice to participants while leveraging the researcher as an actor in understanding the phenomena under investigation (see also Smith & Osborn, 2003, 2007).

## **USING TECHNOLOGY FOR ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY DATA**

Yin (2014) described the need for leveraging technology for creating a case study database that organizes and documents data collected including all materials gathered in the field and subsequently suggested computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) as one high-tech alternative. By doing so, a CAQDAS can be utilized as a repository for the database and will preserve the data in an orderly way which “markedly increases the reliability of your entire case study” (p. 124). This line of thought was echoed by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2011) who discussed how such software increases the rigor of a qualitative study and described how seven popular data analyses including constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) could be accomplished with CAQDAS.

One popular software program, NVivo (QSR.com) was mentioned by a number of researchers for its utility in managing and facilitating analysis of large data sets such as case study research (Basu, Hicks, Krivokapic-Skoko, & Sherley, 2015; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Also, an example of the constant comparative analysis process is illustrated in McWhorter, Delello, Roberts, Raisor and Fowler, 2013. In addition, Table 1 presents comparative features of NVivo to selected CAQDAS software.

Table 1. Comparative Features of Selected Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) Platforms

Name of Software	Publisher Website	Available Formats	Key Features	Subscription Cost
ATLAS.ti	Atlasti.com	Windows: Vista, 7, 8, and 10; and Macintosh formats  Also, App for iPad offers various essential features for data collection, viewing, analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect and begin data analysis on iOS and Android devices</li> <li>• High quality visualization tools</li> <li>• Multi-language options</li> <li>• Geo-Data embedded through built-in links to GoogleEarth™</li> </ul>	Student Versions begin at \$51 USD and €39  Also, trial versions available
MAXQDA	Maxqda.com	Windows and Mac OS X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numerous Mixed-Methods Features</li> <li>• AutoCode and Intercoder features</li> <li>• Focus Group Analysis</li> <li>• Import from Twitter</li> </ul>	Student Versions begin at \$36 USD and €37  Also, trial version available
NVivo	QSRInternational.com	Windows and Mac OS X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NVivo for Teams provide collaboration in secure environment</li> <li>• Import from multi-media and social media</li> <li>• Import references from various reference software platforms</li> </ul>	Sign up for Price Quote  Also, trial version available

Although CAQDAS can act as a repository for a plethora of data gathered in case study research, and CAQDAS such as NVivo can also perform various initial analytical functions, cautions have been issued to researchers not to rely too heavily on these digital tools for analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, Slate, Stark, Sharma, & Frels, 2012; Yin, 2014). Instead, researchers are encouraged to hone the human instrument for analyzing qualitative case study data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and utilize these platforms for the purposes for which they were designed.

When compared to high-tech features of CAQDAS, word processors and spreadsheets are a cost-effective low-tech option. As Yin (2014) pointed out, routinely used word processing tools such as Excel and Word can be utilized for arranging numerical and narrative data, but he advised researchers to keep the set of documents well-organized so that others could audit or examine the collected data easily. For detailed examples of how these low-tech tools can be utilized, see Ruona (2005).



## WRITING UP AND PRESENTING CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Qualitative case study researchers must be adept at writing up their findings so that the results can be accurately and thoughtfully disseminated (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Merriam (1998), writing qualitative case study findings can be “particularly daunting...because data collection and analysis is continuous and simultaneous in qualitative research, there is no clean cutoff—no time when everything else stops and writing begins” (p. 220). Also, there is typically a large amount of data that must be sorted, chosen, and woven into a meaningful narrative; and, no agreed upon format to do so. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offered the give steps for the writing process that include: first, assemble the materials pertinent to the study in an organized way; second, determine the audience based on who will be reading the report. This could include practitioners, peers in the field or discipline, or general public. Third, the researcher must select a primary focus for the write-up that is conditional on the audience and denote the original purpose of the study. For instance, if for a dissertation committee, the report would look much different than for a business magazine article or peer-reviewed journal article both in its format and in the level of detail and style of writing. The fourth step is writing an outline for the report with suggested number of pages for each section; and, the final step is to begin writing utilizing the created outline as a guide.

The presentation of the findings should include the three components, particular description (quotes from sources of data), general description (patterns in the data), and interpretive commentary (provided to guide reader through descriptions) which are essential to the reader’s understanding. Failing to do so “is perhaps the most serious flaw in much reporting of fieldwork research” (Erickson, 1986, p. 151 in Merriam, 2009, p. 235).

## FINAL POINTS: AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS

Scholars have assessed the rigor type and quality of some previously published case study research in management and within the supply chain context have acknowledged that several shortcomings have been identified that can provide guidance to other researchers to improve the quality of case study research (da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012; Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010; Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008). In particular, Gibbert and Ruigrok (2010) provided three strategies that include: talk the walk, priority ordering of validity types: internal and construct validity over external validity, and necessity is the mother of rigor: creatively use setbacks and make best use of existing resources. Talk the walk refers to those studies deemed to have addressed rigor extensively and reflect those that “focus on the concrete research actions that were taken and carefully walk readers through their methodological choices and decisions” (p. 725). In terms of the second strategy, authors demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of validity and reliability criteria and the relationships among them, but also prioritized internal and construct validity over external validity. Lastly, authors described “some of the challenges and problems that were encountered...” (p. 730). Further, da Mota Pedrosa et al. (2012) acknowledged that authors could improve the description and justification of the selection of the cases, reporting of the unit of analysis, and how analysis was specifically done. In addition, the notable lack of pilot studies was a pitfall that can be avoided.

## CONCLUSION

This article has established qualitative case study research as a powerful form of inquiry when the researcher desires to address ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions as well as to provide rich, thick, description of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context. It is a flexible approach given the array of approaches for collecting and analyzing data.

However, despite the many strengths and benefits associated with conducting rigorous qualitative case study research, there are some drawbacks that need to be acknowledged. Qualitative case study research is time and resource intensive and does require thoughtful consideration to a number of issues at each stage of the research process as articulated in this article. Such research is also “limited, too, by the sensitivity and integrity of the investigator” (Merriam, 2009, p. 52). Undertaking qualitative case

study research requires the researcher to be the human instrument which means that the researcher must rely upon his/her abilities and instincts which may not be fully developed or applied. Also, potential biases can surface in the development of the case study report and therefore the researcher should be aware of his/her own biases and present balanced evidence from the case (Merriam, 2009). Lastly, scholars have acknowledged that there is the “inability to generalize from case study findings” (Yin, 2014, p. 20). However, Yin raised a valid point when he noted that “generalizations in science are rarely based on single experiments; they are usually based on a multiple set of experiments that have replicated the same phenomenon under different conditions” (2014, p. 20).

Ultimately, as Merriam (2009) concluded, “much can be learned from a particular case study” (p. 51). Therefore, it is our fond hope that the content of this article provides an initial primer to help students and researchers get acquainted with qualitative case study research. However, it is not intended to serve as the only resource for such an undertaking. It will be necessary for students and researchers interested in this form of inquiry to immerse themselves in seminal texts as well as to examine outstanding and award winning qualitative case study research articles and dissertations so that many of the criticisms associated with case study research in general can be overcome. We conclude by providing highly recommended and relevant sources in Table 2.

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**Table 2. Highly recommended case study research and qualitative case study research resources**

Books	Award Winning and Highly Commended Refereed Articles	Award Winning Doctoral Dissertations
Merriam, S. B. (1998). <i>Qualitative research and case study applications in education</i> (2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.	Ellinger, A. D. (2005). Contextual factors influencing informal learning in a workplace setting: The case of “Reinventing Itself Company”. <i>Human Resource Development Quarterly</i> , 16(3), 389-415. Richard A. Swanson Research Excellence Award, Academy of Human Resource Development.	Balboa, C. M. (2009). <i>When non-governmental organizations govern: Accountability in private conservation networks</i> . Yale University. Rudney Memorial Award 2010 for Outstanding Dissertation, The Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action.
Merriam, S. B. (2009). <i>Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation</i> . San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.	Wofford, M. G., Ellinger, A. D., & Watkins, K. E. (2013). Learning on the fly: Exploring the informal learning process of aviation instructors. <i>Journal of Workplace Learning</i> , 25(2), 79-97.	Smith, T. S. (2011). <i>A case study of the Lincoln Theatre in Columbus, OH: A participatory social action study</i> . University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Illinois Distinguished Qualitative Dissertation Award, Honorable Mention. Congress of Qualitative Inquiry.
Stake, R. (2010). <i>Qualitative research: Studying how things work</i> . New York: The Guilford Press.	Li, L., Gray, D., Lockwood, A., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Learning about managing the business in the hospitality industry. <i>Human Resource Development Quarterly</i> , 24(4), 525-559. Highly Commended.	Wofford, M. G. (2012). <i>Examining the influence of frames of reference on flight instructors’ process of informal learning in an aviation training setting</i> Malcolm Knowles Dissertation of the Year First Place Finalist 2011-2012 presented by The Academy of Human Resource Development.
Yin, R. K. (2012). <i>Applications of case study research</i> (3 <sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.	Muir, D. (2014). Mentoring and leader identity development: A case study. <i>Human Resource Development Quarterly</i> , 25(3), 349-379. Highly Commended.	Cowan, A. M. (2013). <i>Sea change: A sensemaking perspective on competing institutional logics</i> . University of Oxford. Best Dissertation Award 2014, Academy of Management.
Yin, R. K. (2014). <i>Case study research: Design and methods</i> (5 <sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.	Lamprinakos, L. (2016). Participative organizational change and adaptation: Insights from a qualitative case study of successful change. <i>Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal</i> , 29(2), 10-13. Highly Commended.	Follman, J. M. (2015). <i>Co-coordinated volunteer programs at U.S. national parks</i> . Retrieved from <a href="http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/1669973664.html?FMT=AI&amp;pubnum=3687557">http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/1669973664.html?FMT=AI&amp;pubnum=3687557</a> AHRD.org 2015 nominee and runner-up for Esworthy Malcolm S. Knowles Dissertation of the Year Award.

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