Tutorial 1.1

# More on Defining “Case Study”

In *Case Study Research and Applications* (6th ed.), a “case study” means a particular kind of research method. The term parallels those used to refer to other kinds of social science methods, such as an “experiment,” a “survey,” and a “history.” “Case study research” is then the broader mode of inquiry (again, parallel to “experimental research,” “survey research,” and “historical research”), and doing case study research is the topic of the entire book.

The definition of case study in Chapter 1 of the sixth edition retains the essence stated in the book’s first edition (1984). The definition has two parts:

(a) *The scope of a case study*: Investigating a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident and

(b) *A case study’s features*: The situation where there will be many more variables of interest than data points, thereby relying on multiple sources of evidence and benefiting from the development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

Communicating a clear definition is difficult. Some reference works (e.g., Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2006; Schwandt, 2015) give short but incomplete definitions. Other works may use several pages and still not attain clarity (e.g., David, 2006b; Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010b). The two-part definition can also be enhanced to avoid misinterpretations that have arisen with the earlier editions of *Case Study Research and Applications*. The enhancements are as follows:

1. The lack of sharpness between phenomenon and context does not minimize the need to identify a “case” and its singularity as the essential feature of a case study; on the contrary, Chapter 2 (see pp. 28-31) discusses the challenge of defining the “case” in great detail.

2. The term in-depth, especially when studying a contemporary phenomenon, implies the likely need for some kind of fieldwork, to get you up close to the case being studied.

3. The term contemporary phenomenon embraces a broad notion of studying the present that also includes the recent past—just not a study limited entirely to those events in the “dead” past, where no direct observations can be made and no people are alive to be interviewed (doing a history would be the relevant method under those conditions).

4. Having more variables of interest than data points arises from the complexity of the case and its context—hence, many variables (Appendix A of the sixth edition explains how the multiplicity of variables can arise in psychology case studies), with the case being the only “data point.” The use of this language does not mean that case studies are variable-based; on the contrary, the multiplicity of variables raises doubts about the usefulness of conventional variable-based methods in analyzing case study data, thereby favoring holistic approaches.

As a final clarification, the sixth edition’s discussion of when to use case study research focuses on its “niche,” compared to other modes of social science inquiry. The discussion was not intended to be used as the definition of “case study.” Similarly, the use of “case study” as a research method differs from other uses of the same term when a “case study” is not necessarily following any explicit research procedures, such as the case studies in the popular literature and media (“popular case studies”) or the case studies in professional training settings (“teaching and practice case studies”)—see “nonresearch” case studies, pp. 18-20, as well as the preface.

# Briefly Annotated References for Tutorial 1.1

Abercrombie, N., Hill, S., & Turner, B. S. (2006). The Penguin dictionary of sociology (5th ed.). London: Penguin. Presents a pocket dictionary, with references, of terms used in sociology.

David, M. (2006b). Editor’s introduction. In M. David (Ed.), Case study research (pp. xxiii–xlii). London: Sage. Contains nearly 100 reprints of source materials for case study research.

Mills, A. J., Durepos, G., & Wiebe, E. (2010b). Introduction. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Eds.), Encyclopedia of case study research (pp. xxxi–xxxvi). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Introduces a two-volume encyclopedia devoted to case study research.

Schwandt, T. A. (2015). The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry (3th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage. Defines terms, with references, used in qualitative research.