

## Comparing Case Study and Grounded Theory as Qualitative Research Approaches

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**Abstract:** The grounded theory and case study all have one thing in common the general process of research that begins with a research problem and proceeds to the questions, the data collection, the data analysis and interpretations and the research report. However they differ as well, yet the differences between the two have inadequate had been made clear in the literature. The purpose of this article was based to clarify doubts and reduce uncertainty about case study and grounded theory by identifying similarities and differences in the two based on a literature review of journals and books and critical reflection on the authors own research. Two areas the definitions and characteristics differentiate the two approaches were addressed. This article provides knowledge that can assist researchers and students in the selection of appropriate research methods for the investigations.

**Keyword:** Qualitative research approaches, grounded theory, case study, definitions, characteristics

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### 1. Introduction

Case study and grounded theory are two of the most popular qualitative research approaches. As more intellectuals have interests in researching social phenomena, the application of case study and grounded theory are growing rapidly. For example most of the medical and psychology research tend to apply case studies while grounded theory is used in cases where there is very little is known about a particular phenomenon. It is important to understand the background of each method before choosing which technique that will appropriate to our research. Grounded theory was the innovative brainchild of two American Sociologists, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (Kenny & Fourie, 2014). They were unhappy about the way in which existing theories dominated sociological research. They argued that researchers needed a method that would allow them to move from data to theory, so that new theories could emerge. When The Discovery of Grounded Theory was published in 1967 (Glaser and Strauss), it introduced qualitative researchers in the social sciences to a new methodology. Thus this article firstly describes several concerns about case study, followed by grounded theory and some conclusions.

### 2. Methodology

This article is based on a review of existing literature on the definitions and characteristics of case study and grounded theory approaches in qualitative research. The study reviewed relevant literatures including journals and books.

### 3. Case Study, Ground Theory Definitions and Characteristics

#### 3.1 Case Study, Definitions and Characteristics

There are several definitions of case study as a research approach. First case study is defined as an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units (Gustafsson, 2017). Another description is written by MacDonald & Walker (1975) that case study is 'the study of the instance in action'. Similarly Yin (1994) defined case study in terms of the research process when he stated a case study "is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within the real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident".

Also Wilson (1979) conceptualized the case study as a process "which tries to describe and analyze some entity in qualitative complex and comprehensive terms not in frequently as it unfolds over a period of time".

Case method is most useful when the research is focused on a "specific, unique, bounded system" (Stake, 1998), and often employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques (Yin,

2003). The focus of the case can be an individual, an event, a family, an organization, or even a place (Mariano, 1995). The uniqueness of case method lies in the focus of the study on the case (Stake, 1998).

Furthermore Yin, (2003) define case method is a research design that is often guided by a framework and is useful to investigate a complex contemporary phenomenon using multiple data sources. Note that the credibility of a case study might be obtained through continuously making descriptions and interpretations during the period of the study.

### **When Would You Use It?**

Case study is an ideal method, when first the aim of research is to find answers to „why“ and „how“ types of questions and It is not possible to control the behavioral events (Teegavarapu, Summers, & Mocko,2009). Similarly Eisenhardt (1989) says that case studies are:

*Particularly well suited to new research areas or research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate. This type of work is highly complementary to incremental theory building from normal science research. The former is useful in early stages of research on a topic or when a fresh perspective is needed, whilst the latter is useful in later stages of knowledge (pp.548-549).*

As a qualitative research approach, a case might be an individual or a group/collective; it might also be simple or complex (Suryani, 2008). Here below are some of the examples of case study as identified by Heale (2017).

Example 1: Nurses' paediatric pain management practices.

He used a case study approach to explore nurses' paediatric pain management practices.

Example 2: Quality of care for complex patients at Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinics (NPLCs)

He conducted a multiple-case study to determine the quality of care for patients with complex clinical presentations in NPLCs in Ontario, Canada.

### **Case Study Strategies for Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection, and in general the execution of a good case study, depend crucially upon the competence of the researcher (Rowley, 2002). This means that the researcher undertaking data collection needs to be able to ask good questions, to listen and to interpret the answers. Also this involves having a sound grasp of the questions and propositions of the case study, and being able to approach the study in an unbiased, and flexible manner.

Data collection should be guided by a case study protocol. According to Rowley (2002) suggest the protocol needs to include the following sections: first an overview of the case study project second field procedures, such as use of different sources of information, and access arrangements to these sources and last case study questions, or the questions that the case study researcher needs to keep in mind when collecting data. In case of data analysis Rowley (2002) argue that data analysis of this rich resource is based on examining, categorising and tabulating evidence to assess whether the evidence supports or otherwise the initial propositions of the study. Furthermore Rowley (2002) states that in general, there are no cookbook procedures that have been agreed for the analysis of case study results, but good case study analysis adhere to the following principles:

1. The analysis makes use of all of the relevant evidence
2. The analysis considers all of the major rival interpretations, and explores each of them in turn
3. The analysis should address the most significant aspect of the case study
4. The analysis should draw on the researcher's prior expert knowledge in the area of the case study, but in an unbiased and objective manner.

### **Strength**

There are some advantages in using a case study as a qualitative research approach. First, a case study may offer larger details about a particular phenomenon. For instance, it may include narrative and a specific description about a particular activity, personal relationship or a group interpretation.

Second, as mentioned by Stake and Trumbull (1982 as cited in Stake, 2005) the readers of a case study may obtain *naturalistic generalizations* from personal or *vicarious experience*. In other words, people can share and understand others' social experience.

The third strength is that a case study provides a holistic interpretation and always refers to a social context. Additionally, it does not involve any treatments, experiments or manipulated social settings. Consequently, the data will be considered as natural phenomena in people's real lives. Finally, I think a case

study will probably not spend much budget as other methods such as experiments and surveys do, but it depends on the type and the period of the research.

Fourth according to Starman (2013) case study suitable for deriving new hypotheses. Case studies are very suitable for serving the heuristic purpose of inductively identifying additional variables and new hypotheses. Quantitative studies lack procedures for inductively generating new hypotheses.

Sixth also Starman (2013) states that case studies are able to accommodate complex causal relations<sup>1</sup>, such as equifinality,<sup>2</sup> complex interaction effects, and path dependency.<sup>12</sup> This advantage is relative rather than absolute. Case studies can allow for equifinality by producing generalizations that are narrower and more contingent.

### **Weakness**

According to Flyvbjerg (2011) identified five misunderstandings about case studies that undermine the credibility and application of this research approach as follows:

- General, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge
- It is impossible to generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development.
- The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses (that is, in the first stage of a total research process), whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building.
- Case studies contain a bias toward verification; that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions.
- It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies

Likewise according to Suryani (2017) noted another limitation of case studies is that the researchers may not be able to cover all issues and offer a *scientific generalization* because they tend to have limited evidence, not as many as quantitative research. Also Suryani (2017) insists that case studies often rely on *subjective data*, such as the participants' statements or the researchers' observations, because most case studies focus on human experiences. Consequently, data will vary based on the participant's description, opinion, and feeling.

Lastly according to George and Bennett (2005) are convinced that case study is especially well-suited for theory development because it tackles the following tasks in the research process even better than other methods (for an example

- Process tracing that links causes and outcomes,
- Detailed exploration of hypothesized causal mechanisms,
- Development and testing of historical explanations,
- Understanding the sensitivity of concepts to context, and
- Formation of new hypotheses and new questions to study sparked by deviant cases.

When we discuss about limitation, I think there is a need to discuss how to limit them in case study approach. According to Sturman (1997) suggests nine strategies to achieve the credibility in a case study:

- Procedures for data collection should be explained,
- Data collected should be displayed and ready for reanalysis,
- Negative instances should be reported,
- Biases should be acknowledged,
- Fieldwork analyses need to be documented,
- The relationship between assertion and evidence should be clarified,
- Primary evidence should be distinguished from secondary evidence and description and interpretation should also be distinguished,
- Diaries or logs should be used to track what was actually done during different stages of the study, and
- Methods should be devised to check the quality of data.

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<sup>1</sup> Causal mechanism: "Y happened because of A, in spite of B," whereas A means a set of participative causes and B means a potentially empty space of opposite causes (A cannot be empty; otherwise, it would not be able to explain Y).

<sup>2</sup> Equifinality means that the same end result can be obtained in different ways

Not only that but also other scholar Mesec (1998) states that a case study is more reliable as much as we are able to show that we could come to the same conclusions if we are able to repeat the survey under an unchanged state of circumstances. This requires accurate and detailed description of data acquisition procedures as well as documenting every single piece of information.

### **3.2 Ground Theory Definitions and Characteristics**

Grounded theory may be defined as ‘the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The aim of grounded theory is: ‘to generate or discover a theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Likewise Wolcott (1980) argues that the grounded theory approach is an appropriate way to study human behaviour on a sensitive topic even in a different cultural context (Wolcott, 1980). Also Grounded theory is one of the data collection approach in qualitative research methods which is totally based on data rather than try to emerge theory from data (Khan, 2014).

Moreover Opie (2004) defined grounded theory is a process of collecting qualitative data and undertaking data analysis to generate categories (a theory) to explain a phenomenon of interested. Equally, Creswell (2012) viewed grounded theory as a powerful tool when a researcher needs a broad theory or explanation of a natural phenomenon. Creswell (2012) also viewed that the emerging theory is “grounded” or rooted in the data, thus it will provide a more sophisticated explanation than a theory derived from other studies.

#### **When Would You Use It?**

It’s Ideal for exploring integral social relationships and the behavior of groups where there has been little exploration of the contextual factors that affect individual’s lives (Crooks 2001). Also ‘get though and beyond conjecture and preconception to exactly the underlying processes of what is going on, so that professionals can intervene with confidence to help resolve the participant's main concerns’ (Glaser 1978).

#### **Grounded Theory Strategies for Data Collection and Analysis**

According to (Khan, 2016) in a grounded theory approach, the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups can be used to get data. Here the aim of data collection and analysis is to identify and explore the antecedents and factors associated with the phenomenon of the study according to the employees’ perception. Then the interview data will be transcribed and analysed through coding and constant comparison process, keeping in view the constructivist grounded theory approach. Analysed data of interviews along with the literature will be used to integrate and for the development of conceptual thinking and theory building.

#### **Strength**

There are some advantages in using a case study as a qualitative research approach. First, a case study may offer larger details about a particular phenomenon. For instance, it may include narrative and a specific description about a particular activity, personal relationship or a group interpretation. Second, as mentioned by Stake (2005) states that the readers of a case study may obtain *naturalistic generalizations* from personal or *vicarious experience*. In other words, people can share and understand others’ social experience.

The third strength is that a case study provides a holistic interpretation and always refers to a social context. Additionally, it does not involve any treatments, experiments or manipulated social settings. Consequently, the data will be considered as natural phenomena in people’s real lives. Finally, I think a case study will probably not spend much budget as other methods such as experiments and surveys do, but it depends on the type and the period of the research.

Fourth strength is that it allows you to tighten what I is known as corkscrew or the hermeneutic spiral so that you end up with a theory that perfectly matches your data. Because you choose the next people to talk to or the next cases to find based upon the [theoretical] analysis and you don’t waste your time with all sorts of things that have nothing to do with your developing theory (Khan, 2014).

Five strength is that Unique to grounded theory, according to Bryant (2002), grounded theory takes researchers’ perceptions into account in the research process. In other words, grounded theory offers opportunities the researchers to use their values and understanding in order to generate a new theory for a very complex phenomenon (Chong & Yeo, 2015).

#### **Weakness**

According to Suddaby (2006) points out, the apparent simplicity of the method can lead new researchers into thinking that grounded theory is ‘easy’ whereas, in reality, ‘the seamless craft of a well-

executed grounded theory study... is the product of considerable experience, hard work, creativity and, occasionally, a healthy dose of good luck’.

Furthermore Cho & Lee (2014) identified the following weakness of grounded theory as follows:

- Because of the number of variations in the original grounded theory text, novice researchers experience confusion in conducting their research. Researchers need to conduct their research with understanding of different coding processes from different versions.
- It does not provide a predefined research sampling process. In order to achieve saturation in theoretical sampling, the researcher must exercise stringent theoretical sensitivity in the data analysis process.
- It is not an effective process in terms of time and energy because of the labor-intensive coding process. Although the researcher follows a rigorous coding process, he or she may not find any substantial theory. Below table 1 the researcher tried to differentiate the grounded theory approach from the case study qualitative research approach.

**Table 1: Contrasting Characteristics of Two Qualitative Approaches**

Characteristics	Grounded Theory	Case Study
Focus	Developing a theory grounded in data from the field	Developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases
Type of problem best suited for design	Grounding a theory in the views of participants	Providing an in-depth understanding of a case or cases
Discipline background	Drawing from sociology	Drawing from psychology, law, political science, medicine
Unit of analysis	Studying a process, action, or interaction involving many individuals	Studying an event, a program, an activity, more than one individual
Data collection forms	Using primarily interviews with 20 – 60 individuals	Using multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, documents, artifacts
Data analysis strategies	Analyzing data through open coding, axial coding, selective coding	Analyzing data through description of the case and themes of the case as well as cross-case themes
Written report	Generating a theory illustrated in a figure	Developing a detailed analysis of one or more cases

Source: Modified by Creswell (2007; P. 78-79).

#### 4. Conclusion

Generally both grounded theory and case study research approaches are important in qualitative research as each is useful in particular situation for investigation of a certain problem. In qualitative research the theory of one fits all it's not applicable but rather it depends on the nature of the problem to be investigated and in some investigation it demands the use of mixed approaches.

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