

3-1-2011

Welcome (Back) to the Old World: A Review of Peter Swanborn's Case Study Research: What, Why and How?

Maja Miskovic

National Louis University, maja.miskovic@nl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Miskovic, M. (2011). Welcome (Back) to the Old World: A Review of Peter Swanborn's Case Study Research: What, Why and How?. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 617-621. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1079>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

A promotional banner for the Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate at Nova Southeastern University. The banner is split into two sections. The left section has a dark blue background with the text "Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate" in white, followed by the tagline "Indulge in Culture" in a smaller font. Below this, it says "Exclusively Online • 18 Credits" and a "LEARN MORE" button. The NSU logo is in the bottom left. The right section shows a group of six diverse people sitting on a stone ledge in front of a building with "NOVA SOUTHEASTERN" visible on the wall.

Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Welcome (Back) to the Old World: A Review of Peter Swanborn's Case Study Research: What, Why and How?

Abstract

Case Study Research, a book by Peter Swanborn, a former chair of methodology at the Universities of Utrecht and Amsterdam, joins the collection of scholarly sources available to students, researchers and practitioners interested in doing case studies. The author situates the book within a general methodological framework, useful for graduate courses with a strong emphasis on quantitative research, mainly organizational science, information management, marketing, health sciences, and psychology. The book offers precise advice regarding the case study design, steps to be followed in conducting it, and a secure epistemological-methodological space in which appropriate strategies lead to solutions/answers.

Keywords

Case Study, Research Design, Empirical/Analytical Paradigm, and Quantitative Research

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Welcome (Back) to the Old World: A Review of Peter Swanborn's *Case Study Research: What, Why and How?*

Maja Miskovic

NationalLouis University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Case Study Research, a book by Peter Swanborn, a former chair of methodology at the Universities of Utrecht and Amsterdam, joins the collection of scholarly sources available to students, researchers and practitioners interested in doing case studies. The author situates the book within a general methodological framework, useful for graduate courses with a strong emphasis on quantitative research, mainly organizational science, information management, marketing, health sciences, and psychology. The book offers precise advice regarding the case study design, steps to be followed in conducting it, and a secure epistemological-methodological space in which appropriate strategies lead to solutions/answers. Key words: Case Study, Research Design, Empirical/Analytical Paradigm, Quantitative Research

Case Study Research (2010), a book by Peter Swanborn, a former chair of methodology at the Universities of Utrecht and Amsterdam, joins the collection of scholarly sources (Gerring, 2006; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Simmons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2008) available to students, researchers and practitioners interested in doing case studies. Although Swanson does not position himself within any particular research epistemology – nor is the issue of researcher's positionality discussed in the book – this text is firmly embedded within an empirical/analytical paradigm. The author situates his book within “a general methodological framework,” stressing that the book is not “a handbook on ‘qualitative methods,’” but is rather useful for graduate courses with a “strong emphasis on quantitative research” (p. viii). For this reason, the Swanborn text may be of special interest to readers of *The Qualitative Report* who would like to compare qualitative and quantitative approaches to case study research.

Indeed, the quantitative ethos thoroughly permeates each of the seven chapters, which are primarily concerned with the design features (formulating research questions, sampling, data collection and analysis, validity and reliability). For example, data is divided into hard and soft, validity understood in a strictly traditional manner, with a note about alternative criteria as “one of the less fruitful enterprises in the social sciences” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 36), while reliability still depends on the classical principle, the more the better, which in case study research translates as: “a multiple case design is considered to be a series of replications of measurement of the same phenomenon under different, but hopefully irrelevant conditions” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 46). The stage is set up in the first chapter where case studies are seen as a form of an intensive approach to research, focusing on variables and the ways the scores on pairs or sets of variables change over time (versus extensive research, whereupon a researcher collects data on a large number of instances). Swanborn defines a case study as the study of social phenomena that is:

- Carried out within the boundaries of a social system (individuals people, organizations, groups, local communities and nation-states);
- Conducted in the case's natural setting;
- Focused on process;
- Guided by an initially broad question, which evolves into the precise one, although a case study can start with a hypothesis to be tested;
- Based on several data sources – and Swanborn repeatedly stresses the exact order to be followed – document analysis, interviews, and observations.

These features could be played out on multiple levels – micro, meso, and macro – and Swanborn's (2010) focus throughout the book is on the meso level, that is, within organizations, since marketing, human resources management, and management information systems are the most popular branches of case study research. Certainly, sociology, education, psychology, and health sciences students are a suitable audience for this book. However, those who, just like Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994), those cornerstones of many qualitative data analyses sections, call themselves “soft-nosed logical positivists” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 122) will enjoy this book more than interpretivists. The book will hardly speak to post-modernists, let alone post-structuralists. The book is, then, welcoming/beckoning us to the world of an old paradigm, in which qualitative inquiry is still on the fringe.

What to Expect from a Case Study and How to Go About it?

The goal of case studies is to answer broad questions about social processes, and Swanborn (2010) offers helpful examples of research questions - whats, whys, and hows of the social world - for which this methodology is fitting. However, this open-endedness is closed by a claim that case studies begin with a simple causal model that evolves into the search for “intervening variables in a causal chain” (p. 27). The language of models and causality in chapter two, “deviation from the regression line” (p. 52) or “systematic and unit specific variance” (p. 97) in the subsequent chapters strongly associates with an experimental or quasi-experimental design. This stands in a rather sharp contrast with conceptualizations of cases that could be studied analytically *or* holistically, by repeated measures *or* hermeneutically, culturally *or* organically (Stake, 2008, emphasis added). An example of an entirely different research approach would be a fine case study of middle school culture and practices that simultaneously marginalize and recognize the needs of immigrant students (Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbua, 2003), where authors want to “unearth, understand, and illuminate” and are attuned to the “nexus of historical structural arrangements and the discursive relations” (p. 92), or a feminist and critical theory driven exploration of the “interplay of emotions with teaching for social justice” in a novice teacher in an urban school (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008, p. 276), or a playful riff on 1995 Stake's *The Art of Case Study Research*, where a reader/author simultaneously draws together his reflections on learning about case studies and responds to his old self and Stake's book (Watts, 2007).

The underlying philosophy and design questions of such case studies could not be found in Swanborn's (2010) book. A discussion on sampling, for instance, is dominated by the concerns of homogeneous and heterogeneous nature of independent variable(s)

and the “position of a unit relative to its position on a variable” (p. 61). Consequently, the issues of generalization and causality are highly relevant. Swanborn notices that the researchers’ attempts to generalize to other populations, places, times, and circumstances are supported not only by empirical evidence but also by “interpretive argumentation by the researcher” (p. 68). As to the debate on the topic of explanation, Swanborn points to the “vulnerability” of the real cause (p. 91) that cannot be solved by correlation and cross-tabulations. Case study data could be, however, enriched by the following strategies:

- Increasing the number of measurement points in time
- Introducing sub-units
- Increasing the number of cases
- Increasing the number of predictions
- Using several gradations of the independent variables
- Diversifying data collections methods
- Employing several independent observers
- Member checking

These strategies are understood as an extension of the degrees of freedom as a response to criticism that in case studies “the number of units is smaller than the number of variables. As a consequence, the researcher can fit almost any model or theory to the data of the studied case” (Swanborn, 2010, p. 99). Striving for precision achieved via data matrices and models also drive the data analysis process. Acknowledging that the data collected in case study research is multifaceted and multi-sourced, Swanborn discusses five traditions in data analysis, since the most research reports rely on one of the following: (a) the field of changing organizations according to Robert Yin; (b) grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990); (c) data analysis and representation according to Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994); (d) time series analysis; and (e) Charles Ragin’s method, using Boolean logic and fuzzy-set theory.

An objectivist version of grounded theory analysis championed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) has regrettably become synonymous with educational qualitative research, while coding acquired the ultimate status among the methods of data analysis. Miles and Huberman’s (1984, 1994) texts further cemented the positivist path towards the goal of qualitative research, often devoid of interpretive, constructivist, or postmodern takes on the questions of research design and the social, political, cultural and ideological contexts of research practices and consequences. Or as Charmaz (2008), an advocate of constructivist grounded theory, put it, “To date, grounded theorists have emphasized the *overt* – usually overt statements – more than the tacit, the liminal, and the implicit” (p. 211, emphasis in original). It is not surprising then that the reader will find in Swanborn’s (2010) book guidelines for the formation of the tentative theory as the end goal of case analysis “represented in the usual way, with a model consisting of a set of points and arrows” (p. 126), with an aim of case analysis as:

we have to keep in mind that it is not the aim of the researcher to produce a detailed ‘portrait’ of each case, described by a multitude of relevant and

irrelevant properties, but rather, the aim is to solve the problem that the case is set out to address as precisely as possible. (p. 125)

Conclusion

This book is an excellent source for graduate students and researchers in various disciplines immersed in an old positivistic paradigm or a new evidence-based scientific movement. It offers precise advice regarding case study design, steps to be followed in conducting it, and a secure epistemological-methodological space in which appropriate strategies lead to solutions/answers. (To learn more about the book, see an image of the cover, and read Chapter 1 online, you may visit the publisher's website at <http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book234703>.) Certainly, case study methodology is not synonymous with an interpretivist, critical or emancipatory research and, as Swanborn (2010) concluded, case studies could be vivid and picturesque, breathtaking, complex, and illuminating. Also, the goal of this review is not to argue for the superiority of one paradigmatic stance (and all the methodological choices and design considerations that emanate from such a stance) over another, since "the issue is not whether they are right or we are right – we both think we are – but rather is the world of inquiry large enough to accommodate both of our interests?" (Bochner, 2009, p. 367).

In the midst of the well-established presence of multiple ways of knowing and doing, and in the wake of all the "turns" in social sciences and education - linguistic, narrative, visual, and performative, to name a few - it is disheartening (but not surprising) to see the dismissal of *Verstehen* "at the cost of explanation" (Swanborn, 2010, p. 137). This, in effect, relegates case studies that rely on uncovering the layers and webs of relationships "thought of as organic and systemic, heavy with purpose and self" (Stake, 2008, p. 124) into the realm of anecdotal and irrelevant. In reading Swanborn's book, as much as I admired his keen scholarly eye and a sense of research precision, I was reminded of Bochner's (2009) call to researchers to use more imagination and fewer rules, more intuition and less procedure, more warm ideas and less cold facts.

References

- Bochner, A. (2009). Warm ideas and chilling consequences. *International Review of Qualitative research*, 2, 357-370.
- Charmaz, K. (2008). Grounded theory in the 21st century: Applications for advancing social justice studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed., pp. 203-241). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chubbuck, S. M., & Zembylas, M. (2008). The emotional ambivalence of socially just teaching: A case study of a novice urban schoolteacher. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45, 274-318.
- Gerring, J. (2006). *Case study research: Principles and practices*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Gitlin, A., Buendia, E., Crosland, K., & Doumbua, F. (2003). The production of margin and center: Welcoming-unwelcoming of immigrant students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40, 91-122.

- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Hancock, D. R., & Algozzine, R. (2006). *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Simmons, H. (2009). *Case study research in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (2008). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed., pp. 119-149). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Swanborn, P. (2010). *Case study research: What, why and how?* London, UK: Sage.
- Watts, M. (2007). They have tied me to a Stake: Reflections on the art of case study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 204-217.
- Yin, R. (2008). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Author Note

Maja Miskovic is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Foundations and Inquiry at NationalLouis University where she teaches general and qualitative research methods. Her research focuses on teacher education, cultural studies, and social and cultural context of racial and ethnic identity construction utilizing interpretive and critical research paradigms. Correspondence: Maja Miskovic, NationalLouis University, Department of Educational Foundations & Inquiry, 850 Warrenville Road, Lisle, IL 60532, USA (maja.miskovic@nl.edu).

Copyright 2011: Maja Miskovic and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Miskovic, M. (2011). Welcome (back) to the old world: A review of Peter Swanborn's *Case study research: What, why and how?* *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 617-621. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-2/miskovic.pdf>.