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## An Exercise in Rigor: A Review of Robert K. Yin's Case Study Research Design and Methods

### Abstract

In his fourth edition of *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, Robert K. Yin continues to encourage the formation of better case study research. The text provides a technical yet practical guide to aid the committed researcher. It is an effort to promote rigor and to encourage the recognition of the limitations and awareness of the strengths of case study research. Throughout the text, Yin forthrightly addressed criticisms of the method and provided a solid defense of case study research and its breadth as a research method. An unexpected bonus of the text is found in the cross reference table that provides access to a wealth of classic and contemporary case study research.

### Keywords

Case Study Research, Generalizability, Methodology, Rigor, Qualitative Research

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**An Exercise in Rigor:  
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*In his fourth edition of *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, Robert K. Yin continues to encourage the formation of better case study research. The text provides a technical yet practical guide to aid the committed researcher. It is an effort to promote rigor and to encourage the recognition of the limitations and awareness of the strengths of case study research. Throughout the text, Yin forthrightly addressed criticisms of the method and provided a solid defense of case study research and its breadth as a research method. An unexpected bonus of the text is found in the cross reference table that provides access to a wealth of classic and contemporary case study research. Key Words: Case Study Research, Generalizability, Methodology, Rigor, and Qualitative Research*

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*Case Study Research Design and Methods* by Robert K. Yin (2009) is the fourth edition of a Sage release, and volume five in the Applied Social Research Methods Series. By his own admission, Yin considers this volume to be harder than his previous editions. It is shaped by Yin's desire to encourage the formation of better case study research. As such, the book is thorough in explaining the "how" and "when" to use case study as a research methodology. To make the book more useful and practical than the previous edition, Yin includes new tips, practical exercises, endnotes and cross reference tables, and friendlier titles and subtitles. The attempt to include and use new techniques and guidance is to support his goal which is to (a) guide and encourage rigor in case study research, (b) provide ample access to published case studies, (c) demonstrate how case study research methodology is advancing, (d) define the case and the substance of a case, (e) address mixed methods research, and (f) note the importance of human subject protection.

Yin's exemplary presentation helps him to make the argument for an increased presence of case study as a research methodology. It can be viewed as a reminder, particularly to the social science research community, of the validity of case study as a research methodology and the considerable contributions case study research has made to the research community. Yin assertively reaffirms that case study as research, is situated squarely, as a methodology, well within the parameters of modern qualitative social science methodologies.

Throughout the text, Yin competently tackles what he considers the traditional prejudices against the case study method such as characterizing case study as being a less desirable form of inquiry than either experiments or surveys. In doing so, he forthrightly addresses a variety of areas of criticism such as the lack of rigor that produces sloppy investigations, the lack of available texts on the subject of case study methodology, and the confusion of case study teaching with case study research that further exacerbates the

prejudice. Although these symptoms are prevalent in other methodologies, Yin believes they are less frequently overcome in case study research methodology.

Other concerns, that Yin sufficiently refutes, include the charge that case studies provide little basis for scientific generalization, they take too long and result in massive, unreadable documents, and they have no ability to establish causal relationships. In light of this, it is evident why the recurring theme throughout the text, first and foremost, is a call for rigor. A further appeal, to the researcher, is for an awareness of the limitations and appreciation for the strengths of case study as a research method, prior to embarking on what is sure to be, a challenging journey. Both the call for rigor and appeal for awareness and appreciation can be construed as a broader message to the research community in general, particularly those interested in embarking on research that tries to understand complex social phenomena.

In a further discussion, Yin addresses a persistent belief that suggests that there is a hierarchical array of research methods in which researchers consider the case study as a preliminary research method only appropriate in the exploratory phase of research. Yin argues that case study can be more than exploratory. In support of his argument, Yin provides examples of descriptive, explanatory, and generalizable studies from a cache of landmark case studies. For instance, Yin's synopsis of Graham Allison's (1971) rendering of the Cuban missile crisis, which is a single case study, effectively demonstrates how case study research can be both explanatory and generalizable. Another example Yin provides is William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1934/1955), a descriptive case study covering a neighborhood, which has proved to be generalizable across neighborhoods and across time. Lastly, Yin includes Neustadt and Fineberg's government report, *The Swine Flu Affair: Decision Making on a Slippery Disease*, which studies the effects and mechanisms of mass immunization in America. Again, as Yin proves, case study research is not only descriptive but generalizable.

The fact that the Neustadt and Fineberg's study has current significance tends to bear out Yin's argument. So persuasive and potentially generalizable in this global milieu, is the Neustadt and Fineberg example, that the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies has made available to the public, free access to the original report dedicating it to the memory of Richard Neustadt (<http://www.iom.edu/?id=65926>). It will be interesting to discover to which countries Neustadt and Fineberg's research become generalizable as the 2009 Swine Flu pandemic, as characterized by the World Health Organization, progresses. It will be even more exciting if it is proven that the free public access to Neustadt and Fineberg's research was instrumental in developing strategies, particularly in poor countries, that eventually saved lives. This would mean that case study research was generalizable, saved lives, and could be easily produced and distributed in an electronic format. This outcome would effectively dispel the criticisms and perhaps stimulate discussions that promote the virtues of case study research.

Yin presents a fairly serious read that is written with a focus towards the more committed researcher not the casual observer. The organization of the book centers on the "doing" of case study research as a linear but iterative process. The book is a compilation of six chapters and 219 pages that offer practical suggestions and technical discussions of elements of the case study to include the plan, design, preparation, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Each chapter is introduced by a series of bullet points which serve as talking points to guide and focus discussion. Further, each chapter has an

abstract which acts to synthesize chapter contents. Yin chose this method as a strategy to help the reader more easily determine whether the information in the chapter offers something of interest or whether skipping to another chapter would be more appropriate to the task at hand. Yin included in the book, a visual design of the linear but iterative process. Within each chapter, Yin uses an element of the design to help situate the chapter within the overall methodological process. My impression is that the design offers an intuitive presentation of a complex subject and I found it to be an effective approach.

In reviewing each chapter I took note of the breadth of material that was used to aide the discussion. After the talking points and abstract, Yin opens each conversation by building upon the discussion in the previous chapter. I think that the decision to include tips in this version of the book is an effective strategy to provoke analysis and encourage the reader to consider various actions in order to successfully exploit the methodology. For instance, in case study research the design is not codified, therefore Yin included a tip to suggest to the researcher that it is an appropriate strategy to consider changing cases if sufficient access to data cannot be obtained. This seemingly obvious tip may not be apparent to anxious researchers trying to feel their way along a new research path. Prominently situated within each chapter are further exercises that are designed to reinforce the topic. This is a change from the previous edition in that it locates the exercise next to the topic. Again, I think this helps focus the discussion.

The book provided me with the necessary insight I needed to understand a rather complex process. Yin's competence helped introduce me to the richness that is inherent in this methodology. Furthermore, the book facilitated my introduction to some of the most important landmark cases that this methodology has contributed to the realm of social science research. In fact, I would recommend this book even if it contained nothing else but the extraordinary collection of case study research. The cross reference tables at the end of each chapter make access relatively easy and makes for a fascinating read. Prior to reading the book, I considered the case study research method as only appropriate as an exploratory methodology. Furthermore, I confused case study research with case study as a teaching tool. Thankfully, Yin effectively cleared up these misconceptions. Clearly, as a novice researcher trying to prepare a dissertation, this would not be a research methodology that I would choose. Yin clearly advocates for an investment in time not only in operation but in the study of case study methodology as a social science methodology. So effective was Yin's defense of case study as a rigorous methodology that it had the effect of increasing my appreciation for case study research as a methodology and engendered a new respect and consideration for its use.

The essence of *Case Study Research Design and Methods* can be found within the first chapter where Yin vigorously builds the case for case study research. His discussion defining case study and his endeavor to provide a logical definition is an important contribution to the field of social science research. Further within the chapter, Yin offers a frank discussion of the pitfalls that can be found within the methodology that can be appreciated by any level of researcher. Finally, Yin's call for rigor can truly be appreciated when reading his defense of case study research as a methodology. This book is full of ideas and concepts with a treasure trove of case study resources. It is a veritable roadmap detailing the methodological process of case study research. If you are a research student, this is a must read book that should be in your library.

### References

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### Author Note

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