

# FOREWORD

I have been using the case study for almost twenty years as the main research method for all my funded projects, for the case method can provide a sound basis for research. Case studies used as a research tool should be distinguished from another type of case study that is common in teaching, where they are used in a more limited way to illustrate a point or highlight a key learning component (Kennedy 1979; Stake 1994).

Interestingly enough, it used to be much harder to disseminate the results of case-study-based research within the academic community. Quantitative research was the dominant paradigm and the validity of any findings generated by the case method was questioned.

Research based on the case method was viewed with scepticism because of what critics saw as poor design and unsystematic procedures (Yin 1981b; Scholz 2001). This is not surprising since the advocates of positivism focused on the development of universal laws, whereas the case approach focuses on the specific characteristics of the phenomena of interest (Altheide and Johnson 1994). At the time, a number of researchers in the social field argued that the case study was less important than studies producing generalizations for a whole population or for many cases (Stake 1994).

Today, however, the research community has moved almost to the opposite end of the spectrum: not only has the case method become “scientifically correct” but there also seems to be a bias in favour of it within the academic community. In addition, many research programs that base their activities primarily on the quantitative approach often use case studies as a complementary method. This is true for most research fields (at least in the social sciences), for a variety of subjects requiring exploratory research at some level, and in many study contexts. This change is, of course, due in part to the advent of postmodernism, which has affected all disciplines and given new impetus and credibility to the social sciences, arts and philosophy (Agger 1990; Lehman 1991; Lyotard 1979; Richardson 1994). After all, postmodernism is quintessentially a means of challenging any method, theory or discourse that claims sole ownership of the truth or authoritative knowledge (Richardson 1994).

That being said, postmodernism does not automatically reject conventional methods of knowledge acquisition. What it does do is raise questions about such methods and propose other methods that must, in their turn, be assessed as well. Thus while I have defended the qualitative approach to research, I also believe it must meet the same requirements as the quantitative approach. Of course, the qualitative approach is based on a different rationale and different tools, but the validity and reliability of the evidence underpinning the accuracy of the research results must be demonstrated just as clearly and convincingly.

The growing popularity of the case study method has spawned many publications on the subject, but they suffer from two main weaknesses. First, few of them give a full and practical explanation of how to ensure valid, reliable results. Second, hardly any of them provide a structured, integrated and complete guide to conducting a case study. Yin (2008) has perhaps come closest to doing so. The

bottom line is that a guide must be a means not only of ensuring *a priori* but also of verifying *a posteriori* the rigorousness of the research process and providing assurance that the findings are accurate.

The purpose of this handbook is, precisely, to give researchers a tool to help them make an informed decision on whether the case method is appropriate and, if it is, to provide them with a guide to help them conduct the study with the required degree of rigour. The handbook covers the appropriateness and usefulness of the case study method, ways of ensuring accuracy of results, the required preparatory work, case selection, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of results. The objective of each of the above stages is outlined, along with the main steps to be carried out.

As one would expect, this handbook is full of practical examples with a focus on the various components of the research process rather than on the results. One particular example is used throughout the guide so that the reader can follow a specific case study from start to finish. It involves a research project that I carried out on the behaviour exhibited by executives of medium-sized businesses during the introduction of new technologies. I chose it because it formed the basis of my Ph.D. thesis and the work was closely and continuously supervised by a committee of three professors, one of whom was inclined towards the quantitative approach in his thinking and research activities. The principles and philosophy underpinning the quantitative approach were therefore a constant in my thesis project. The thesis itself is over 300 pages long and describes in detail every stage in the case study, the rationale behind it, the steps in it and the results achieved. An entire chapter is devoted to showing how, in practical terms, the reliability and validity of the data has been ensured. The results have been published in articles in two international journals (Gagnon and Toulouse 1993, 1996), which is to say the approach has been subject to further peer review and found to be sound.

After completing my thesis, I decided to generalize my research results by applying a quantitative approach and, in particular, developing and administering a questionnaire. Once again, the results were reported in two scholarly publications (Gagnon 2001; Gagnon, Sicotte and Posada 2000).

Many other examples are given to illustrate specific aspects of the case method. They show that the method is applicable to a broad range of fields in addition to management, the discipline from

which my core example is taken. To make this handbook as useful as possible as a practical guide, I also provide a step-by-step checklist in an appendix.

Of course, in preparing a practical guide, one has to make choices. I wanted to include only points that would help researchers carry out case studies, while ensuring that the approach was rigorous. Accordingly, this handbook does not include a more philosophical, or epistemological, section outlining the various schools of thought on, and possible approaches to, planning and executing each stage and step. Nor does it revisit the main debates and arguments on the case study as a research method or take a position on them. The reader should therefore use and judge this handbook with these considerations in mind.