

Encyclopedia of Case Study Research

Case Study Database

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A case study database is a primary method for organizing and warehousing case study data and analyses—including notes, narratives, tabular material, and documents—in a single space. This entry describes the elements of a high-quality case study database as well as the four compartments embedded in most case study databases.

Conceptual Overview and Discussion

Prescribed by case study methodologist Robert K. Yin, a case study database is an increasingly useful analytical tool that strengthens the reliability of case study research. Although most books on field methods have not recognized case study databases as an important methodological technique, the failure to craft a formal database may be deemed a major shortcoming of case study research. Instead of creating a case study database to establish a clear audit trail, many researchers engaged in case study research do show their data separately from the final case study report, it is blended into the narrative of the report. To offer only case study data that is blended with the narrative in the final case study report leaves a critical reader with no opportunity to examine the raw data that led to the case study's conclusions.

Although there is no uniform approach to establishing a case study database, the quality of a database is evaluated by the extent to which other researchers are able to understand how the collected data support claims made in the final case study report through perusal of the database. A formal case study database not only enables researchers who are not involved in the case study project to juxtapose data collected and cited in the database with claims made and conclusions drawn, but such a database also increases the reliability of the overall case study. Thus, to prepare a case study database that is reliable and usable for secondary analysis, a high level of clarity and specificity within the organization of the database is required to ensure accuracy of the data and data analysis.

Compartments Embedded in Case Study Databases

There are four compartments embedded in a case study database: notes, documents, tabular materials, [p. 80 ↓] and narratives. Each compartment is described in the subsections below.

Notes

Case study notes, the most common compartment of a case study database, are messages derived from interviews, observations, and/or document analysis completed throughout the case study research process. While notes may be generated in a variety of ways (e.g., handwritten, typed, or audiotape format), the most convenient way to organize and categorize notes is to ensure that they are easily understandable and accessible for later examination by research and nonresearch team members.

While there is no precise, systematic way in which case study notes must be organized, a common technique is to divide notes into the major subjects as outlined in the case study protocol. Aligning notes with sections of a protocol helps the researcher to maintain the level of organization necessary to construct a clear and usable case study database. While organization and clarity are important to achieve for secondary analysis, researchers need not spend excessive amounts of time rewriting case study notes derived from data collected. Rather, case study notes should simply allow readers not involved in the research process to understand how the data support claims and conclusions.

Documents

Similar to case study notes and other compartments embedded in the case study database, the primary objective of case study documents is to make these materials readily retrievable and understandable for subsequent inspection.

As case study documents are collected throughout the research process, one useful way to organize documents is to develop an annotated bibliography. Such annotations would facilitate storage and retrieval so the database can later be inspected and/or shared with other researchers involved and not involved in the original study. To establish further convenience and wider usability of the case study data, converting documents into portable document format (PDF) copies will make for efficient electronic storage. Notwithstanding the efficiency of PDF files, researchers are not required to trouble themselves with the time and storage space associated with the construction of electronic documents.

Tabular Materials

Some case study researchers interested in organizing and storing data for subsequent retrieval use tabular materials either collected from the site being studied or created by the research team, which may represent a third compartment in a case study database. These materials might include survey or other quantitative data and counts of phenomena derived from archival or observational evidence. Similar to other means of storing data in the case study database, it may be most convenient and useful to organize and store tabular materials in an electronic case study database, as opposed to separate documents and data filed in separate places.

Narratives

A final compartment embedded in most case study databases is the construction of narratives—an analytical procedure that involves documenting the answers to the questions in the case study protocol. During the process of writing narratives, the researcher needs to cite or footnote relevant evidence—whether from interviews, documents, observations, or archival evidence—when generating an answer. While developing narratives in response to case study protocol questions facilitates the production of a clear and concise preliminary analytical process, the narratives may or may not need to be included in the final case study report.

In short, case study narratives offer researchers a method to converge data with tentative interpretations. The researcher or research team may then use the narratives embedded in the case study database to compose the case study report, and readers may be able to understand the sources of evidence that directly support the claims and conclusions offered in the final report.

Critical Summary

Establishing a case study database is a helpful technique given the complex and multifaceted nature of case study research. While inordinate amounts of time should not be devoted to making a case study database professionally presentable, the data embedded in each compartment should be understandable to researchers involved and not involved in the case study. The primary characteristic of a quality case study database is that citation of data clearly connects to claims made in the database as well as in the final report. The construction of a [p. 81 ↓] case study database also establishes a warehouse for subsequent cross-case analysis. While the inclusion of a case study database in case study research is not widely noted in the literature on field methods, these databases represent a technique that increases the reliability of case study research that merits more attention.

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See also

Further Readings

Yin, R. K. (2008). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.