

Higher Education Close Up 5: Think Pieces

This is one of four ‘think pieces’ offered by the Keynote Speakers at the HECU5 conference, which is to be held at Lancaster University 20-22nd July 2010. The theme of the conference is Questioning Theory-Method Relations in Higher Education Research and these pieces are intended to act as the starting point for a conversation about research into higher education, which conference participants can continue by submitting a proposal to present a paper or a symposium at the conference. Further details can be found on the conference website: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/events/hecu5/index.htm>

Unreflective Practice? Case Study and the Problem of Theoretical Inference

Martyn Hammersley, Open University

My argument is that as researchers we are insufficiently thoughtful about the methodological concepts we employ, and about the exact nature of our goal in inquiry; in other words, about what we are aiming to produce. I will use the example of case study research to illustrate this general problem, particularly as regards the development and testing of theory.

‘Case study’ is a contested concept. The term is used in a variety of sometimes conflicting ways (Gomm et al 2000: Introduction), and yet it is frequently deployed without being defined, and in a manner that does not make its meaning sufficiently clear. Clarity is not, of course, enough; and nor is it absolute - it is always relative to some purpose (Price 1963; Kaplan 1964:62-78). However, contrary to some influential claims otherwise (Lather 1996) it *is* a virtue. Indeed, it is a necessity. To employ terms whose meaning is seriously indeterminate or ambiguous is to make the tasks of productive thinking, and of communicating research findings to others, even more difficult than they already are; and they are much harder than we often tend to assume.

Like most other methodological labels, ‘case study’ does not form part of a well-defined typology. Instead, the term is usually employed so as to draw an implicit or explicit contrast with some particular alternative, and the nature of the contrast varies according to circumstance. Frequently, of course, case study is presented as a global approach that is in opposition to quantitative research; for example, in one version of this its distinctive feature is that it places emphasis on studying unique situations as bounded systems (Simon 2009), but there are alternative characterisations of it even in relation to this contrast. In my view, this global sense of ‘case study’ is unhelpful. What is required, instead, is to look at the more specific dimensions of variation in research practice to which the phrase ‘case study’ is sometimes used to refer. There are at least a couple of these. One concerns the number of cases studied, and whether these are naturally occurring or are artificially produced. In this context, ‘case study’ means the investigation of a relatively small number of naturally occurring cases, and it is contrasted with studying a relatively large number of cases (surveys), and also with investigation of artificially produced cases (experiments). Another

specific contrast relates to the process of analysis. Here the distinction is between examining relations among features *within a case*, on the one hand, and focusing on how factors tend to be related to one another *across an aggregate of cases*, on the other. This is often referred to as the difference between case-based and variable-based analysis (see Byrne and Ragin 2009).

One of the consequences of making these specific distinctions between research strategies is that it becomes clear that there is rather more scope for combining strategies than is usually recognised when people contrast global approaches. For example, although studying a *single* case inevitably means that only case-based analysis can be employed, if data are collected on a few cases, then there is scope for using *either* case-based or variable-based modes of analysis. In fact, a great deal of qualitative research uses a variable-based approach (for example, focusing on the effects of social class, gender, or ethnicity). It is worth underlining that variable analysis does not require numerical measurement or statistical analysis. Whether or not these are used is a further specific dimension in terms of which research can vary.

Awareness of the range of options that face us ought to highlight the need to think about the grounds on which we choose amongst them; and, in particular, about what it is we are aiming to produce. However, it seems to me that a great deal of research is insufficiently thoughtful in this respect. There are several options as regards goal, just as there are about other aspects of research: Are we aiming at description or explanation? Are we trying to provide information solely about a set of cases (one or more) all of which have been studied; or is the aim to make inferences leading to more general conclusions, and if so of what kind? Are we intending to generalise across a specified set of cases, or are we developing and testing a theory that applies to all cases that match some specified set of conditions, other things being equal? In fact, almost all case study research is effectively aimed at producing an explanation or a theory, and therefore relies upon some mode of inference that is assumed to be capable of delivering this product. It is sometimes argued that case study is particularly weak in this area, for example as compared with survey research – on the grounds that it cannot use statistical inference. But this is very misleading. While, generally speaking, the more cases studied (up to a limit) the more effective any generalisation to a larger finite population is likely to be, and it is true that random selection will increase the likelihood of representativeness in this task, surveys cannot *guarantee* the validity of their findings even in these terms. Moreover, this kind of enumerative inference does not provide an effective basis for theoretical analysis aimed at capturing causal relations. What is crucial is comparative investigation. However, carrying out this effectively is very challenging in all non-experimental research, whether survey or case study data, variable-based or case-based analysis, are employed.

In my view, most of the time social scientists are insufficiently reflective about these issues, and this has undesirable consequences for the quality of the work that we do. A lack of clarity in the methodological concepts we use, especially those relating to modes of theoretical inference, both reflects this failing and serves to reinforce it.

References

- Byrne, D. and Ragin, C. C. (eds.) (2009) *Handbook of Case-Based Methods*, London, Sage.
- Gomm, R., Hammersley, M, and Foster, P. (eds.) (2000) *Case Study Method*, London, Sage.
- Kaplan, A. (1964) *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioural Science*, San Francisco, Chandler.
- Lather, P. (1996) 'Troubling clarity: the politics of accessible language', *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 3, pp525-54.
- Price, H. H. (ed.) (1963) *Clarity is Not Enough*, London, Allen and Unwin.
- Simons, H. (2009) *Case Study Research in Practice*, London, Sage.