

THE USE OF QUALITATIVE CASE STUDIES IN STUDYING THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF FEDERAL POLICIES

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On Using Qualitative Case Studies

The following paper was written to assist with Task II included in the technical proposal to conduct a Compensatory Education Study On The Administration of Title I. It attempts to explicate the ways in which qualitative case studies may be used in conjunction with a large-scale statistical survey.

PART A

The "New Look" In Case Study Analysis

Between the two world wars, the social sciences became part of the intellectual and political scene in the United States. In 1923, the Social Science Research Council (S.S.R.C.) was created as the leading agency, connecting the professional organizations of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, economists and historians. One of the first moves of the S.S.R.C. was to create a committee on methods which was the center of its activities up to about 1940. And the focus of its concern was the discussion of "personal documents" -- which were later christened "case studies" -- and their relation to research using quantitative methods.

During the second world war, the United States government used quantitative methods of social research in many of its operations; and in 1949, the favorable reaction to the methodology reflected in the publication of "The American Soldier" inaugurated the dominance of the quantitative approach for the next fifteen years. The methodological credo was codified in books such as Survey Research In The Social Sciences.¹

As a response, those who continued to conduct case studies became much more self-conscious and explicit about their own alternative

¹Charles Glock (ed.), Survey Research In The Social Sciences, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1967).

methodology. Donald Cressey studied a deviant group: embezzlers who had joined a bank in good faith but then embezzled under the pressure of an "unsharable problem." He included a discussion of "analytical induction" which gave rise to the question of whether "universals" can be derived from a few detailed case studies.² Melville Dalton studied an industrial organization and the way its subgroups interact.³ He shows, for example, that very different types of "corruption" develop according to whether a big business organization has a central repair department or several repair units, each attached to a separate division. Later he also described in great detail the considerations by which his case study was guided.⁴

More recently, community studies were given a new recasting by Gerald Suttles. His Social Order of the Slum, for example, was extended into a methodological monograph in which the implications of the use of both participant observation and quantitative data could be outlined with reasonable completeness.⁵ The development of a professional role was intensively described in a study of a Kansas medical

²Donald Cressey, Other People's Money, (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1953). A good source for the various positions in this debate can be gleaned from two Bobbs-Merrill reprints, S-489 and S-532.

³Melville Dalton, Men Who Manage, (New York: Wiley, 1959).

⁴Phillip E. Hammond (ed.), Sociologists At Work, (New York: Basic Books, 1964). Chapter Three.

⁵Gerald Suttles, The Social Construction Of Communities, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). A similar "reconstruction" was added by William F. Whyte, Streetcorner Society, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

school. The rationale for this inquiry, guided by Everett Hughes, a master of qualitative work, was very well explicated in 1958 by Howard Becker in his "Problems of Inference and Proof In Participant Observation."⁶

Anthropologists have, of course, made case studies their main stock in trade. But they too have become more introspective about their intuitions. Many of their reports now appear in the form of autobiographies. An example is Rosalie Wax's Doing Field Work, which has the revealing subtitle, "Warnings and Advice" (Part Three, Pages 177 - 279). She describes how she was struck by the low academic performance of Indian students in American colleges; she finally traced this back to the contradiction between the family culture of Indian families and the conduct of white teachers on reservation schools.⁷ A multidisciplinary training program, sponsored by the NIE at the University of Pittsburgh, has sparked a review of existing anthropological case studies of schools.

Political scientists seem to have taken a more ambivalent route. When quantitative studies of voters and legislators entered the stage, the discipline split. Lindsay Rogers' The Pollsters was a classical attack by an author steeped in historical insights, which in turn

⁶This article, which is included in Howard S. Becker's collected essays, Sociological Work, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970), gives additional information on the connection with the original study, Boys In White, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁷Rosalie Wax, Doing Field Work: Warnings and Advice, (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1972).

influenced the work of other social scientists.⁸ The broader attacks, guided especially by Leo Strauss, were so polemical that they did little to clarify the methodological problems.⁹ We know of no examples where the logic of field case studies was explicated by a political scientist.

Sociologists continued to be concerned about the case study issue. But somehow the atmosphere within the discipline became less acrimonious. As early as 1951, two representatives of the quantitative tradition published a paper on the role of qualitative analysis in empirical social research.¹⁰ The defenders of the qualitative approach began to moderate their flag-waving and turned to the explication of their own empirical work. In spite of its polemic against the "Establishment," Strauss and Glaser's book The Discovery of Grounded Theory deserves careful attention.¹¹ They develop the notion of "awareness" of an impending death in a hospital, but the concept could be extended to apply to any situation where people or organiza-

⁸For example, see Mirra Komarovsky (ed.), Common Frontiers In The Social Sciences, (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957).

⁹H. J. Storing, Essays On The Scientific Study of Politics, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston Publishers, 1962).

¹⁰Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Allen Barton, "The Role of Qualitative Analysis In Empirical Social Research," (Bobbs-Merrill Reprint, S-336, originally published in 1955).

¹¹Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

tions must cooperate.¹²

Having roughly sketched the development of the case study issue to the middle sixties, we must now point out a common characteristic of most of the case studies of this period. They describe and try to explain the working of an existing organization, social group, role, deviance, etc. Sometimes the origin of the phenomenon is included in the case, but the actual entity under study is treated as though it were static. The implicit assumption is that the object of study exists and is likely to exist for a while. If this existence is regretted, as in the study of gangs or thieves, the hope is that intervention might bring about some improvement in the state of affairs. But no emphasis is put on the possible intrinsic forces which could induce change or how the entity under study might influence other components of its larger social context.

¹²Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, Awareness of Dying, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965).

The Turn To Implementation Studies

In the middle 1960's, there appeared a new type of case study, which moved the longitudinal aspect onto the center of the stage. Probably the study of underdeveloped countries after their decolonization provided an impetus for this new emphasis; the new technology and administrative policies that were transported to these countries influenced and were influenced by indigent conditions and cultura, and provided a unique longitudinal focus. The main turning point has come since the federal government has increasingly taken on the task of responding to major social problems. The execution of a general intention at the federal level is a rationally constructed task, the details of which can be worked out in advance. In the United States, such a response must be designed in the context of a social system that has evolved with a deep tradition of pluralism. Congress makes the laws and the Executive Branch carries them out. They have to work through states which in turn depend on formally constituted local agencies, themselves exposed to the pressures of large numbers of civic organizations. As a result, the process of implementation has become a major program development issue and major topic of research.

As far as we know, the first person to stress the importance of this problem was a policy analyst in the Office of Economic Opportunity, Walter Williams. Based on his own experience and a number of detailed case studies, he addresses two major problems in his book on policy analysis.¹³

¹³Walter Williams, Social Policy Research and Analysis, (New York: American Elsevier Publishing Company, Inc., 1971).

First, he explains what policy analysis means: what data are necessary to perform this function and what the relation between available information and final recommendation is. The role of a policy analyst was transferred during the Johnson administration from the Department of Defense to all other executive departments. Williams questions whether this transfer from military hardware to social problems is as easy as the presidential order assumed. But this is only the minor of his two concerns. This experience indicated that after Washington agencies have developed a plan, they usually do not have the knowledge to think through or the machinery to carry out the actual execution. This brings him to the central theme of his book: the need to make implementation a topic of research. The explication is summarized below:

He feels that the implementation process has received too little attention from social scientists and discusses in great detail the complexity of converting fairly abstract social-policy concepts into meaningful field-operational terms. According to Williams, five difficulties must be overcome:

- 1) Recommendations are made to the top-level decision-makers; the language used for this purpose is quite different from the implementation prose suitable for use in the program offices.
- 2) The central agency is often not aware that an action recommended might require considerable changes in the local agencies.
- 3) This difficulty becomes especially acute if the action required from the local agency calls for "the flexibility to change or replace local personnel."
- 4) Most implementation requires traveling staff who mediate between the central agency and the people at

- 4) (Continued) the local level. The training of this traveling staff for downward communication and upward feedback is often quite inadequate.
- 5) A field agency can be under local political pressure of which the headquarters is not aware. After having gained acceptance of a recommendation by central political powers, political blockages at the local level could defy ultimate action.

Two years later, two other analysts carried out a much more detailed case study and went one step beyond Williams' essentially narrative writings. They studied a plan whereby the Economic Development Administration (E.D.A.) would organize a multi-million dollar project in Oakland, California.¹⁴ A variety of construction projects were to be subsidized by the federal government in order to give work to the local hard-core unemployed. But in fact, few buildings were ever built and very few disadvantaged workers were employed. Their analysis shows that this was due to the fact that at thirty points in this transfer of the Washington plan into local action, fifteen different agencies had to reach agreements on the clearing the next steps. As a kind of a game, the authors figured out that, if at each point there was a 95 per cent probability of agreement, there was still a less than ½ per cent chance that the project would succeed. In this vividly-told story, the authors conclude with seven generalizations.

Three of their points pertain to what one might call organizational motivation.

¹⁴J. L. Pressman and A. B. Wildavsky, Implementation, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

The most extreme handicap is direct hostility. The E.D.A. project set up a training program for hard-core unemployed which directly competed with a training program already established by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. (Point One)¹⁵ A second type of difficulty emanates not locally, but from the central agency. The E.D.A. was originally established to aid disadvantaged rural areas and small towns which were suffering from structural unemployment, as, for instance, the coal mining districts of Appalachia. When the new agency concentrated on an urban project, many members of the E.D.A. felt that their attention was detracted from other projects of their agency in which they invested a great deal of energy. (Point Two) One other problem area in organizational motivation is a rather pervasive one: The greater the number of programs that are developed centrally, the more likely it is that subsequent work will converge on the members of other organizations involved along the line. The mere difficulty of providing time for the various assignments can create delays and unintended obstructions. (Point Three)

The division of labor is the second dimension which the author stresses.

When new tasks are developed, existing agencies usually do not have all the personnel available to carry out the necessary work, and outside consultants or members of other agencies have to be called in to help. (Point Four) Clearly, if several organizations are involved, the problem of leadership and rights to the final decision has to arise. (Point Five) If a task is very complex, there are bound to be differences as to which element should have priority. But the decision about the order in which to proceed can have consequences for the organization next in the sequence. This can be experienced as either a legal or an administrative impingement. (Point Six)

¹⁵Williams reports a similar difficulty due to the competition of a Manpower Training Program established by O.E.O. with the bureaucratically-entrenched local offices of the Federal Employment Service. (See pp. 36 - 52).

Point Seven finally combines the problem of organizational motivation and the problem of the division of labor.

It can very well happen that organizations which have the greatest interest in success have the least power in the whole process. This would be the case with voluntary organizations representing the disadvantaged minorities in such an employment program.

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Examples From Education Cases

Both of the monographs just reviewed deal with the implementation history of manpower programs. Other authors' interests focus on longitudinal case studies in the field of education. J. T. Murphy analyzed the implementation problems of the Title I legislation.¹⁶ After describing the origin and purpose of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the analysis is divided into two parts. The first part deals with relations between the state of Massachusetts and the E.S.E.A. Title I office in Washington. The Title I division in Washington had several regional desks. If Murphy's finding of the special mediating role of these staff officers can be generalized, an important source of variability in program implementation can be isolated. In his study, he reports that the staff officers (who were under various pressures) continuously changed the kind of regulations that would prevail in the supervision of state education departments. On two points specifically, the Washington supervision was very weak: they never seriously stressed state-wide evaluations and they were lax in their financial audits.

The author gives five reasons for the weakness of supervision. Washington was expected to act very quickly; therefore, Washington had more interest in statistics -- how many schools were involved -- than in detailed information. If state departments were pushed too hard, they

¹⁶J. T. Murphy, "Title I of E.S.E.A.: The Politics of Implementing Federal Education Reform," Harvard Educational Review, (Volume 41, Number 1, February, 1971).

could always retaliate by having their congressman complain and that would weaken the power which the Office of Education might want to exercise. And, if Washington was pushing very hard on the whole front, they might not get compliance on the specific points on which the Office of Education might be especially interested.

It seems that with regard to parent participation, the situation was especially unstable. The State Department of Education did not like parent participation in Title I because this would also suggest such participation in other educational matters in Massachusetts. The law originally required such participation. However, the degree could vary according to the rule which the Washington office made and tried to enforce. There seems to have been continuing pressure from the state on Washington to make parents' associations less specific, not to require them in every district and not to spell out the rights that the parents had. As far as Massachusetts goes, therefore, it could be said that the Washington center made its regulations so that they were acceptable to Massachusetts, or at least made them vague so that Massachusetts could interpret them as they desired.

In the second part, Murphy discusses relations between the Massachusetts State Department and a local school district which applied for aid. It seems that, in the beginning, the State Department of Education had to urge this district to submit applications which were then immediately passed on to Washington with state approval. Subsequently, the problem which arises at the state level is that the department did not have enough personnel to solicit and to monitor projects. As a matter of fact, for a long while they returned money to Washington because they could not use it. The staff people in charge of contact with districts under Title I have many other assignments which reduce the importance of this additional role for them. This is comparable to Point Three in the

Oakland construction case. Each person in each organization connected with a new program implementation already has old assignments and therefore the amount of importance they give to the new assignment can vary.

J. T. Murphy stressed that seldom does the state take primary action against districts which do not comply to a program proposed and agreed upon. There are probably very few such cases but they would be worth studying in detail. How was the penalization decided upon? Was this case especially symbolic for something important in the policy of the state department? (Such "deviant case analysis" will be discussed later.)

In the last section of the Murphy paper, the question of conflicting norms is discussed. Certain things which Washington stresses might be different from the concerns which the state department emphasize. The districts receiving directives from both might feel in conflict. One could imagine that in a case study, the district people could be asked whether they feel that sometimes they were not under vacillating guidance as mentioned before, but rather under conflicting guidance. This is especially important because certain activities and programs go directly from Washington to the district while the others go through the state department. In either case, the question of conflicting directives could be asked together with questions of conflicting pressure groups -- for instance, teachers' organizations or minority organizations (a topic which, of course, plays a very great role in all the studies about school decentralization in New York City).

The topic is different, but the basic theme is the same as in Williams and also the Oakland study: the flow of a plan through various organizational levels. There are other situations where the itinerary of an idea from the center to the periphery goes not through organizations, but through individual people or (as the sociologist would rather say) through roles. This is exemplified by a study done in connection

with the Learning Research and Development Center (L.R.D.C.) established at the University of Pittsburgh.

A central staff developed ideas on individualized elementary instruction. At seven sites in the United States, classrooms were selected to utilize this program. At the local level, a project director and educational specialists were appointed to guide the teachers in this new form of instruction. Pittsburgh had on its staff seven consultants who traveled between the L.R.D.C. and the sites. Workshops were organized both at the user sites and at the Center to reinforce the training of all agents concerned, to provide for mutual information, and to develop ideas for improvement.

This study of the Pittsburgh L.R.D.C. - Follow Through Project was started several years ago and is about to be completed. In many respects, its findings are similar to those of the Oakland study, especially as far as the division of labor is concerned. The consultants from the Center had to transmit the educational program to those in the sites without being experts themselves in all of the details of operationalizing the program. Most of the educational specialists were recruited from the local teaching staff and had difficulties in supervising their former colleagues. A time lag occurred so that the developers at the Center were working on new programs and considered those being implemented at the sites as outdated. The recognition of the school personnel that an improved version was already under development and that the one they were exerting effort to implement was becoming obsolete was discouraging.

The Pittsburgh implementation study concentrated on the rational elements of the program which had to be operationalized. At the same

time, a group at the University of Michigan (C.R.U.S.K.) conducted similar studies on the way new ideas were introduced in and utilized by industrial organizations. Here, too, what they call linkage systems are at the center of attention. A number of "models" of such systems were described in special case studies and, again, the emphasis was on specific roles which were performed by various individuals. However, the Michigan approach stressed the motivation which induced the participants to perform their role:¹⁷

We have a general impression that there is a cacophony of motives involved in the utilization process, some good, some bad, some helping utilization, some hurting. Many of the motives that lead to good utilization have no direct relevance to it.

It would be too much to expect that every role in the utilization chain is filled by someone who has the consumer's need always in mind. In fact, people fill these roles for a variety of reasons, all related to their own needs.

¹⁷R. G. Havelock and K. D. Benne, "An Exploratory Study of Knowledge Utilization," reprinted in The Planning of Change, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston Publishers, 1969).

"Itineraries" And "Organizational Learning"

Implementation cases do not necessarily have to concentrate on linkages between organizations or roles; they can also attempt to show how one existing organization adapts itself continuously to its own experiences, either through the policy of the leadership or through some kind of social quality control built into its operations. An example of the latter type is provided in a study by the Vera Institute of Justice of its efforts to relieve the overcrowding of jails.

In this case, the specific problem is that, within a few hours after being arrested, the defendant comes before a judge who can make one of three decisions: he can put the defendant in jail to await trial; he can release him on his own recognizance (R.O.R.) until trial; or he can set bail. The Vera Institute realized that the overcrowding of detention facilities could be reduced by increasing the number of R.O.R.'s. An experimental project was set up in which a group of Vera agents took the responsibility for seeing that released defendants appeared at the final trial. To implement this plan, it was important to investigate the the various steps between arrest and final court appearance.

Directly after the arrest, Vera interviewers obtain background information on the defendant on which they base their recommendation to the judge who makes the first decision. What confidence have the judges in accepting the Vera recommendation? What accounts for this confidence, and how could it be improved?

When a man is released under the responsibility of the Vera Institute, he is informed that he has to stay in periodic contact with their office. How well does

a defendant understand these instructions? How difficult is it for him to stay in touch? In some cases a local philanthropic organization is asked to act as an intermediary. Does this increase the number of contacts?

If a defendant does not maintain communication with the Vera group, one of their regional representatives makes a visit to his address. How often is the address fictitious? How often can a defendant not be located? If the local representative finds the defendant, what is the explanation for his failure to maintain contact: misunderstanding; negligence; the hope of being forgotten? How often and under what circumstances is contact re-established by the visit of the neighborhood representative?

The unifying idea here is to study turning points in the itinerary of the arrested person and by so doing, improve the program of the organization itself as it attempts to ensure that the defendant released on his own recognizance returns for trial.

In a way, many case studies can be seen as analyzing the itinerary of a specific idea or rule. It is the "world outside" which affects the destiny of the original idea. Robert Alford, for example, reports how for a period of twenty years (1950 - 1970), New York State appointed commissions to deal with the problem of neighborhood health centers and how all of their recommendations resulted in a dead end.¹⁸ Even when large federal funds finally became available for this purpose, organizational conflicts blocked their productive use. This is an

¹⁸Robert Alford, Health Care Politics, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

example of an unsuccessful itinerary, but as a longitudinal case study, it is of the same type. The difference in the Vera case is, of course, easily understood: there was no central organization in New York State which would use the recommendation of commissions as a guide to improve its performance; the commissions were spasmodic events and not part of an over-arching quality control.

One should look for inverse cases, where an organization can adapt itself over time so that it can achieve its goal under changing circumstances. Here we can use the Pittsburgh L.R.D.C. as one of the few success stories that has been studied in detail.

The Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary School Act provided for the establishment and institutional funding of university-affiliated, multidisciplinary research and development centers. The aim was to systematically and collaboratively bring the latest theoretical, methodological and substantive knowledge of relevant disciplines to bear on educational practices.

No recommendations were offered for creating an integrated organization comprised of persons from numerous disciplines, sharing a commitment to improving educational practices. However, the stipulation that the center select a mission or focus was an attempt to ensure collaborative effort. The co-founders of the Pittsburgh L.R.D.C. recognized the establishment and development of such a center itself as a first innovation that should be monitored. They established an external advisory board, the Board of Visitors, and provided a field staff of

sociologists to collect concurrent data and prepare reports for this board on organizational development.

Periodically, reports were prepared by the field sociologists and presented to the Board of Visitors who used these along with their own observations made during annual visits to L.R.D.C. as a basis for evaluating the Center's development and making recommendations to the directors.

Using the data collected by means of regular rounds of interviews, documentary analysis and participant observation over the course of six years, a case study was written which focused on how the leaders believed their organization might be structured to maximize goal attainment, and what impact these conceptualizations had on organizational development. There were four distinguishable dimensions:

(1) policy-making -- which produced the broad guidelines for (2) specific decision-making -- which was a responsibility delegated to the project directors, (3) allocation -- of specific tasks and (4) communication -- all through the organization.

The first vision of the directors was a continuum of sequenced activities beginning with basic research and ending with the dissemination of developed products utilizing the outcomes of research. It influenced the strategies for recruitment and task assignments. The gaps in transforming basic research results into prescriptions for development projects, however, became critical. The directors perceived, as they observed what happened in their own organization, that these gaps

were overcome most readily when one individual became personally involved in both basic research and development. Therefore, the original continuum conceptualization was altered; persuasion was used to get many people to take an active role in both research and development projects. Later, under pressure from the funding agency, the leaders tried to strengthen the integration among all center activities. Explicating the relationships among projects did not necessarily enhance meaningful communication and collaboration across task activities and disciplinary boundaries. The directors then organized small group meetings at the intersection of common interests and this fostered greater multidisciplinary collaboration and exchange. The study provides numerous examples of the interplay between conceptual schemas and organizational developments, and documents how one organization responded to the goal of establishing a multidisciplinary center for educational R & D under Title IV of E.S.E.A. A second paper, an intellectual history of this organization, looks in more detail at the relationship between the organization and its social context and the effects on internal dynamics.¹⁹

These are case studies of organizational learning. The term is more than an analogy. Such an analysis is only possible if concurrent records are kept: organizational memory should be fostered by the

¹⁹Leslie Salmon-Cox and Burkart Holzner, in preparation.

emphasis on longitudinal case studies and the interactional aspect of learning -- the idea of a "teacher" learning as he implements -- is evoked.²⁰

²⁰There is also detailed learning. One of the earliest cases is the Selznick study of the Tennessee Valley Authority (T.V.A.), meant to provide cheap electricity for poor farmers. T.V.A. had a public relations division, the task of which was to get compliance from the local towns. However, they were dominated by rich farmers who finally were able to influence T.V.A. policy in their interest. Philip Selznick, TVA and the Grass Roots, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966.)

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