



## **EMERGING 'GOOD PRACTICE' IN CASE STUDY WORK**

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This essay is part of a series of papers commissioned by The Partnering Initiative through its Case Study Project to develop insights into the process of researching/writing partnership case studies as tools for change.

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While the art of developing case studies is hard to explicate, there is some emerging evidence which can help case study researchers/writers along the way. This paper explores some of the challenges facing case study writers/researchers and raises issues to consider, particularly with regard to:

- The ethics of case study research and the responsibility of the case study researcher
- The need for managing participative approaches to research
- Questioning the validity and objectivity of your research

This chapter is by no means a comprehensive discussion of these issues, it is merely a means of contextualizing some of the principles of case study research for case study writers focusing on cross-sector partnerships. It is informed by the experiences and opinions of a network of case study practitioners brought together by The Partnering Initiative's Case Study Project.

## 1. The responsibility of the case study researcher

Much has been written about the ethics and principles of social research. Although there may exist no strict guidelines for researching/writing partnership case studies there are some general principles of social research which case study researchers/writers may consider as a means of reference.

It is important for case study researchers to consider and protect the interests of those involved in the research and those affected by it. These include:

- The sponsor/commissioner of the research
- The gatekeepers
- The research subjects
- The discipline

This section examines some of the issues that case study researchers may encounter in managing their relationship with these key stakeholders and in balancing their responsibilities to them.

### a. The sponsor

In partnership case study research **the sponsor or commissioner of the study** may be a player within the partnership or an external stakeholder who has a vested interest in the partnership itself. The position of the sponsor with respect to the partnership may considerably influence the testimony of the research subjects. For instance when the sponsor of the case study is a lead/funding partner in the partnership profiled, they may have the opportunity to influence the testimony of the other partners to some degree. In such cases it is important for the case study researcher to be aware of the sponsor's position of influence and to take steps to ensure that this does not hijack their ability to conduct their research.

The circumstances under which a case study is commissioned may also influence the development of the case study research. In some cases the timing of the case study research has a considerable influence in the development of the study. In one instance a large grant making organization commissioned a learning case study to review its partnering practices and to draw lessons on good partnering. However the case study was commissioned in the midst of a downsizing exercise within the organization and was viewed by many as a means of justifying further job-cuts. As a result the case study

subjects spent a considerable part of their interview defending their partnering approach rather than reflecting on their partnering experiences critically.

While the case study researchers may not be able to choose all the circumstances under which they conduct their research, they can make an effort to outline the limitations of the research within the study in order to contextualize the research findings. Furthermore by adopting a research methodology which enables a plurality of views and voices to be heard, case study researchers can ensure that no one voice or point of view is dominant and the reader of the case study is allowed to hear all perspective and make his/her own conclusions. .

#### **b. The gatekeeper**

Often the case study researcher has to gain permission to access the subjects of the research. The person/institution who controls access to the research subjects is referred to as **the gatekeeper** of the research. The gatekeeper may be the programme manager/CEO of a partner organization profiled in the case study or a representative of one of the stakeholder groups involved in/affected by the partnership (e.g. a community representative/elder, a legal representative, a supervisor/manager, a guardian etc).

The gatekeepers themselves may not be able to inform the research, but they do control access to the research subjects who may be central to the case study. Thus it is important to define the benefits of the research for the gatekeepers to convince them to allow the research subjects to participate in the research. The researcher may also want to clarify the research purpose and methodology to the gatekeeper and inform them about the use of the research so they are comfortable with the focus and means of the research, and thus more likely to facilitate the research process.

One case study writer realized the importance of outlining the benefits for the gatekeepers. While researching a case study commissioned by a company on its partnering practices the researcher found it hard to schedule interviews with staff member who had been in-charge of partnerships that had been terminated or were failing to meet their objectives. It seemed the corporate staff managing these partnerships felt that by allowing themselves and their – current or previous – partners to participate in this research exercise they may risk implicating themselves. It was not until the researcher offered these corporate employees and their partners the benefit of confidentiality and anonymity and communicated the learning opportunities for themselves and their organizations, did he manage to secure the interviews he needed for his research.

Even though, in many cases gatekeepers may present themselves as representatives of the research subjects the latter may not perceive them as having the same interests as themselves. Knowing this, case study researchers might want to be especially careful to not harm the relationship between the case study subjects and the gatekeepers, particularly since the gatekeepers may be in a position of authority over the research subjects.

In such case it may be tricky for case study researchers to balance the rights of the research subjects, the gatekeepers and the research, especially when researching partnership case studies where the nature of the relationship between the subjects and the gatekeeper is an important factor influencing the development of the partnership, and needs to be explored. In such cases the gatekeepers and subjects are more likely to be

available and candid in informing the research if they are comfortable about the use of the case study and assured that their confidence will be respected.

### **c. The research subjects**

A researcher's responsibility to the researched has been the subject of much discussion and different disciplines have developed specific ethical codes<sup>1</sup> outlining principles for engaging research subjects.

Informed consent is one of cornerstones of social research, it requires researchers to stress that participation in the research process is voluntary. It also involves making the context and purpose of their research explicit, and outlining the research methods, possible risks and anticipated benefits for the research subjects. The researchers may also explain the motives and objectives of the research, share publication plans and possible uses of research findings and reveal the sponsors of the research to all research subjects participating in the study.

The researcher is not only responsible for the way in which the research subjects are treated during the research process but also how they may be affected by the publication of the research. In this regard researchers need to anticipate and guard against any potential risks of publishing the research by seeking to protect the rights of the research subjects. All research subjects have the right to protect their privacy, to expect confidentiality and anonymity and to have direct access to the research findings.

- **Privacy:** By choosing to extrapolate as much as possible from existing data before initiating new research case study researchers can reduce the burden of disclosure on research subjects and protect their right to privacy.
- **Confidentiality** it is expected that case study researchers either disguise or refrain from using any confidential data.
- **Anonymity:** The manner in which the data is disguised must be well considered. In the in-famous so called "Springdale case", the researchers had constructed a qualitative study of a small town dubbed "Springdale". While each of the research subjects had been given a fictitious name they were still quite identifiable by their role (e.g. mayor, CEO etc). The research subjects objected to the research findings and to the lack of anonymity afforded to them. This study caused much concern in research circles.
- **Access:** All research subjects have the right to access the case study they helped inform, to extract any learning/benefit from it and to ensure that it accurately represents their views and their agreement with the case study researcher.

### **d. The field of research**

In the interest of future research case study researchers may want to conduct themselves in a manner which does not negatively impact research subject's willingness to participate in other research programmes. Some researchers believe that a piece of research - no matter how valuable - which compromises the prospect of future research and tarnishes the reputation and credibility of the discipline is not worth conducting.

Furthermore as case studies enter the public domain it is important to offer guidelines on their use, articulate any assumptions and outline the research design, methodology and limitations which may have influenced the research findings, so they may be read and

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<sup>1</sup> For example the ethical codes produced by the American Sociological Association, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth and the Social Research Association

understood in the appropriate context. It is equally important to appropriately acknowledge the contribution of all informants and credit all sources cited. Furthermore, by explicating the limitations of the research and any factors which may have influenced the reliability and applicability of the research findings, case study researchers not only lend credibility to the research but also help guard against the possibility of the research findings being misused/misinterpreted.

## **2. Managing participative approaches**

One of the key issues of case study research is access to information. The previous section outlined some of the challenges of gaining access to key stakeholders – sponsors, gatekeepers, research subjects etc- and the need to define the benefits of the proposed research for each of these stakeholder groups. However having gained access to his/her subjects the next step is for the researcher formulate what research methodology would be most appropriate to gather data through them.

In many ways the research methodology is dictated by the time and resources available to the researcher and the nature of the partnership. For example when developing a case study on a global partnership with stakeholders around the world the researcher may consider telephone interviews or questionnaires rather than in-person interviews.

In outlining an appropriate research methodology there are a number of questions that may arise, this section seeks to address two such issues including, the researcher's degree of involvement/separation from the research subjects/ situation (how to approach the subjects) and the challenge of cross-cultural research (how to interpret issues across cultures).

### **The involved researcher**

*"In most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of the interviewer and interviewee is not hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship"*

Ann Oakley (1982:41)

There are differing views about the degree to which a case study researcher may become involved with his/her subjects. While some social scientists like Oakley believe that the researcher's engagement with the subjects enhances his/her ability to learn more about them, others warn about the hazards of influencing the subjects/situation you are studying through your involvement with them. The decision between maintaining distance or becoming involved is to some extent reliant on the nature of the research. For example it may not be appropriate to become involved with a research subject following a 20 minute interview; on the other hand it may be equally difficult to remain detached from person(s) you have been studying over a considerably long period of time. There are a host of other factors which also impact the researcher's degree of involvement and engagement with his/her subjects. For example, in some cases the case study researcher may be a stakeholder within the partnership. In that instance the traditional role of a detached researcher, an unobtrusive recorder, may be difficult to assume.

Oakley (1982) argues that to facilitate disclosure and to gain access to the intimate details of the situation/subject being studied, researchers have to develop a rapport with the research subjects. This necessitates a reciprocal disclosure which reduces the distance at which researcher can hold her/himself from personal presence and/or investment (Avis 2002). However the degree to

which researcher chooses to reduce this distance should be tempered by the danger of influencing the research process and results by doing so.

Through its Case Study Project, The Partnering Initiative has investigated the impact of the researcher's level of involvement with the research subjects by commissioning a series of case studies using both internal and external case study researchers. All case study researchers were offered the same tools and methodologies for collecting, analyzing and presenting data and were asked to keep a detailed log recording their rationale for developing the case study, the research methodology adopted, challenges and observations. The results of the research are discussed in Sasha Hurrell's paper *Getting Real; Findings of the Case Study Project*, (2005) which offers some interesting examples of how the position – or perceived position – of the case study researcher may influence the development of the partnership case study. The findings also discuss some instances of case study researchers balancing the requirements of remaining detached observers against the need to become more intimately informed about the people and partnerships studied.

### **The challenge of cross-cultural research**

*“The way in which we view the research setting and the people within it is highly subject to our own social position. The influence of ideas that we therefore construct and disseminate are not devoid of our social location.”*

Bani Dev Makaan

During the Case Study Workshop one of the case study practitioners from the developing world explained that when she first began researching partnering case studies in the UK, she found that in some ways her 'foreignness' gave her license to question people's assumptions and ask them to deconstruct partnering concepts and terminology which are commonly used but frequently misunderstood/misinterpreted. In some ways she managed to make her "otherness" work in her favour but confessed that in other matters she still felt limited in her ability to interpret the context of the research subjects.

Such cross-cultural differences may be magnified when the researcher is coming into a developing country from a developed country context. Because of globalization researchers in the South are more likely to be aware of and familiar with the cultural context and influences of the North than visa versa. Furthermore when the researcher is – or is perceived to be -coming from a position of economic superiority their presence may raise expectations. For example the involvement of researchers and research organizations from the North may be associated with the promise of aid for many in the developing world. This notion may influence the behaviour of the research subjects as well as their testimony.

The role of the interpreter in cross-cultural research also complicates the research dynamic. Now, not only is the researcher's approach to, and interpretation of the research, influenced by his/her identity but it is also effected by the analytical frameworks and context of the interpreter.

In cross-cultural social inquiry, the question of difference is one with the question of identity (Reinharz, 1992). It may be impossible to develop a definitive list of the factors which influence the context from which we approach partnership case studies. Melanie Rein's paper on *Case Study Research Relationships* (2005), for example, discusses the influence of the researcher's academic discipline on their approach to case study research and writing, however the researcher's gender, class, race, religion and several other identifying factors may be equally influential. As case study researchers we can not erase our identity. However, if we are to benefit from the differences between cultures and people it might be helpful to begin by questioning our

own assumptions and critically examining our starting point, especially if we expect to represent and critically analyze another cultural context.

### **3. Questioning the validity and objectivity of data**

The process of disentangling the story of a partnership requires all the skills and expertise of a detective. Like the detective, the case study researchers must piece together the story of the partnership, establish the chronology of events, identify the key players, explore their motives, actions and ambitions, validate their testimony, and analyze the potential impact of all these factors on their relationship to each other. This process requires considerable skill and patience and relies heavily on the quality of the data collected.

Case study researchers have several sources of information but the reliability of the data they choose to include in their research will dictate the relevance and credibility of the research findings. It is not surprise then, that one of the toughest challenges facing case study writers involves deciding what data to include in their case study. In this section we explore some of the challenges of establishing the objectivity and credibility of the data selected.

#### **The myth of objectivity**

There exist conflicting views on the “objectivity” of the data collected for social research as well as the possibility of finding an “objective” researcher. Some social science researchers believe that it is impossible to do research ‘that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies’ (Becker) and that it is inevitable that all researchers will take sides because they develop deep sympathies with the people they are studying and often - consciously or unconsciously – neglect to ask questions that might offer another perspective.

Becker suggest that researchers can attempt to be objective by committing themselves to:

- Not misusing the techniques of their disciplines
- Using their theories impartially
- Avoiding sentimentality
- Inspecting their methods and theories to ensure they could disprove their beliefs
- Making clear the limits of what they have studied

Even if these principles assist us as case study researchers to be objective, how do we guard against the lack of objective data available to us while researching a case study of a partnership?

Like Becker, many of the case study practitioners brought together by the Partnering Initiative’s Case Study project Workshop questioned whether an objective account of any partnership could exist. Partnering case studies - which focus primarily on the relationship/partnering process rather than the outputs of the partnership – are built largely on the partners’ accounts of events and these may vary across people and over time. It is rare that any two individuals will offer the same account and some partners may choose to exclude information that undermines their version of events. Although this results in contradictory data it does not render the data invalid. In fact these contradictions may prove to be as useful - in understanding their values and interests of the partners as well as their relationship to one another – as the consistencies. Each partner’s interpretations of the fact offers us deeper insights into their motives and vision and into their relationship with the other players helping to enrich the

In reality, facts and interpretations require and shape one another<sup>2</sup> as data is influenced by the power relations and social dynamics which are constantly evolving. Thus there exists no “objective truth” and it is the case study researcher’s job to validate the trustworthiness – not the truth- of the data collected. For partnership case study researchers establishing the “trustworthiness” rather than the “truth” of the data selected is also vital, because the latter assumes an objective reality whereas the former moves the process into the social world<sup>3</sup>.

### **Validating data**

If objectivity is not truly possible the only way we can accept the legitimacy of any data is by validating it. Wolcott (1990) suggests that there are a number of steps case study researchers can take to ensure the validity of the data collected. He stresses the importance of listening and producing copious and detailed field notes which capture the richness of the data available in the field and which offer the readers a chance to experience the situation him/herself and come to his/her own conclusions. He also recommends getting feedback from colleagues in the field and triangulating the data collected.

Triangulation is described by Denzin as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomena”<sup>4</sup>, it is an accepted form of testing the validity of data. Data triangulation can take many forms:

- **Validating over time:** This involves checking the consistency of a source’s testimony by asking the same set of questions over a period of time. If the subject’s responses remain unchanged a researcher may assume that the data is – or is believed to be - authentic.
- **Validating through other sources:** Case study researcher may confirm the validity of a subject’s testimony by checking his/her account against the evidence provided by others.
- **Validating through the use of other researchers:** To limit the possibility of a researcher’s bias influencing the data collected, the research may rely on using multiple researchers investigating the same issue to guard against the researcher’s influence on the research findings.
- **Validating by changing your theory:** By analyzing the data from a new angle, or hypothesis researcher’s can test whether they get the same results

Because, often qualitative data is more difficult to validate than quantitative data, case study researchers may seek to balance the use of different kinds of data to lend more credibility to their research findings.

### **What to censor or disguise**

During the course of the Case Study Workshop convened by The Partnering Initiative in February 2005, case study practitioners stressed that in pursuing partnership research it was paramount that they protect the partnerships they profile. They established some general principles regarding when it may be necessary to censor or disguise data in order to protect the partnerships profiled.

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<sup>2</sup> Stivers C 1993 Reflections on the Role of personal narrative in social science. *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18(2), p421

<sup>3</sup> Reismann, C.K, (2002) ‘ Narrative Analysis’ in M.A> Huberman and M.B. Miles (eds), *The Qualitative Researcher’s Companion* Sage Publications

<sup>4</sup> Denzin N. K., (1978) *The Research Act* Second Edition McGraw Hill, New York

The practitioners agreed that it was important to not include any data if it risked undermining or damaging the partner relationships. One way of ensuring this is to have the data corroborated/signed off by the research subjects to ensure that they are comfortable with the manner in which their testimony has been presented.

Getting sign off can be a difficult and often complicated process and requires the case study writer to balance their responsibility to the research subjects against their responsibility to the research findings. However while researchers may struggle to not lose any data which is significant to understanding the partnership profiled, if it is expected to negatively impact the partner relationship the practitioners agreed that it may be advisable to rephrase or exclude it.

The practitioners stressed that it was also important not to include any data which was confidential, unreliable or insignificant i.e. added no value to furthering the readers' understanding of the partnership or partnering issues. They agreed that case study writers should avoid including any data which did not make the case study "fit for purpose".

## **Conclusion**

There is no denying that developing case studies requires skill and patience and there are a number of challenges and ethical considerations for case study researcher/writers to ponder before they choose to research/write case studies. However, when done well, case studies can be a powerful way of capturing the partnering experience and offer opportunities for learning about the partnering process which may be of interest to many partnership practitioners.

While the case study practitioners brought together by The Partnering Initiative raised some interesting issues regarding the challenges of case study research and highlighted some possible ways of addressing these challenges, they all agreed that more work needs to be done to capture the potential applications of case studies for the partnership agenda. The purpose of this paper was to offer an initial exploration of some of the issues raised during this workshop, to raise more questions and encourage case study practitioners to reflect more deeply on these issues. It is hoped that this reflection will result in enhancing the value and application of case studies for partnering.

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Sehr is currently working for The Partnering Initiative - developing learning case studies for the Initiative's commissioned work- and with the ENGAGE Campaign to capture and support the development of business-led employee engagement activities around the world. Previously, Sehr worked primarily for capacity building programmes and focused on researching and writing teaching case studies on cross-sector partnerships. She has been invited to present her research at conferences in Europe, Asia and America and has published her work in related academic journals and books.

