

## THE USE OF THE CASE/S STUDY AND REPORTING ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH. LITERATURE REVIEW

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### Abstract

This work focuses on the use of Case Study (CS) in Educational Psychology research. It is part of the research project "Qualitative Research Designs in Psychology: characterization and integration of ethical and methodological aspects of Case Study" (2015-2016), whose central purpose is to perform a bibliographic descriptive exploratory study, type on the use of CS research designs from different fields of psychology. In this article we delve into aspects such designs in the field of psycho-educational research: proactive, interactive and postactiva that allow deepening problems or educational facts. In the development of the CS, three phases are identified. The last phase involves the definition of the EC as a product or result of a larger process: it involves reporting by biographical narratives-from the understanding of a fact, event, individual or group in its singularity forms. To this end, they have collected not only contextual descriptions, but also the voices of the subjects, allowing experience an "existential" sense of the case that favors both their understanding and the development of lessons learned for future interventions.

**Keywords:** Psychological Research; Education; Case Studies; Narrative Report.

### Introduction

There are different perspectives to delimit the nature and range of a Case Study (from now on CS) (Archenti, 2007, Hernandez Sampieri, Baptista Lucio y Fernandez Collado, 2010, Montero, y Leon, 2007, Stake, 1998). The International Development Bank BID (2011) defines a CS as an investigation design which makes possible the production and understanding of knowledge at institutions and the joint systematic reflection of the participants of work teams to obtain *lessons learned* and take part in the best way. The *lessons learned* are defined as the combination of systematized knowledge which is deduced from the reflection of a program, project or experience developed in institutions or organizations (BID, 2008).

They allow identifying successful or deficient aspects of the actions developed (strengths and weaknesses), recognizing and solving the problems that appear during

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the course of actions, as well as improving the making of decisions and establishing the guidelines for further interventions. According to Perez Serrano (1998), the primary aim of these kinds of studies is the comprehension of an experience and its significance.

The above mentioned definitions take us to consider the accuracy of the use of CS at educational institutions, including the evaluation practice of implemented projects as well as its full potential for the design of further efficient and adjusted strategies to a specific context. Considering multiple intertwining between the field of school orientation and psycho-educational research, and our academic and professional experience related to those fields, we propose to analyze different uses of CS in educational psychology taking a close look at the post active phase, or final report elaboration phase, from which lessons learned are deduced.

The framework of this paper corresponds to a major research project whose main purpose is to make an investigation about different research designs on Psychology, in particular CS. It is about a bibliographic exploratory descriptive study focused on systematizing information to identify properties and characteristics of this design in different Psychology fields.

In previous works (Borzi, Gomez y Cardos, 2015, Cardos, Borzi y Gomez, 2016) we concentrated on different CS uses in Development Psychology and Educational Psychology. We made a bibliographic review of CS definitions, its characterization and aims. Our purpose was to specify the benefits and contributions of this type of design particularly in educational research. In this work, we pick up some of those issues and reflections to delve into in the final report and its full potential.

### **Case studies characterization.**

In Human and Social Sciences knowledge is developed from research tasks, as in the rest of disciplines. In general terms, we consider research as a process which allows to articulate in the action a series of practices and decisions, whether explicit or not, to get to know about a situation of interest that makes the planning and designing of the process possible, to make it something controllable (Piovani, 2007).

The term *research design* may be used in two senses, on the one hand, restricted to methodological aspects, related to the decisions of recollection and interpretation of information; in this sense, it is equal to technical procedures. On the other hand, it is understood as an analytical and reflexive instance where components that take part in the process are logically articulated, that is, the design corresponds to flexible scientific process that includes research questions, purposes, onto-epistemological grounds, methods and evaluative means to obtain a study of quality. (Mendizabal, 2006).

Some differences may be found in the definitions of CS. According to Archenti (2007), it is a *research design* in which the relations between different properties and the relations of variables in one or few cases are studied. She considers it as a multi-method approach of a complex phenomenon, where qualitative analyses take rele-

vance without excluding the use of standard and quantitative measurement methods. Archenti proposes that the researcher should make clear selection criteria of cases and their interests, if they are chosen by the researcher or if they come from outside of the research area.

Lopez Gonzalez (2013) considers that CS is:

“The empirical research of a phenomenon from which one desires to learn inside a common real context (...) specially useful when limits or edges between phenomenon and context are not entirely evident, and therefore it is required multiple sources of evidence” (2013, p. 140).

As we may observe, this last definition focuses much more on the object of research and its contextual relations than in the method or design itself.

In the literature we reviewed for this work, there appeared some other CS definitions when it deals with educational research and its application which we will analyze next.

### **CS in educational research**

The use of CS in educational research is related to different traditions that find in the observation field and in the deepening of particular situations based on the relations established with participants the possibility to obtain an exhaustive knowledge and qualitative phenomena, facts and problems. Among these traditions, we could mention ecological psychology, holistic ethnography, cognitive anthropology, ethnography and communicational sociology and symbolic interactionism (Martinez Bonafe, 1988).

In Anglo-Saxon area, educational research through CS has an important development. It is first used to evaluate and investigate from methodological qualitative and ethnographic models the implementation of practice and curricular innovations. In a conference which took place in Cambridge in 1972 with the purpose of researching no traditional models of curricular evaluation, it was pointed CS as “umbrella” term which refers to a family of research methods and techniques focused on thorough study of a particular example or case. (Martinez Bonafe, 1988, Perez Serrano, 1988)

According to Simons (2011) observation, interview and documental analysis, might be considered as the main methods which are used in CS qualitative research and Simons points out the potential to institutions development. The author specifies that external evaluation of innovative programs from CS showed that the news were destined to fail unless they considered contextual and local cultures and the acknowledgement of the interpretation that teachers and students made about the curriculum.

Some alternatives were necessary and they should include participants’ perspectives which were receptive to public needs and sensitive to the process and dynamics of implementation and interpretation of the events in their own sociopolitical contexts. CS would satisfy requirements providing truly relevant information.

On the other hand, some studies are focused on teacher's practical knowledge - as part of the investigation framework on teacher's process of thinking - that in many cases led to investigations based on CS. In this way, Feldman (1999) argues that the notion of "practical knowledge" influenced the orientation of theoretical work and investigation, encouraging the tendency to describe teacher's knowledge as articulated with the experience that guides practical action. Teacher's thought, which obviously remains inaccessible, requires distance processes, objectiveness and reflection about practice. It is important for this reason to point out the CS appropriateness since investigation intentionality based on them is related to meaning comprehension of a particular experience. (Alvarez Alvarez y San Fabian Maroto, 2012).

According to Sabariego Puig y Bisquerra Alzina (2009), educational research is characterized by the flexibility and heterogeneity of methodologies and results, minding the object of study complexity, the context where it takes place and the scientific training of those who carry it out. At the same time, Sabariego Puig, Massot Lafon and Dorio Alcaraz (2009) point out that CS in the field of educational research is part of research traditions and interpretative paradigms included in the qualitative and ideographic methodologies. They define CS as a qualitative research method which implies a systematic and in-depth examination of cases of a phenomenon, understood as unique social entities or educational entities.

Along the same lines they indicate that:

"For some authors (Wolcott, 1992, Rodriguez, Gil y Garcia, 1996) case study is not a methodological option with entity in itself but it is a design strategy of research which allows selecting the object/subject of study and the real scenery that is constituted into an information source". (p. 309.)

It is important to point out that authors like Martinez Bonafe (1988), Perez Serrano (1988) or Alvarez Alvarez y San Fabian Maroto (2012), consider that CS is a research method as well as a training strategy. Likewise, they refer to CS use as a way of diagnostic instrument previous to legal, clinical and educational interventions. Perez Serrano (1994) goes deeper on CS and uses it as a didactical method as a means to group, systematic and continuum learning which tries to relate what is learned with what is experienced, that is to say, theoretical knowledge with experience. The case analysis assumes the scenery and/or problematic situation comprehension and tries to conceptualize the praxis and the appropriate decisions making to solve the suggested situation.

With regard to different definitions about CS uses in the research and educational evaluation fields, Simons (2011) specifies that these differences would be in "philosophical, methodological and epistemic preferences" of each researcher and of their disciplinary traditions (p. 41). The author emphasizes that there is no correct way to investigate through CS, but that it is important to be open to the convenience of researcher and the subject of his/her study, that is to say, methodology does not define the case but it shapes the way of a particular study. Also Simons considers CS as a

thorough research and from multiple perspectives of a specific project, politics, an institution, a program, a system, all possible cases, in its particular cultural and political context.

This kind of studies has an open and flexible design with the possibility to modify the centre of attention dependent on a progressive comprehension of the case, the unexpected events, or of the priority change of interested people or the researcher of the subject. The identification of questions or problems of the research, general methodology, participants' selection criteria and the ethical procedures which make sure that these participants receive a fair treatment, are some of the factors to consider at the moment of designing a case.

Finally, the author concludes that CS approach is useful in educational research due to the fact that involves many people for whom it is accessible. By using qualitative methods, it allows recollecting the opinions of participants or interested people, including them in the process and representing different interests and values. Moreover, the resulting reports are formed by naturalistic observations and facts obtained from interviews, written in participants' language, which permits the elaboration of conclusions that other may recognize as own and use them as a ground for further actions.

### **CS full potential in the educational field**

There are various reasons to maintain the CS election in an educational research. Among them, there are: a) the critical nature, since it makes it possible to confirm, extend and/or modify the knowledge on object of study, b) the uniqueness nature, as the interest lies in the object itself, and c) the revealing nature, because it gives some relevant information about a peculiar and relatively unknown phenomenon. To these advantages Alvarez Alvarez y San Fabian Maroto (2012) add that cases selection involves some complementary criteria, among them, the facility to access to it and the possibility to establish a fluent relation with the informants.

Martinez Bonafe (1988) points out that CS involves a three phases procedure that offers the benefit to allow delving into a series of problems or educational facts: proactive, interactive and postactive phases. In the first one, the epistemological bases are analyzed which define the problem or case, as well as the criteria for the selection of a case. On this ground, the intended objectives, the available information, the characteristics and possible effects of context where the study will take place, the available resources, the most adequate techniques, time estimation and the ways of general follow-up of the research are proposed. Field work involves the interactive phase, including procedures and qualitative techniques selected to develop the study. It results essential the triangulation as a procedure to contrast obtained information from different sources. Finally, the postactive phase consists of the final report development, with ethnographic nature, where results, critical reflections and conclusions from problem or study case are mentioned. We will delve into this last phase and in the characteristics that should present the final report.

## **CS postactive phase or final report elaboration.**

As we just mentioned, according to Martinez Bonafe (1988) the final report in these kinds of researches would have an ethnography nature that gathers results, reflections and conclusions. At this specific moment, the relation between researcher and participants gains central importance.

Taking into account that in CS one tends to find stories about people experience about facts and contexts, resorting to the narrative report helps in the comprehension of the case. In other words, "people narratives and researchers' narratives, phenomena and methods productively merge to understand social reality" (Bolívar Botia, 2002, p. 560).

It should be noted that in CS the idea of "study" is held on an initial ambiguity because it could refer to the phenomenon investigated, to the research process or to the result itself. Phenomenon as well as process and result together obtain the form of narrative.

CS as product or result involves development through biographical-narratives means to present detailed information of a subject or group. To do so, it may be necessary to collect not only contextual descriptions but also subject's voices.

The narratives can be unique, multiple or parallel. The first ones correspond to the intrinsic case that in which it is expected a better knowledge of a particular situation. The second ones refer to the intertwining of voices about a specific environment or context to understand them. At last, different voices are put together in parallel around a topic or issue to increase its knowledge.

The correlation between CS and biographical narrative is established because the first, searching for the understanding of a fact, event, individual or group in its singularity, takes the form of a biographical narrative research in its investigation process as well as in its report. At the same time, this kind of research focuses on singular cases which pretend to reveal a specific context of life. Both the temporary aspect and plot about the context is what bring the report case closer to a biographical narrative. (Bolívar Botia, 2002). Also, Zeller (1998) refers to the practices in educational research on the base of CS and particularly to the strategies of narratives in them, noting two assumptions about cases report. The first one is that the main objective of a case report is to create understanding, to create new senses; the second one is that case narrative should be a product instead of a register of research.

According to Perez Serrano (1998), the development of ethnographic and final report about the case under study could be descriptive, interpretative and/or evaluative. As descriptive, it focuses on details about the objective of study without previous theoretical grounds or purpose to establish generalizations. If interpretative, richer and deeper descriptions are made to illustrate and protect or dare certain theoretical assumptions. The abstraction and conceptualization in this kind of study may cover from suggestion of relations between variables to a construction of a theory. Lastly, on evaluative studies there are descriptions, explanations and judgments emissions. To

sum up, “although some case studies are characterized to be purely descriptive, most of them are a combination of description and evaluation or description and interpretation” (Perez Serrano, 1998, p. 99).

Simons (2011) considers that the final report is a way to tell the story of the development and the experience of a specific case. With the term “story” the author makes reference to two senses, on the one hand, to the narrative structure with which the researcher interprets the case, and on the other hand, to the specific way with which it is expressed in the written report. The author proposes, in the final report, to delimit the scope and the content of the narrative and to specify the composition of database, that is to say, which was the source of information, how they were obtained, who surveyed the information, and when, besides indicating the number of field notes and observations.

Likewise, Simons points out that there are different ways of organizing and presenting facts, which depend not only on the purpose of the study but also on the researcher’s style.

Simons introduces the following models of reports, which are not different accurate forms:

- Formal: a linear sequence of a narrative, with a historic script and a chronological organization of information. This is the most usual way in social and educational researches.
- Descriptive: the reader is involved in the story, without introducing dense interpretations. The story has no stipulated beginning but it reflects how the information is mixed up with “collages of different voices” (p. 208) with observations and interviews, short presence of people (through phrases, photographs, images), narrative expositions, etc., from perspectives of the different subjects involved.
- Lead by conclusions: the objective is more analytical and explanatory. The theory used is that of the case itself. Conclusion is stated and the story is told with detailed fragments of interviews and field notes, etc.
- Interpretative: the story follows the researcher’s interpretation through issues, images, metaphors or the resource chosen. Stories are deeply intertwined and that’s the reason why the coherence of the story has more visibility and certainty than the information.
- Story tellers: the aim is to arouse feelings and stimulate the reader’s imagination as it happens in fiction tales and in oral tales tradition.
- Documentary film: a common format used in educational research and evaluation. Parts of interviews and observation are filtered, framing and episodes are edited and reorganized as a filmmaker would do. It comes from the immersion in the field and from cognitive and intuitive ways of knowing.
- Artistic forms: the use of music, paintings, poetry or theatric expression, among others expression forms to tell a story and the conclusions of research.

Finally, Simons (2011) points out that every student or novel researcher who uses CS may use literature, journalism or biographies resources to learn how to structure a case story to tell, however, we must not forget ethic implications since it is the story of real persons and not a fiction tale or a mere artistic production.

For Ceballos Herrera (2009) CS is an approach that belongs to the qualitative interpretative paradigm. The author presents a structure for final report with three chapters: I. Introduction, II. Methodological procedure, and III. Discoveries. The new aspect in this proposal is to include a section in chapter I where the author suggests the researcher to tell his/her academic training, philosophical orientation, professional experience, and knowledge of the subject that led him/her to select the CS.

In final report one resorts to thick descriptions which take the format of stories, these allow the reader to deduce singular meanings and build naturalistic generalizations from vicar experience. Both participants and researcher are present in the story, the first ones through fragments of dialogues and phrases, and the researcher from introduction of epilogues, commentaries and foot notes. The researcher uses a personal and literary narrative with a vivid description of the place and situations. The narrative of the report must offer the reader such experience of "having been there" taking the reader to the place, placing him/her in the context, and bringing participants voice through phrases of them mixed in the story. It does not introduce a neutral or objective research; it intends to transmit the complexity and uniqueness of the case in context.

The elaboration of the report as narrative text involves carrying out a hermeneutic interpretation in which each part gets its meaning in relation to the totality while this one depends on each one of them. The story of the case is the product of selection of episodes, voices and observations but mainly of its order and conjunction. The researcher makes a great effort to give sense to the experienced and gathered, finding him/herself between experiences and field texts (Bolívar Botía, 2002).

## **Some conclusions**

Focusing on CS in an educational framework, we appreciate that different authors refers to the CS as a research method but also as a methodology for the training of professionals, including psychologists who work in this field. Also, CS allows to delve into a subject or reality of unique character with diagnostic, therapeutic and orienting aim.

As we concentrate on research based on CS, it is important to consider that the production of knowledge about education supposes a mixture of theoretical knowledge and practical action, which is obtained through methods adjusted to its dynamic nature and with the participation of those who are willing to change it (Bisquerra Alsina, 2009).

This brief bibliographic review allows us to conclude that the use of CS designs in educational field presents many benefits and a full potential. Among them, it allows designing strategies of intervention-action adjusted to the most realistic diagnosis

possible on a specific context, taking into account roles and functions of different involved authors.

Finally, we may point out that the narrative report would be the most appropriate for the presentation of the final report of an investigation based on CS design, since it allows to experience an “experiential” feeling of the case, promoting not only its comprehension but also its elaboration of lessons learned for further interventions.