

Components of Qualitative Case Study Research

A qualitative case study research has primarily three components that drive the study. These include the 'phenomenon' being studied, the 'context' in which the phenomenon is being studied and the 'theoretical anchoring' on which the study is built upon. Let's understand each of them.

Phenomenon

A phenomenon is happening of something which is not fully understood, they can be both observable or non-observable. As vague as it may sound, multiple phenomena are occurring around us at any given point in time. Discrimination, Sustainability, Leadership, Employee or Customer Experience, Mindfulness, Patient Engagement, Bullying, Talent Retention, Entrepreneurship, Identity, Career Development, etc. all are examples of phenomena.

A phenomenon, exists irrespective of the 'context' in most research studies, be it qualitative or quantitative, a researcher is primarily studying a phenomenon while trying to nullify the effect of the context. For instance, to establish that discrimination is a common phenomenon in different countries, a research, may develop a survey questionnaire including questions that capture Hence, the studies which test establish theories in in different context do so by removing contextual differences like culture, geography, time, etc. For instance, to study the effectiveness of leadership, a researcher, may capture survey or qualitative data from different context (organization type, geography, time) and establish the factors that make leadership effective irrespective of contextual differences. Hence, the role of context becomes insignificant in such a study.

When choosing a phenomenon, the researcher should justify the relevance of the phenomenon studied, if he/she is unable to justify the same, then the study will not appeal the reviewers. The minimum criterion of selecting a phenomenon is that it should not be a part of MBA curriculum. It should be far far away into research domain. For instance, leadership is an age old phenomenon, and various dimensions of leadership has been identified. However, it is still a relevant phenomenon, this is because now the phenomenon is being studied in different context, the unprecedented context of pandemic. Thus context becomes the differentiating factor in the study of leadership. But what is context.

Context

Context is a specific dimension of a phenomenon that allows the researcher to narrow down their array of study while increasing the process of demystification about what, how, and why of a phenomenon. In simple words the context is the 'environment' in which the phenomenon can be studied unhindered. If properly defined, the context may help in bringing out the uniqueness of the phenomenon. A well bounded context may also help in identifying the limits of the theory under consideration. The environment cannot be controlled by the researcher and hence, one can observe changes within the phenomenon with a giving context.

For instance, if you wish to study the effectiveness of leadership in North Korean organization, it may reveal different factors as compared to South Korean organization, due to difference between political context in the two countries. Such context specific study will explain how leadership will differ in light of contextual differences. A case study research is thus context specific, as it aims to explore how a phenomenon works in a given context.

Context can be at macro as well as at micro level. An example of macro context could be Nation and national culture, while micro could be organization and organizational culture. A micro context can be further narrowed down to department and the culture within that department.

If your case unit is a single individual, then the context which will influence your study could be both macro as well as micro. For instance, if you wish to study the working style of that individual employee, you may find influences of national culture (collectivist/individualistic) as well as the culture of the team (team norms) with whom he/she works.

Hence, depending on your research objective, your context and the level of the context may vary. The decision could be based on the extant of literature on the phenomenon within that context. So if there is significant knowledge on a giving phenomenon at the national or country level, then one may like to study the phenomenon at a regional level, or organizational level. The idea is that one should be able to justify the choice of the context as much as the choice of the phenomenon.

Blurring between phenomenon and context

Sometimes, the environment in which the phenomenon is being studied can be a phenomenon in itself. In such cases a researcher gets confused as to what is the phenomenon and what is the context. For example, if one wishes to study how the 'identity' of a person shall change when promoted to a 'leadership' role, and takes a multiple case to explore this question, then one can get baffled with the fact that both are phenomena. In such a case, the key to understand what one wants to study (identity) and in where is its situatedness (leadership role). Hence, in this

case 'identity' shall be the phenomenon, while 'leadership' will be the context. If the same study is done in a specific type of organization, say, an NGO serving to homeless people, then the narrower context will be the NGO within the broad context of leadership, while the phenomenon shall still be identity.

Theoretical Anchoring

Many researchers confuse theoretical anchoring with literature review. The key difference between the two is that a literature review arrives as knowledge gap, hence giving information on what is known and what is not understood or ambiguous. While theoretical anchoring discusses the supporting theories for the study and establishes what the current theory(ies) doesn't explain in the context. Another crucial differentiating factor is that literature review is done before the study starts while, theoretical anchoring is identified, while the findings start emerging. Hence, we encourage to not look for supporting theories in advance, rather, allow the data to direct you to the theory or theories that most support your data. So, for instance you are studying identity in leadership role, and your data suggests that an individual involves in 'identity work' and to enhance his 'social identity', then it will be said that your study is anchored in the theory of 'identity work' and 'social identity theory'. This is also where his contribution shall lie. Either, he/she will extend the currently known theories of 'identity work' and 'social identity theory' or build a new identity theory which intersects these two theories.

Thus a researcher while doing a qualitative case study researcher should be able to clearly identify and explain his/her phenomenon being studied, the context within which it is being studied and the theory or theories it is being anchored within. A key thing to remember would be that, the phenomenon and context is known in advance, while the theoretical anchoring emerges as the study findings emerge.