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How to Design Your Case

Preview

This chapter starts from the assumption that you have now decided to conduct a case study. So the focus here is on design of the case itself. Design is a holistic, dynamic concept, difficult to encapsulate in a linear script. Certain features of design need to be identified at the beginning to relate to the end we have in sight. Yet others will emerge as you conduct the case and establish how best to communicate what you find. It will be an evolving and iterative process. The chapter focuses primarily on the initial design, including motivation for your research interest, any previous relevant research, as well as how to conceptualize your topic, select the case, set boundaries, gain access, determine your research questions, and frame the case. It outlines different types of design, including pre-ordinate and mixed method, but focuses particularly on emergent design to reflect the reality of what is encountered in the field and how it may change. It also incorporates a brief reference to methodology and interpretation as these are part of design. Thinking ahead is helpful to ensure that the methods you choose and the way you intend to interpret will give you the evidence you need to address your research question/s. Not all can be said in the one chapter, however. Details of methodology and methods I leave to Chapter 3 and analysis and interpretation to Chapter 4. The chapter concludes by outlining the ethical issues you need to address in developing a protocol to guide the conduct of the case. Ethics are present throughout the process, but they start here.

Preplanning

Start with Your Experience or Motivation

Before deciding on the primary focus of your case and framing your research question/s, ask yourself why you have chosen this particular topic to research: Is it for its intrinsic interest? Do you wish to make a difference to people's lives? Or deepen your understanding of a specific educational or social issue? Take time to reflect on your motivation as this may influence the kinds of questions you choose to investigate, the methods you adopt, and how you decide to present the case. Past experience often suggests an area or specific issue to explore. Examples here might include bullying because you were bullied at school, innovative mathematics programs because you flunked at math, or dementia care because your father who had dementia did not receive good care. Case study can yield a deep understanding of concerns such as these. Through a narrative both of your experience and that of others, you can portray the effects of bullying, feeling hopeless at math, or lack of adequate dementia care with insight and compassion, as well as highlight implications for policy. Your motivation could also stem from a general educational or health interest, the social/educational effects of the "silent student" in the classroom, the implementation of a new health policy in schools, or a broader social justice issue such as the continued inequality of women in the workplace.

Having identified your motivation, take a moment to write down what is critical about it to focus what you will research through your case. If it was a personal experience, describe what happened and what was the effect. Do not distress yourself if it brings back difficult memories. See it as a way of objectifying your experience and finding an angle that would be useful to investigate to understand the impact the experience had on you. This may resonate with others as well. If words do not flow, try sketching or painting the experience as a doctoral student in one of my classes did to display the devastating, silencing effect bullying had on her. Document any issues or questions that arise. As you consider them, think what would constitute an overarching research question to help frame the case and to which your findings will ultimately relate. What, essentially, do you wish to understand?

Choose a Topic That Engages Your Emotions

Your own experience provides a strong emotional commitment that can sustain you when you feel you are getting nowhere or having difficulty making sense of a mass of data that are overwhelming, contradictory, puzzling, or ambiguous. Research of whatever kind can be a long and lonely road. It is helpful if you are emotionally, as well as intellectually,

committed to what you wish to research. Besides keeping you motivated, in presenting the case you can engage readers with the immediacy of an event or circumstance that had emotional force for you. Compare this point of view with the following from a potential student who wanted me to supervise his thesis. When I asked what he was interested in, he said "whatever you are interested in!" I know that in some subjects students choose an aspect of the supervisor's research interest to explore in their own research. On the whole, however, it is preferable to select an area of interest that is emotionally or intellectually significant for you. This is not an invitation to give free range to your emotions, which could bias your study, but rather to investigate how they might influence your conduct of the case. In your design, consider what effect your emotions could have, positive or negative, so you can monitor their impact as you proceed. Here is how one student examined the possible effect of her strong emotional commitment on the case she was about to explore.

VALUES AND THEIR EMOTIONAL IMPACT

The topic was language and ethnic identity among Greek Cypriot students, with a specific emphasis on examining the impact of the Greek Cypriot dialect in a context where the formal language instruction in schools was Standard Greek. At the outset of her case study, Ioannidou (1999) identified those aspects of herself and her values and the origins from which they stemmed that would be likely to impact her research. Several stirred up strong emotions and feelings, arising in part from her identity as a Greek Cypriot and the inner conflicts she felt growing up in a country where there were tensions between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. Her feelings were exacerbated by the anger and injustices Greek Cypriots experienced in 1974 when Turkey invaded Cyprus. Her emotional and intellectual interest in studying the Greek Cypriot dialect was undeniably a strong motivating factor, but she did not wish it to unduly intrude on her impartiality in conducting the case. To heighten her awareness of the possible impact of her values and emotions, she wrote a narrative poem identifying what these were and how she felt about the different interpretations of the political conflict and tensions between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. This influenced how she perceived her identity and what it meant to be a Cypriot. Identification of her values and emotions in the poem proved a reference point for monitoring her subjectivity throughout the case.

Slightly different, but still on the subject of emotions, is the importance of observing your reactions in the research process itself, documenting when you may have overempathized with participants, did not like an interviewee perhaps, or got angry with yourself for failing to follow up an issue that later turned out to be significant. This is the beginning

of a process of reflexivity that is important to maintain in conducting the case. Keeping a record of your emotional reactions and adopting a self-reflexive approach throughout will enable you to demonstrate that you did not allow your emotions or emotional commitment to overwhelm. You will come to know when emotions helped you gain insight and when they may have hindered you from seeing clearly, as you had a point to make or a demon to exorcise.

Think about Your Audience: Who Wants to Know?

Potential audiences interested in the outcomes of your case could include commissioners seeking evidence to inform policy change on a critical social issue; funders looking for a positive return on their investment; professionals or institutions anticipating guidance as a step to action; participants hoping to learn how their perspectives contributed to understanding the case; or other researchers interested in what your case adds to the body of knowledge on the topic. Decide early on who will be your prime audience/s. Then ask yourself:

- What will these different audiences expect from my case research?
- What research design might each favor?
- If not the one I prefer, how will I persuade them that my choice of design will best meet their purpose for seeking a case study on the particular topic or issue?
- What form of reporting might different key audiences value?
- Should I involve my preferred audience in identifying issues or in analyzing and interpreting?
- What ethical protocols will I adopt to respect the privacy of personal issues, should they arise, while ensuring that major findings become public?

You might not always choose to run with audience expectations if you have a different idea of what would better serve their information needs. But knowing what these needs are at the start will help you decide which design and style of reporting is most appropriate to maximize the chance that your case will be used. The key question in the specific context is what is more effective for whom for what purpose?

Search the Literature

Search and acknowledge what has gone before. This is a fundamental research precept, and it may help you find a precise focus for your case. You

may think that this is not necessary in an experiential case study, as has sometimes been expressed to me by students exploring a personal experience or topic close to their hearts. One doctoral student who took this view claimed that what was original (a requisite criterion for a PhD) about his research was that it was his experience, insisting that he did not need to acknowledge any authors or theories that had relevance for his case. Someone's experience may well be unique, but in a PhD context this is not what is meant by making an "original contribution to knowledge." More importantly, it is unlikely to satisfy an external examiner.[1] Rarely, if ever, do we come up with something in our research that we can claim to be entirely original. Most likely, others will have explored the broad topic before, if not the exact circumstances. We need to acknowledge aspects of their research that are pertinent to our case, even if we have taken a different angle.

Select Relevant Concepts and Research Studies

Many theories and research studies may seem relevant to the issues you are exploring in your case, but you need to be selective. A full literature review is not needed for a single case study. Only choose those studies that are helpful to foreground your case, distinguishing between theories that inform your research question and framework and research studies that are close to what you intend. Doing so will sharpen the focus and questions for your case. Indicate what different authors with an interest in a similar topic have found, drawing attention to any theoretical concepts possibly relevant for your study. Critique their ideas or studies if this is warranted. Not everything that has gone before is necessarily pertinent now or applicable to your specific interest.

Acknowledge others, but also indicate your point of departure and any gaps or further questions your case could well address. Record any limitations in the research methodology others have adopted that do not get at the in-depth meaning you hope your case study will illuminate. And state precisely what the case study design enables you to explore that eludes other design options.

Study the Context

It is also important to become familiar with the context of your case to see if any relevant policies or projects preceded your study or if political sensitivities in the culture may affect your design. Preliminary analysis of any such documents and previous research is straightforward and will demonstrate that you have an understanding of factors that may be critical in the cultural and political context. Questions to give you some purchase on what might be appropriate include: Why was the program or policy instituted in the first place? What influenced its development?

What values underpin it? Who was responsible? What person or group appears to have the power to determine action? These questions are equally applicable in an institutional case study. The aim is to find the precedents that impact on the design. Addressing political and cultural sensitivities contemporaneously is a trickier matter. Some can be picked up informally in an access visit and through informal contacts who have previous knowledge of the context. This was my experience, which led to the result in the following example.

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WORKING WITHIN THE SPACES

In an international case study of a "new" nurse education and training program in a different country from my own (Simons et al., 1998), I was aware at the start from a colleague who had conducted research there before that my findings could be challenged on the grounds that I did not understand the culture. He also warned me that I needed to "work within the spaces." What he meant by this was that the "truth" or "truths" in the situation may not be what any one individual says, even if corroborated by others, but something more subtle, elusive, or with a history no one wished to make explicit. This is the case in many contexts, but in this particular culture participants were known to each other. They were related by family and had concerns they chose not to share or had a "living memory" of earlier issues that had been a source of conflict or disagreement. Lips were sealed on the "real life" of the case. Difficulties were blocked to me as the outsider, my detective instinct immediately aroused.

My way around the culture issue was to build into the design of the case a historical account of nurse education and training prior to the evolution of the "new" program and to include in the research team a nurse researcher who was born in that culture. My way around the interpersonal and political dynamics in the process of conducting the case was to make sure I listened actively to everyone without judgment and colluded with no one, despite pressure to agree with certain individuals' interpretations of events. I searched for whatever documents I could access that may have recorded past events and decisions and by whom. I also interviewed key protagonists contemporaneously to explore their perspectives, trying to understand the power dynamics and to ascertain from where they stemmed—history, former relationships, misunderstandings or conflicts, for example. In this way I aspired to construct as accurate a picture as I could of the "real" situation and gain a deeper grasp of any cultural and political differences that might affect the interpretation and implementation of the new program.

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What can be helpful in such a context, where you are challenged as an outsider is to find a confidant within the setting who can tell you about the subnorms that exist in the culture. These may be personal or political—who

talks to whom, who doesn't talk to whom and why, what should not be said or probed. Subnorms often hold the clue to how people act and who holds the power. Finding a confidant is not always possible however and a different strategy has to prevail, as in the following example.

LIVED EXPERIENCE IN A FOREIGN CULTURE

In another international case study, this time in Central and Eastern Europe, understanding the context and culture was more difficult, and I had no one in this setting to appeal to for background insight. I was directing case study training concurrent with getting local teams in the particular country to conduct case studies of education in a system that, while beginning to decentralize, still carried the vestiges of a former communist state that was hierarchical in intent. Aware of my advocacy for democratic case study, which was developed in the United Kingdom, I was warned at the outset that I could not adopt that approach in their culture even though participants welcomed the principles behind it. When I encountered opposition to aspects of the final report, I (and my colleagues) had to think deeply about what issues in their culture may have led to the opposition and how our approach in this case study training may have differed from the way we viewed similar issues in our culture. The manager of the program wanted the report to place the organization in a more positive light and to blame certain people for its failings. This I declined to do. But, as director of the evaluation, I needed to understand what led to the opposition and negotiate an agreed outcome. For eventually, the evaluation, which was funded by the European Union, had to be signed off by the manager before participants could be paid. One of the issues was fear. The country was still emerging from a centrally controlled communist system, and while this was changing, there was still a tendency to be fearful of evaluation. This had two effects: One was suspicion of outside influences. The other was avoidance of critique. As far as I and my co-researchers were concerned, the report seemed reasonable and fair, and we could not initially see that the manager had anything to fear from it becoming public. However we quickly realized that his fear (of unknown consequences and his future job prospects) was real to him in a cultural context, where fear of reprisal still held force. We had to decode the cultural norms (Hyatt & Simons, 1999) and reconsider what, if anything, might be negotiable, taking account of the manager's concern and the cultural norms, while maintaining the integrity of the evaluation and ensuring that participants were remunerated. For an extended account of this example, see Simons and Greene (2018, pp. 91–93).

These examples may seem a long preliminary journey into the cultural and political context but searching the context is an important antecedent to design for two reasons. First, you will have a head start

to establishing effective relationships with those in the case if they can see that you understand their culture. Second, interpretation in context is a critical feature in case study. If you do not have an awareness and appreciation of the cultural context from the beginning, it may create misunderstandings in data gathering and lead to misinterpretation.

The Case for Research Design

I have heard it said more than once that case study research does not require a specific design. The case is often a given, and it is the fieldwork that is the essence of the case. So leap in and see; talk to people, observe, and document whatever is going on. I have seen many an inadequate case study take this route, when data gathering is perceived as the more exciting task than preliminary thinking about how to proceed. But design issues, a clear focus, and framing of question/s or issues are as important in case study research as in any other form of research. See Leavy (2017) for an extensive account of the design issues that need to be considered in different forms of research and especially, for the purpose in this text, qualitative, arts-based, and participatory research.

I am reminded here of a doctoral student who rushed into the field and gathered data that filled a large filing cabinet. He was an excellent field worker, and the data were carefully documented and filed. But the mass of material so overwhelmed him that when it came to analysis and interpretation, which he perceived as a later stage in the research, he could not begin. He had no signposts, no overall framework, no critical questions, and no clear units of analysis. He had left it too late. The data remained in his filing cabinet, the research never written up. To avoid a situation such as this, but also to focus data gathering, it is important to have a design at the outset, even if changes are required in practice due to the reality of what is encountered in the field.

Design Choices

Emergent Design

More often than not in qualitative case study that takes an interpretivist, co-constructivist approach, the design is emergent, particularly when issues are not clear at the beginning. You may start with a plan of key questions or issues, methods, key informants, and preferences for analysis, interpretation and reporting. However, the design frequently evolves or needs adjusting in response to issues that arise in initial and ongoing field visits, emerging understanding in the sociopolitical context, or

changes in the brief or policy direction. It is far from a static outline of how all parts of a planned design fit together.

Flexibility in Design

Janesick (2004, p. 210) offers a fluid approach when she invites us to conceive of qualitative research design through the metaphor of dance. She suggests that we think of the design process much as a dancer does in three stages: first, a warm-up, the design decisions made at the beginning of the study; second, the total workout where design decisions are made throughout; and third, the cool-down stage when design decisions are made at the end of the study. During this three-stage process, the dancer will make many moves back and forth and "yet always returns to the center, the core of the dancer's strength" (p. 211). This metaphor of the dance is equally applicable to qualitative case study design. Its appeal is in the movement and flexibility it offers the case worker in designing the case, starting with preliminary issues, adjusting in the light of emerging understanding, and finally, in the reporting and presentation of the case, returning to illuminate its central question and focus.

I recommend Janesick's paper to you for several reasons. It enables us to capture the "reality" of lived experience, which is richly textured, complex, never still. It suits the holistic nature of case study, moving, as in a gestalt between foreground and background, to reach a holistic understanding using multiple methods and all our senses. Initial questions in your preliminary design may remain as background as more significant issues or questions come to occupy the foreground. It has that agility to accommodate changes in the field and be open to different interpretations. And it resonates with the use of art forms in data gathering and interpretation and my previous experience literally dancing the data (Simons, 2009, p. 140). See also Cancienne and Bagley (2008) who advocate interpreting through dance and movement. This flexibility to modify a design to reflect the actuality of the case in the field is one strength of case study and demonstrates why emergent designs are often to be preferred.

Preordinate Design

Designs that are determined in advance and follow a logic from aims to methods to predicted outcomes are most likely to be employed when the aims and objectives of a policy, program, or project are precisely stated, any interventions well described, and the expected outcomes delineated. It is possible to conduct a case study with a preordinate design if these conditions exist or if the topic is theory-driven, the aim of which is to explore the implications of the theory in practice. It may also be the

preferred approach by case study workers who take a realist or postpositivist perspective to research the case.

A preordinate design can be adjusted if, in conducting the case, it no longer seems to provide the most appropriate framing for what you are finding. If you stay with the preordinate framing, despite "new" emerging issues, your analysis is likely to be constrained to the preordinate questions. If the data suggest a diversion from the initial questions and are analyzed accordingly, the analysis, however insightful, may address a question that was not asked! This was the case in the first example presented below.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Value of Emergent Design

The following two examples demonstrate how the flexibility of an emergent design can more adequately represent the case, responsive to how it unfolds, rather than constraining the data to a design that does not reflect the reality experienced in the field.

IMPOSING AN ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS ON A PREORDINATE DESIGN

A doctoral student I examined started out with a preordinate design, but in the course of his research he discovered a different reality and analyzed it in a convincing conceptual framework. The problem was that the data he had gathered, the sense he made of it, and the conclusions he drew did not actually inform his initial questions. There was a misfit. He still tried, however, to connect his conclusions to these questions. Forcing the data into such preconceived questions led to misleading findings and did not do justice to the excellent data he had gathered and how he had made sense of it in a different conceptual frame. This lack of fit presented a dilemma for the examiners. Given the emphasis so often impressed upon research students of answering or informing research question(s), this thesis was potentially a failure. The analysis was excellent, only it did not inform the research question/s the student identified at the outset. In the event, the examiners were able to suggest a reframing of the case with different questions to allow a referral[2] (i.e., for the student to do more work) to align his analysis with the reframed questions rather than a failure, as the data and the way they were gathered and analyzed had such merit. Had the student adopted an emergent design from the outset, he could have modified his design and framing question/s to achieve a better match between these and the different reality he encountered in the case. The analysis and conclusions would then have been coherent, and the outcome—of referral—avoided.

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**EXTENDING THE DESIGN
TO INCORPORATE POLITICAL FACTORS**

This second example of the value of an emergent design is from the international policy case study mentioned in "Working within the Spaces." The case was exploring how a pilot of a new nurse education and training diploma program was implemented in one site with a view to rolling it out to other sites should the evidence warrant it. Unexpected political factors in the context led to the emergence of a slightly different design from what was envisaged initially. The design, while not strictly preordinate, was clearly outlined at the beginning: the stakeholders, key questions/issues, methods, and expected outcomes were identified. The first factor that necessitated a change in design was that other sites, having heard of the success of the new program, did not wish to wait for evidence from the one case that might lead to a rollout. The second factor was the recommendation by a Nursing Commission (set up due to pressure from the nursing unions) for a four-year degree before the one site case study of the diploma was complete. It looked at this point as though the pilot case study would be redundant for the purpose of a rollout to other institutions.

In this situation, the evaluation team extended the design to undertake focus groups with all the other institutions to learn what issues they were facing that would affect a diploma rollout if this was approved or the four-year degree on the Commission's recommendation. Developing the design in this way ensured that the evaluation was still relevant to inform a policy change whatever decision was taken. In the event, the degree recommendation was adopted, and the learning from the one site case study was incorporated into its design. This a further example of the utility of in-depth case study, even when the original purpose to influence a particular decision no longer prevails.

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Indirectly, these examples draw our attention to the value of an emergent design. Both had started with a preordinate framing, but in the conduct of the case other issues pointed to the need to modify the design. Had an emergent design been adopted from the start, the flexibility it offers to adjust the design as the case evolves would have served the purpose of these cases more effectively.

Mixed Methods Design

Several methods are commonly used in case study research to see things from different angles, yield a richer understanding than one method alone can do, and offset bias from any one. This has been the practice since case study methodology and other forms of qualitative inquiry

became prominent over 50 years ago as a counterpoint to the dominance of quantitative models for evaluating the effects of innovative programs. One consequence of this development was that case study came to be seen as entirely qualitative and this was intensified in the paradigm wars that were prominent in the 1970s and early 1980s (Hammersely, 1992; Denzin, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

From this point and for over 30 years now, a formal mode of mixed methods inquiry has developed, with its own literature, research approaches, conferences, and publications (see, e.g., Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Greene, 2007; Greene et al., 1989). This approach has sometimes been thought to resolve the paradigm wars, providing it is appropriate for the case being explored (Bryman, 2008). However, see Williams (2020), who suggests that academic allegiances may still be a dominating factor that persuades researchers to prefer one paradigm or the other, and Denzin et al. (2024), who indicate that the issues, which divided researchers in the paradigm wars, are still prevalent, if not intensified in current times. Giddings and Grant (2007) further advance the view that far from breaching the paradigm divide, "mixed methods is a Trojan Horse for positivist inquiry, depending for its appeal on a pragmatic orientation" (p. 1). In so doing, it marginalizes other forms of knowing. These authors make a powerful argument for how they see mixed methods has been captured by "a pragmatic post-positivism" in nursing, health, education, and related fields, but they also look forward to how it is possible to situate a mixed methods research practice within a broader framing (p. 13) that shows the benefit of utilizing different methods.

Despite these views and critique, mixed method designs have proved popular in many contexts over the past 30 years and particularly in program and policy research and evaluation, especially in large-scale studies. Commissioners often prefer a mixed methods approach on the grounds that it provides a firmer basis for informing policy than a single or even multiple case study. This is not necessarily the case but is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore. For a single case study, especially one of intrinsic interest, mixed method designs, as defined by the current literature on mixed methods research (MMR), may not be the route to follow. This does not prevent you from adopting different methods within one case, but this is different from mixed methods design as defined by the key authors of this approach noted above. Qualitative case study has much more in common with narrative and ethnographic case studies that similarly use multiple methods. It is also worth keeping in mind that there may be a situation within your case study where in-depth interpretation through one method renders a more meaningful understanding of the issues central to your case.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Relevance of Mixed Methods Design in Case Study

If considering a mixed methods design, ask yourself the following questions:

- How will you combine or integrate the different methods, and for what purpose?
- Does each method offer evidence to inform the same or a different question?
- If different, draw up a matrix showing how each method meets a different purpose or question. This will prove a useful reference when gathering and interpreting data.
- Are you seeing the case merely as qualitative context in which data gathered by other methods are interpreted?
- Are you rushing to include both quantitative and qualitative elements to counter the deficiencies in either or both?
- Are you giving equal epistemological status to both forms of knowing? Or is one kind of knowing more valued than the other?
- Do you think that adopting more than one method, especially if quantitative and qualitative, gives more validity? It may or may not, depending on how these methods are combined or integrated (more in Chapter 6 on this issue).
- Are you aware that there are many methods you can use beyond those traditionally known as quantitative or qualitative? Think, for example, how your case study might illuminate a different way of knowing through use of art forms.

Research Design of the Single Case

Having chosen the type of design you prefer, there are five micro design issues to consider before entering the field: how to conceptualize or fine tune your area of research; select the case; gain access to the site; set boundaries of the case; and how to frame it to collect data. In the enthusiasm to start collecting data, these steps are often overlooked, which can result in the case being difficult to analyze and interpret.

Conceptualizing the Focus

You may well have narrowed your focus following Merriam's (1998) warning that it not be too wide, for other issues arise once you are in the field. However, it still needs to be conceived in a way it can be researched, which often means narrowing the focus further or concentrating on a

particular component of the general topic. Questions to ask yourself include: What aspect of this area of research do I wish to understand? What angle is likely to yield most insight? Have others explored this perspective before? How difficult or easy will it be to analyze or interpret? Further refinement may be necessary to formulate research questions and ensure that the case is doable in the time that you have. Failure to conceptualize a clear focus will affect the framing of the case, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and possibly lead to gathering and analyzing data that does not actually inform your question/s!

I emphasize specificity at the outset, even if it needs to be reconceptualized as the case proceeds. I have seen too many case studies that start with a broad aim but never focus, ending up with too many issues, too many questions, and a mass of data that is difficult to organize and interpret. I have also seen studies that have an immaculate design in the sense that each part neatly connects with every other part to reach a predetermined, desired goal, which is rigorously adhered to even when the goal is no longer relevant given the reality of what has transpired in the field. Clearly, what is required here is a balance—a direction, but an openness as well to evolving issues in the context of the case.

Selecting the Case

In many contexts in case study research, selecting a case is not an issue. It may be a given if the case is a commissioned research or evaluation study or you have chosen a particular site because of its intrinsic interest. If it is an instrumental or multisite case study, you need to consider what criteria would guide the selection of your case/s, particularly if you aspire to influence social and educational issues where coverage may be important. This may look like sampling in a traditional sense, but it isn't. Case study is not sampling research as Stake (1995) clearly indicates:

> We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case. In intrinsic case study, the case is pre-selected. In instrumental case study, some cases would do a better job than others. . . . The first criterion should be to maximize what we can learn. (p. 4)

Representativeness is not the issue here. Nor is typicality. No case is typical. Even if it shares some features in common with others of a similar type, there will be differences that establish its uniqueness. This is true even if you are conducting a multiple case study. Here the aim would be to discern what is common in the cases in relation to an overall research question and what is unique to each (Stake, 2006). But whether

your case is intrinsic or instrumental and a single or multiple case study, you still need to justify why you chose the particular site or sites that you did. Factors that might influence your choice are geographical location and/or convenience (close to home or work), the scope it offers to study a specific issue in-depth, and whether it has a density of the population that would enable you to fully research this issue. If you are studying more than one case, you may choose sites in different states or districts to explore cultural and state differences. You also need to consider whether time, distance, and money will determine the number of cases you can realistically study.

An example that unites two of these criteria is the ethnographic case study by Ioannidou (2002) mentioned earlier. Ioannidou's topic was language and identity in Cypriot schools. Her precise focus was to explore whether the Greek Cypriot dialect was evident in language use in schools (and in what situations) where Standard Greek is the language of instruction, and how this compared with language policy. She chose a school close to the town in which she grew up in Cyprus where she had access, and where children came from a range of the social strata, in order to explore in what ways the Greek Cypriot dialect was currently in use or not in the school. This was an obvious and necessary choice in this context.

Other determinants include the ease or difficulty in accessing particular sites and the extent to which the school or context has been studied before. It is also sometimes a case of opportunity where, for example, your previous work is known or you have been invited to conduct the case.

Seeking Access

When you do not know the gatekeepers, a formal letter requesting access is the customary route. I always try a phone call first to introduce myself and the topic and to request a preliminary visit. I follow up this phone call with a letter briefly outlining what the case study would involve: the methods and ethics to be adopted, the relevance of this particular institution, and the time commitment, stressing that the aim is not to disturb the ongoing operation of the institution. It is often suggested in letters seeking access that you point out how conducting research in this institution could benefit participants. I am wary of doing so in case this is seen as pressure to agree. It is also a promise you may not be able to fulfill.

On the visit itself I take a one-page outline of the study and the ethical protocol (an example of which is outlined in a later section of this chapter) to share with staff. I indicate whom I wish to interview and what and whom to observe, reiterating that the time needed would not interrupt the normal working of the institution. I explain the ethical protocol in detail with key participants to make sure their expectations

are clear as to how any information they offer would be used and in what form. I have found it necessary to do this because key participants (and especially the head of an institution) often give consent to the ethical principles when seeking access, as they seem fair, but they do not have a thorough understanding of what these principles mean in practice. Seeking informed consent for data gathering is often suggested at this stage. However, I view informed consent as a more specific process in gaining ethical approval at the start of the actual case. (See "Interlude: Informed Consent" later in this chapter.)

Setting Boundaries

In Chapter 1, I noted various ways in which a case can be conceived and indicated the importance of setting a boundary that circumscribes it. In this design phase, you need to delineate the boundaries more closely to facilitate data gathering and interpretation. For example, is your case bounded by an institution or by a group within an institution, by a project, program, or policy, or by state or district? If we take a school as an example, when I first began case study, as I indicated in my case study journey in Chapter 1, I took the physical geography of the school and major actors within it—the principal, teachers, and students—as the boundary. Later, in exploring the complexity of the case and how and why things happened, I extended the boundary to include the cleaners, the caretaker, the receptionist—individuals who often know a great deal about the subnorms and culture of an institution. If the case is a policy, program, or project, the considerations may be slightly different. People will still be paramount—those who generated the initiative and those who implemented it—but there is likely to be a political culture surrounding its introduction which has an influence on the way it evolved. Would this be part of the case?

    Whatever boundary is chosen, sometimes issues within this boundary can be understood only by going to another level. What transpires in a classroom, for example, is often partly dependent on the support of the school leadership and culture of the institution. If it is an innovative program, its success may depend not only on the teachers and students and the leadership and institutional context, but also on the resources allocated from the local education administration outside the school. It is the intersection of the levels and the impact of one upon the other that need to be explored if the case extends to include these levels. An image often adopted to visualize this intersection of levels is that of the Russian Doll, where you have a series of dolls of different sizes fitting neatly one inside the other, each relevant to an integrated holistic understanding. Bryant (2021) makes a similar point in describing wholeness as a series of nested

concentric circles that illustrate depth but where each part belongs to the whole (p. 76). See also Rog et al. (2012) for an extended discussion of the several levels of context we often have to consider in case study practice.

Case study authors and practitioners do not always agree at what point you should decide what the case is a case of and where the boundaries lie. I think it is helpful to have some idea at the outset to help you decide what research questions to ask and what data will inform these questions. However, it is important to keep in mind that the boundaries and the experience of the case may shift in the process of conducting the study as you examine how events and activities unfold in the particular circumstances of *the case.* And sometimes it is only possible to establish what the case is a case of when the study is complete. This is not a problem but rather an example of emergent design in action.

Unit of Analysis

Deciding what the case is a case of, and its boundaries, may suggest the unit for analysis, or you could just decide from the start what this unit will be—a classroom, an institution, a program, a district—whatever is most apt for analyzing and interpreting your case. If you are working in a health setting, a possible boundary and unit for analysis could be a hospital ward as in Duke's (2007) case study exploring her role as a palliative care nurse consultant. Included in the boundary of this case was a terminally ill patient, the family, other nurses (for whom she had responsibility), doctors, and ward sisters. While the specific ward was the focus of much of the data gathering, in interpreting and understanding the meaning of the case, it was necessary, as in the school example, to extend the boundary, in this case by examining the politics in the medical context that impacted on the case. Had the focus in the ward not been the care of a terminally ill patient, the boundary, assuming ethical permission was granted, might have included other patients, cleaners, nurse aides, and medical students. The point I am emphasizing here is that while the unit of analysis may be one thing (and decided at the beginning), the boundary of the exact case will be circumscribed by the specific focus and context.

Framing the Case

Overarching Question

Having selected your case and set the boundaries, you now have the task of framing the case to guide data collection, analysis, and interpretation. You first need an overarching question that you are hoping to inform through your case. This question should not be too descriptive, unless the intent is to produce an entirely illustrative case study. It should have

scope to explore different avenues but not be so broad that it is difficult to analyze or interpret data to inform that question. If it is an evaluative case study, this overarching question has to have a value component. Instead of asking, for instance, what are the outcomes of a particular curriculum intervention, ask what is the *value* of the intervention for this particular group of students. This focuses attention on both the particularity of the case and what its value is to whom.

I have used the overarching framing question in the singular, but you can of course have more than one, and subquestions often flow from the primary question. However, I caution against having too many framing questions at the start. Three seems a useful number as others frequently come to mind after preliminary data gathering. A further caution is not to confuse a framing question with interview questions, which are specific and tailored to the sub-issues and/or individual people interviewed.

Four Specific Approaches to Frame Your Case

You can frame your case in many different ways but four well-known approaches are: *questions, foreshadowed issues, theories,* and *program logic.* In a qualitative case study, *questions or foreshadowed issues* (Smith & Pohland, 1974) are frequently adopted because they have an openness to explore and potential to change as the study evolves. This resonates with an emergent design and allows scope for generating a theory of the case toward the end from your interpretation and analysis.

Questions also need to be open to development and change. Planning your case and the data you gather too tightly to preliminary questions may result, as we saw in the box "Imposing an Alternative Analysis on a Preordinate Design," in misconstruing the meaning or failing to engage with the lived experience in the case. Rainer Maria Rilke offers valuable guidance on this point.

> Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you
> Because you would not be able to live them,
> And the point is to live everything.
> Live the questions now.
> Perhaps you will then, gradually,
> Without noticing it,
> Live along some distant day
> Into the answer.
> (Rilke, 1992, letter four, July 16, 1903)

The inspiration in this letter that speaks to me is the opportunity it provides to slow the pace and intent of our questioning, to keep questions alive, to reconsider them, and perhaps change their focus, but above all not to seek closure. I love the way the poem gently suggests that if we do

not seek answers that cannot be given to us and live the questions, then, almost without noticing, we will gradually come "Into the answer."

Frame *foreshadowed issues* similarly. See them as open to change and stay alert to "new" issues arising in the lived experience of the case. If you are conducting an instrumental case study, however, it may be necessary to stay close to the foreshadowed issues to explore the commonality or depth of issues across several cases. (Different ways to conduct cross-case analysis are explored in Chapter 6.)

Opting to start with an *existing theory* or a *theoretical framework* you design purposely for the case provides a basis for formulating questions and issues, but it can also constrain your case only to those questions or issues that fit the framework.

The same is true with using *program logic* or a *theory of change* as a framework. Using this approach, individually or with stakeholders, you examine how the aims and objectives of a program relate to the activities designed to promote it and to the outcomes and impacts expected. It is a useful heuristic to engage stakeholders in clarifying thinking, and it provides clear direction for a policy or curriculum intervention and its evaluation. The downside is that it can lead to only confirming what was anticipated rather than documenting what transpired in the case or failing to apprehend the unintended consequences of the intervention. A preordinate framework of this kind cannot control for the political exigencies that often create disturbance to the best laid plans in complex sociopolitical contexts.

Whichever approach you choose to frame the case, check what relevant antecedents exist in the context of the case you are exploring. This can help you sharpen framing questions or foreshadowed issues, avoid unnecessary data gathering, and shorten the time needed in the field. Think also about the rationale or theory for each framing question or issue and what methods would best enable you to gain an understanding of them.

Designing the Case Openly

To access experiential understanding and augment the potential of an emergent design, there may also be a looser framing or starting point that is not dependent on questions, issues, theories, or logic of change. You might begin with deep immersion in the site, profiles of individuals telling their story or paintings of their story, a critical incident, or a set of issues that strike you as important, though you don't yet know why. You might need to sit with these issues and forms of displaying data for a while until they coalesce into a mosaic, a hexagon, a puzzle, or in some other way yield meaning. Living the questions or issues may be the route

to follow here to allow the answers or understanding to come to light. A montage or video story could be a useful way of representing a case that is designed openly, but a collage or bricolage[3] of issues that do not necessarily cohere may be an even more accessible way of conveying how the experience may be understood and interpreted in different ways. This openness in framing is particularly useful for engaging and accessing the perspectives of those who are less articulate or familiar with traditional methods to ensure that their experience is understood from their phenomenological perspectives and that the case is epistemically just.

From a Single Datum to a Universal

A further trigger for framing a case can be a single datum as in the following example. The observer of a mathematics classroom being explored as part of a whole school review noticed that one student did not fit the norm-based criteria for success in mathematics. Far from deleting him as an outlier that disturbed a neat analysis, the observer investigated further and found, on interviewing the student and searching his background, that he was highly gifted. His results were off the traditional normative scale. He was silent in class, bored by a curriculum that was neither relevant nor challenging for him. If this was the case in one class, the observer wondered how it was for him, and gifted students like him, in other classes. So she shifted focus to examine how the school was meeting the needs of all gifted students in other subjects. The lack of individualized attention might be affecting not only this student's education, and peers like him, but their prospects for the future as well. If you encounter a similar situation in your case, consider the opportunity it provides to create a new framing and boundary for the case. I raise this issue to encourage you not to be fixated on your first framing; see it rather as a guide. One has to start somewhere. But stay open. Live within the case and keep all your senses alert to what may be a more significant framing than you first thought.

Selection of Participants

While I indicated earlier in selecting the case that sampling in a traditional sense is not an issue in case study, it is possible to conceive the selection of who to interview and observe and what documents to analyze in sampling terms. In cases I conducted, I was not conscious that I was using sampling approaches. The key actors and events to observe were fairly evident. I simply followed my instinct as to what was appropriate given the time I had. But if it is helpful to speak in sampling terms when you are writing up the methodology of your case, here is an example of how I could have characterized my intuitive decisions as sampling.

> ### SAMPLING CRITERIA IN USE
>
> In most case studies I have conducted, my choice of issues, interviewees, and situations to observe has been *purposive*. I have interviewed key stake-holders, those with a specific role, and those who were key in implementing the policy or program, taking a lead from them or heeding a hunch of my own to follow up other issues or individuals. This practice might be called *snowballing* in sampling language. At other times I have been concerned to understand how particular issues played out in different situations—*sit-uational* sampling. Rarely, if ever, have I sampled at *random*. The pool of people has never been large enough in any case study I have conducted. In any event, as I said earlier, representativeness is not the issue in case study research. *Purposive* sampling is more the norm. As I began to develop a theory of the case, I chose other situations to observe individuals to inter-view, or issues to investigate that would support or deny the evolving the-ory—*theoretical sampling* in other words. And on occasion, I have taken the opportunity to interview a person not included in the initial group of inter-viewees to investigate a tension and difference in perspective that arose. In sampling language, you might call this *opportunistic*, but it was also *pur-posive* to ensure fairness in the context.

● **INTERLUDE:** *Informed Consent*

Informed consent is required before a research study can begin. In many contexts, this consent is sought in written form and customarily at two levels: first from the institution in which you work, which is commonly gained through an ethics committee or, in the United States, an institu-tional review board (IRB); and second from each person interviewed or groups observed. These written forms, often long and detailed, explain what the case will involve, how the data will be used, and what rights participants will have.

However, a few words of caution are necessary. In many contexts, these forms are mandatory and obviously are important to follow if per-mission to research is needed. But they are limited in three respects. First, informed consent forms are purportedly used to protect research participants from undue harm, but often they serve to protect the insti-tution (Janesick, 2002; Lather, 2004; Hammersley, 2009; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004) or, in the case of forms individuals are asked to sign, to assure them that they will be treated fairly, equitably, and with respect.

Second, whatever is stated in such forms is in prospect only. Rarely are they followed up in practice to see if what is claimed is carried out and whether individuals would still give consent once the study is underway. For this reason and to respect each person's autonomy, I always seek con-sent from each person interviewed, even if a gatekeeper has spoken for

all. I also adopt a form of process or rolling consent to give participants the opportunity to reconsider whether they would still give consent once they know more about the case in practice. Informed consent can be withdrawn as well as given. Participants are not always aware of what they need to consider at the outset, but the additional point which calls for a procedure of rolling consent is that circumstances change as the intricacy and uniqueness of the case unfold.

Third, written consent forms are sometimes proposed as one way to ensure that the research will be ethical. While they may include some precepts of how to act ethically, they do not confer ethical practice. In many instances, such forms constitute a bureaucratic governance tool under the guise of being ethical (Hammersley, 2009).

Informed consent for me has more to do with creating the "right" relationships and agreed principles at the beginning of the case than with written informed consent forms. To be honest, I have never asked participants to fill in a consent form for any cases I have conducted, though of course in the institution where I worked, I have supported research students to do so. My preference is always to talk with people to establish agreed ethical principles and procedures at the outset to provide the basis for generating trust and assuring participants they have the right to comment, edit, and see that they are reported fairly. Having established good relationships and by adhering to the procedures consistently in conducting the case, I can ensure consent continues and any problems are harmoniously resolved.

Data Production[4]:
Preferences and Possibilities

Methodology and methods will be considered in the next chapter. But your choice of methods and justification for that choice starts here. In shaping your design, you have to give some thought to the kind of data you need to generate evidence to inform your chosen topic and the methods that are most helpful to this end. This is not a straightforward, linear decision from the logic of your question/s or issues to the logic of appropriate methods. Several factors may influence your choice: the main audience for your case who may wish to stipulate a particular methodology; methods you think may best inform your research question or are likely to get quality data from participants; the skills you have; and your own preference for a particular method. A range of qualitative methods are given in the next chapter, with an emphasis on those that are open to intuitive ways of knowing. All these methods to different degrees and with different audiences in mind enable you to access experiential

understanding. The art forms in particular allow you to get close to establishing epistemic justice. If your case study is commissioned, you may need to adopt a method that is not your preferred choice to make sure that it is useful to your client, as in the following example.

RESPONDING TO METHOD PREFERENCE OF COMMISSIONERS

My preference, as you will know by now, is for a single case study design and qualitative methods. I conducted a qualitative case study on this basis to help directors of a governors' program in a local administration make decisions about its future development. The case study was commissioned by them and the findings were well received and considered useful for their purpose. However, they then asked me to conduct a questionnaire survey to a larger sample. While they recognized the value of the findings from the single case, commenting that the insights would be helpful in revising their program, they thought that a questionnaire to a large sample would give them more confidence in the findings. I did as requested and conducted a questionnaire with a 10 percent sample and found, not surprisingly, that it corroborated the case study findings. The directors could clearly see this too. However, they asked me to rerun the questionnaire with a 20 percent sample. I declined to do so because it was not needed. They had the evidence they required and had affirmed its utility and insight for informing how they could improve their program. Nevertheless, for their own administrative or political reasons, they placed more emphasis on the quantitative measure.

I have encountered this situation more than once when a qualitative case study has been sought. In some contexts, there is still a prevailing sense that the qualitative alone is an insufficient basis for future decision making. I do not agree with this position, and in Chapter 6 I point out how the single case can provide the evidence sought, though differently from what might be expected. I raise the example here to indicate that we need to be responsive to the concerns of commissioners and use methods that may not be our preference if it seems judicious to do so in the specific context.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In a similar way, in delineating your design, indicate in a few words how you are thinking of analyzing or interpreting the case, for this may influence the methods you choose and how you will report. Will you choose a predominantly analytic or intuitive approach? Are you seeking experiential understanding or an explanation of the case? What interpretive or analytic strategies will you adopt to accord with your design framework?

Such options are explored in Chapter 4. Your design should draw attention to which of these will inform the way you intend to interpret or analyze, as well as the overall stance you are taking to conducting the case. In the design for a case I was conducting, I would point out that I would be prioritizing an interpretive, intuitive approach as it more closely aligns with my worldview, personal predilection, and the best way I consider to access experiential understanding and seek the evidence they require. You need to decide which is the most useful approach for your purpose. Two other issues I suggest you include briefly in this design phase are the distinction I make in Chapter 4 between interpretation and analysis and the imperative to start interpreting or analyzing from the beginning of the case.

Ethics in Design

The final and essential design feature is ethics. The evolution of case study research in education brought to the surface ethical issues that were often hidden in previous methodologies. While several of the ethical issues I raise in this and subsequent chapters will be familiar in qualitative research in general, they are accentuated in case study where it is nigh impossible to anonymize individuals. They can be recognized, if not from what they say, at least from the description of the unique context. This creates the need for ethical principles and procedures (an example of which I give below) that offer individuals some control over how they are represented in the case. First, however, there are some broader ethical issues to consider, which have implications for both the design of your case and the methodology you choose.

- Is the topic of your case ethical? Or is it ethical to study the topic in the precise context you have chosen?
- Will you give equal rights to all participants irrespective of the position they hold in their profession or society?
- What ethical theory will guide your practice?
- Will it be the ethics of consequence, utilitarian ethics, duties and obligations, rights-based ethics, relational ethics (Kirkhart, 2019; S. Wilson, 2008), ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Visse & Abma, 2018), or social justice (House, 1980)? See Simons (2006) for an explanation of these different theories.

In qualitative case study, given the intense focus on people, politics, and contexts, the most likely theories that will be useful are relational (close to the ethics of care), human rights, and the ethics of consequence. In making an actual decision, of course, there may be more than one

theory in action and virtue ethics, such as integrity and respect for persons, need to be embodied in all our actions.

Then there are more practical questions:

- Will your design and methodology respect cultural, gender, and age differences?
- Will it honor those who are less articulate or disenfranchised in our society?
- Will your interview questions and observations of events and activities be unobtrusive and fit for purpose?
- Will your reporting respect participants' rights to privacy of sensitive data that could potentially be harmful, even if only perceived to be so by them?
- Will you give participants the opportunity to edit or expand any information they offer?
- How will you balance a concern for privacy with the requirement to publicly report?
- Have you considered any potential risks to participants and whether it is wise to outline potential benefits, when it is a promise you may not be able to fulfill?

For further discussion on ethics in design, see my introduction in Piper and Simons (2011, p. 28).

Devising an Ethical Protocol: Principles and Procedures

The next step is to prepare an ethical protocol to guide practice in the field. Like other qualitative forms of inquiry, where individuals are identifiable, even if anonymized, an ethical protocol in case study should be underpinned by the fundamental principle of "do no harm." Precisely what this means may differ from one context to another. Make sure that you are aware of the cultural context in which your research is located. Reflect what it means in your case and build this understanding into the protocol you share with gatekeepers or stakeholders in gaining access and with participants before you involve them in data gathering. This will help you negotiate any potential issues identified in the design phase and resolve any conflicts that arise. If there are no such procedures, it would be too late to invent them. While we cannot anticipate precisely what ethical issues might arise in practice, thinking through what could happen with one or two examples and how you would respond will give you a head start and be useful if your research proposal has to gain approval through an ethics committee or IRB.

Below is an example of the ethical procedures I have used in conducting democratic case study research (Simons, 1987, 1989, 2009). These procedures, designed to establish trust in the process of conducting the case (Norris, 2007), are underpinned by the principles of transparency—everyone is working to the same page; democratic—everyone has a right to be represented; and fairness—everyone has a right to be treated equitably and with respect. I have written the procedures in the present tense so they are easy for you to adopt or modify should you find them useful in conducting your case. In writing up what you actually did (see Chapter 3), the past tense will be more appropriate. For details of the reasoning behind these principles and the procedures derived from them, see Simons (2009, 2010, 2015b) and also Macdonald (1976) and Norris (2014).

SETTING THE GROUND RULES

- The purpose and primary audience for the research will be made clear at the outset.

- Permission will be sought for access to relevant documents, and no excerpts will be copied without agreement.

- Informed consent will be sought for each person interviewed and re-sought if the field situation requires a change in focus to make sure their consent still holds. If you sense diffidence or refusal may be problematic for individuals in an organization, especially when the major gatekeeper has given access, draw attention to the procedure in "Negotiating Data for Release and Reporting" below, which offers them an opportunity to decide whether any part of their interview should *not* become data for the case.

- Informed consent will also be sought with children, who, verbally or through body language, can give or decline consent, even if parents or the school (in locus parentis) have given permission for their children to be interviewed and observed. This procedure accords them the same respect as adults.

- Interviews will be conducted on the principle of confidentiality.

- Participants will be asked at the end of the interview if they wish to exclude anything they had said and if they agree to its use in analysis, interpretation, and reporting.

- No data will be reported that a participant asks to be kept in confidence. A slight caveat is necessary here. This procedure cannot always be upheld, for example, when what a person claims in confidence is already public knowledge. If it is vital to report this information to ensure an accurate account, acknowledge the request, but let the person know that you cannot withhold the information and the reason for it (e.g., it is already public knowledge). However, emphasize that you will make certain the origin of that knowledge will not be attributed to any one person.

NEGOTIATING DATA FOR RELEASE AND REPORTING

- Information or co-created data for inclusion in the case study will be negotiated with participants on the criteria of accuracy, relevance, and fairness. Setting criteria is critical to avoid receiving comments that are extraneous or irrelevant to the focus or analysis and interpretation of the case.

- Permission will be sought from individuals for direct quotations and observations that can be traced to them.

- If images or artistic products are to be included, permission will also be sought from the person whose image or product it is.

- Where quotations are used to raise general issues that are not attributable or identifiable, explicit clearance will not be sought.

- Participants will have an opportunity to see how they are reported in the context of the written case study and to edit or add for clarity, accuracy (nuance of meaning), and fairness within a deadline of two weeks. The strict deadline is necessary to keep the research on track. People forget, delay, are busy, or simply, quite often, do not want to be bothered.

- Pseudonyms and roles will be used in reporting institutions and individuals. This does not guarantee anonymity, as is frequently assumed, but it does reduce the likelihood that individuals and institutions will be identifiable.

- Where anonymization is insufficient to avoid identification, clearance will be sought for participant comments.

- If a disagreement arises over the use of some data in reporting the case, an attempt will be made to resolve this conflict through discussion with the individuals concerned, first by offering an apology for any disturbance or distress caused, unintended though it will have been, and second, by suggesting that we (deliberately in the plural) renegotiate an agreed way forward. This is to emphasize that you and the person who commissioned the case agreed to this procedure at the beginning.

Identifiable Images

In devising an ethical protocol where you use images and filming in your research and reporting, consider what further safeguards you could institute by asking the following questions:

- How would I ensure that I gain proper consent first for taking the photographs or filming and second for their use? The three ways I seek consent in a written case—before an interview or observation, immediately after, and in the context of reporting—are more difficult to enact with visual data, particularly for the use of photographs or a film clip in the context of reporting?

- What protection, if any, can I give participants if using photographs, videos, or video diaries or film?
- If I can't offer any safeguards, how would I justify using photographs or a film sequence if these are important for understanding the case?
- Is it helpful, dishonoring, or misrepresenting the person to block out individual faces?
- Even if participants give permission, is it ethical to reveal their identity, not knowing how the case will be received when it is made public or several years later? This issue is problematic enough with facial images. It also applies to content and context; individuals can be recognized from drawings or stories they may have offered as data for the case (Waters, 2004).

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Decoupling Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are commonly linked together in ethical procedures in social research as though anonymity in reporting protects the privacy of individuals who have been offered confidentiality in the process. In case study, however, which is dependent on people and context, key protagonists can remain identifiable even if anonymized. See also Walford (2005) who argues that it is impossible to successfully anonymize in small-scale studies. For these reasons in the ethical procedures I follow (cited above), I respect confidentiality in order to allow individuals to express freely what concerns them, but through negotiation offer them some control over how their perspectives are reported. I do not accept an automatic connection with anonymity in publication. There are several situations where anonymity does not serve the case: where participants have had a significant role in identifying and interpreting issues and you wish to name them to value their contribution; where senior public figures, who cannot be anonymized anyway, need to be accountable in their public role; and where you may need to name someone who may have caused harm to others or is at risk of doing so.

But there is a further reason for decoupling these practices. This is relevant in any case study but is particularly necessary in democratic case study (Macdonald, 1976; Norris, 2014) which needs to generate authentic accounts of cases to inform external audiences so they can contribute to debate on social issues. Ethical procedures help to build the trust needed to gain honest accounts. However, the best way to establish and maintain this trust and deliberate the outcomes (House & Howe, 1999) where there are differing or opposing views is through the relationships we create in the field and beyond. This point is also underlined by Schwandt (1998) and Torres and Preskill (1999). It is through dialogue with those in the case that any difficulties in practice are likely be resolved. Anonymity cannot serve this

purpose, though it may be needed in rare situations where going public may cause damage to individuals. See also the distinction Guillemin and Gillam (2004) make between procedural ethics and "Ethics in Practice," which goes beyond any conception of ethics assumed in IRB systems to consider micro ethics and reflexivity in the field. With this in mind, it is worth considering what ethical issues could arise and how you would respond.

Thinking Ahead to Ethics in Practice

Influence of Gatekeeper

The first ethical issue you may confront in practice concerns who you would regard as the gatekeeper and what principle would guide your action if a person gives consent but the gatekeeper in the institution in which the person works does not, or vice versa, if the gatekeeper gives permission and individuals do not. In hierarchical contexts in particular, the head of an organization often gives access. Those lower in the hierarchy may be less inclined to do so (and to be interviewed or observed) but feel they cannot refuse if the main gatekeeper has agreed. What would you do in such a situation?

Whose Data Are They?

A second, corollary issue arises where the main gatekeeper wishes to control what data are made public when individuals have given consent for *their* data to be used. Whose data are they? What position would you take on this question? Whose judgment would you accept and what difference, if any, might it make to interpretation of the case?

Context–Dependent

A third issue concerns how we act if we observe unauthorized or unethical practices. Clearly, if it is a criminal act, we must report it, but there is often a gray area in the reality of human interactions where what may be unethical in one context or in one person's perspective is not in another.

Equal Rights?

A fourth issue concerns equality. Do we pay as much ethical attention to those less empowered as to the powerful? What rights, for example, do we give children we interview, observe, and film? What rights do we give participants where a case study undertaken for a research or educational purpose has monetary gain? Think what your response would be to these questions. They may not occur often in case research, but if your case

does involve the rights of children or the disempowered, or if financial reward is at stake, thinking ahead how you might respond will give you confidence that whatever issues arise will be resolved. Below I offer two illustrations that address these issues to demonstrate how the uniqueness of the case and sensitive relationships in each led to the decisions that were taken.

Examples of Equal Rights in Action

1. *Equal access in a different culture.* In a study she conducted of a school for Black workers in South Africa, McKeever (2000) was concerned that she was privileged as a White researcher. While she conducted the research, the evidence clearly stemmed from the Black workers. They agreed that it was her research, but in fact it was co-created through the questions she asked and the observations she made. It was their research as much as hers. In the event she resolved the ownership issue by writing two texts, one for the academy authored by her and another co-authored with the workers, which could be sold for their benefit. The research not only was accessible but also attributed to them. McKeever argued that if profits were to be gained, the workers should have a share, if not the sole rights.

2. *Equal rights for protagonist and children.* This second example revolves around the documentary French film, *Être et avoir/To Be and to Have* (Philibert, 2002). The film portrays a year in the life of a French teacher in a single teacher school in a class that had a dozen children aged 4–10. It was seen by over 2 million people in France. On October 10, 2003, it was reported that the teacher was suing the producers for a large share of the profits on the grounds that his lessons were original intellectual creations and had the same status as a book adapted for film. The teacher protested that the film could not have been made without him. The reporter, playing devil's attorney, commented that it could not have been made without the pupils either. Should they not also have a share of the profits?

Review of Key Issues

- Design is holistic and dynamic; some coherence may be necessary at the beginning, but allow for openness to change.
- Choosing a topic that engages you emotionally as well as intellectually will sustain you when difficulties arise or interpretation is unclear.
- Design in qualitative case study is likely to be *emergent* to connect to

issues identified in the real-life context and in response to developments as the case evolves.

- Preordinate designs may constrain the flexibility and dynamic evolution of the case.

- Mixed-method designs, which are frequent in large-scale studies, are less applicable in single-case research.

- Setting the boundary of the case is critical whether you do so at the outset or at the end when you know what the case is a case of in practice.

- Ethical issues need to be considered in design, as well as in the conduct of the case.

- Ethical committee or IRB approval should not be confused with institutional governance.

- Informed consent at the start of a case does not mean it will endure. Process or rolling consent needs to be maintained throughout as field events often give rise to issues that cause participants to reconsider their initial agreement.

- Anonymity is not always the counterpoint to confidentiality in reporting a case. Often they need to be decoupled to honor the contribution of participants, to call officials to account, and to name any persons in danger of causing harm to others.

- Taking time to establish good relationships at the outset will ensure you gain quality data and can harmoniously resolve any ethical dilemmas that arise.

NOTES

1. The term *external examiner* is used in the United Kingdom for the main person who assesses the worth of a PhD submission and recommends whether or not it should be awarded. There is a second examiner who is internal to the institution where the student is registered whose primary role is to support the candidate and see fair play. The assessment takes place in a face-to-face viva. In the United States, this examination (assessment process) is undertaken by a committee.

2. Referral is the term used in the United Kingdom where the examiners (those who assess) find the work has shortcomings. They therefore refer it back to the candidate for more work.

3. For an explication of the value and process of bricolage, see Denzin and Lincoln (2003, pp. 7–11).

4. I use the word *production* here rather than data collection to mark the point Small and Calarco (2022) make in their boo*k Qualitative Literacy* that we do not only collect data but also *produce* it; through the questions we ask and what we observe, we are inevitably embedded in the data.