

## **Case Closed: An Earnest Review of Gagnon's Case Study as Research Method**

Brian T. Gearity

The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, USA

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*Gagnon's (2011) text is the most recent contribution to the growing corpus of knowledge on case study research. As a whole, the text contains all of the typical parts one would expect in an introductory text on case study research. The text begins with a brief discussion of paradigms and epistemologies and then gives way to issues of reliability and validity. Next, the reader is taken through a "step-by-step" approach to case study research with chapters on data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing reports. Drawing upon his own experiences using case study method, Gagnon identifies enduring concerns and provides several practical tips for the novice researcher. However, the text could be improved by a clear definition of case study and a lucid explanation of the relationship between methodologies and methods. Keywords: Case Study, Method, Management, Qualitative Research, Constructivist.*

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Why am I here? What is knowledge? How should one live an ethical life? The most arduous of philosophers may dwell on these issues for a lifetime. Also taking up these concerns are scientists or researchers, particularly qualitative researchers. For myself, I can remember having an existential curiosity long ago as a child, but graduate school provided a focused and guided opportunity to explore how qualitative researchers have developed methodologies to produce knowledge. I was introduced to case study research design and methods during a course bearing that name in graduate school. Through the work of Stake (1995), Merriam (1998), and Yin (2003), we discussed enduring questions and essential concepts such as "what is a case," "why do case study," as well as data collection and analysis methods. This past year I was also embarking on a descriptive case study of Major League Baseball strength and conditioning coaches and their coaching practices. The research design would be case study, drawing primarily upon Stake (2006) and secondarily Yin. This brief historical context provides the backdrop for this review. In earnest, when I saw *The Qualitative Report* had a new case study book (Gagnon, 2010) available for review I was intrigued.

No sooner had I seen the front cover, however, than I became bothered by the title, *The Case Study as Research Method: A Practical Handbook*. For me, case study is a design (i.e., framework, structure), not a method (i.e., tools, steps, and procedures). Thinking perhaps I was being nitpicky, I attempted to *bracket out* (Husserl, 1962) the front cover to open myself up to the text. The table of contents was next. The *chapters* were not called by that name, but are labeled *stages*, which could be seen as conveying the message that the research process (i.e., case study), is a linear process. This is a far cry from Stake (1995) who talks about case study in its "complexity" and "particularity" (p. xi) and Merriam's (1998) belief that this design is best suited to gain an "in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (p. 19). Indeed, it is a

challenge for authors to write clearly and orderly, without being reductionistic, misleading, or failing to convey important details and interrelationships.

Beginning with stages (read chapters) on “assessing appropriateness and usefulness,” “ensuring accuracy of results,” and “preparation,” the organization of the book is also different than most introductory research texts, but in a good way. The thoughtful researcher needs to have an understanding of paradigms and epistemologies before being unleashed to do empirical research. The rest of the text proceeds in typical format with chapters on how to collect, analyze, interpret, and report research. By beginning with some foundational epistemological issues from the outset, Gagnon (2010) is to be applauded for not reducing issues of knowing and research to methods and procedures. Unfortunately, this discussion struck me as somewhat unclear and contradicting. For example, upon citing the *advent of postmodernism* as a challenge to truth and knowledge, Gagnon immediately proclaims, “thus while I have defended the qualitative approach to research, I also believe it must meet the same requirements as the quantitative approach” (p. x). So, although he recognizes postmodernism, Gagnon seems to reconstruct critical realist criteria for truth and knowledge claims. As I struggled to interpret the meaning of the introduction, I appreciated the author’s attempt to address topics and terms related to the purpose of research, research design, sampling, and the uses of case study. In the end, however, case study is never operationally defined; as opposed to Stake (2006) who notes at the outset of his text, “A case is a noun, a thing, an entity...” (p. 1).

Gagnon (2010) begins stage one, “assessing appropriateness and usefulness,” by challenging the reader to identify their paradigm as being constructivist, or anything else. He argues that a social constructivist view of case study, as well as qualitative research in general, is best suited to understand constructed realities that are historically situated, multifactorial, and involve the complex interaction between self and environment. (Gagnon’s approach to case study is solely qualitative; he does not see case study as a design that permits both qualitative and quantitative data.) Then, the researcher should identify the research problem and determine if the research is exploratory or of the “raw empirical type” (p.15). The difference between the two, Gagnon identifies, is a matter of the researcher’s preliminary ideas and conceptions on the research topic. Stage two, “ensuring accuracy of results,” provides a rather post-positivist perspective on criteria used to evaluate whether a study has been conducted with rigor. The material on internal and external reliability and validity is quite thorough and the list and steps offered are in line with a post-positivist approach. In this section, it might have been helpful to readers to include a definition of triangulation on page 35; and several paragraphs of one to two sentences in length are distracting.

Stage three, “preparation,” takes up the issue of framing the research question in the existing literature and the use of a theoretical framework. Furthermore, the reader is advised to choose the type of case study (single vs. multiple) and consider becoming familiar with the potential site, and data collection and analysis methods before beginning the study—good advice indeed. The chapter begins with a discussion of how to identify a research question (existing knowledge gap, need or the researcher’s experience) and whether or not to be guided by an existing theoretical framework or to do more of a grounded theory approach. At the end of the chapter, Gagnon (2010) advises that the subjects (the term he uses rather than participants) should be, “enthusiastic about the idea

of participating in the study and prepared to accept some experimentation and trial-and-error” (p. 48). This section of the text points to the way that bias, history, culture, context, an autonomous subject, and the subject’s motives may influence a study, and seemed somewhat at odds with the earlier post-positivist claims about reliability and validity.

Stage four, “selecting cases,” and stage five, “collecting data,” present further prescriptive advice pertaining to the researcher’s relationship with the site, subjects, and power and politics (not his words) of data. The reader is introduced to the different sources and types of data such as observation, interview, and document. Gagnon (2010) provides several practical “tips” and refers back to his own experiences for examples. In stage six, “analyzing data,” and stage seven, “interpreting data,” he discusses how to code data which will eventually lead to creating a description of the case. Next, he discusses how the interpretive process is used to create possible explanations. Gagnon recommends that these explanations should be checked against the data to ensure their validity and that rival hypothesis should be eliminated. This latter point seems to run counter to the earlier discussion of multiple realities and epistemologies of constructivism. A discussion of how to use an existing theoretical framework or develop a grounded theory is intertwined with the observation that the investigator’s *creativity and imagination* are involved in interpretation. This section also includes a brief mention of (qualitative?) factor analysis procedures and determining causality, both of which would benefit from greater development.

In stage eight; “reporting results,” there are again a few tips on how to write the report such as creating an outline, memos, drafts, and the use of *storytelling*. Gagnon (2010) wraps up the conclusion by stating the aim of the “handbook” was to help the reader determine if case study is appropriate for them and to equip the reader with a step-by-step guide that is “comprehensive.” For me, providing a clearer definition of case study would assist the reader in making an informed choice about the use of this research design; also, the step-by-step approach seemed rather prescriptive for the qualitative researcher guided by flexible or emerging design and methods. The complexity of the research process and the pros and cons of various approaches gave way to stages, steps, and tips. Gagnon notes, “The steps in this handbook describe the specific activities that should be carried out in order to produce evidence and theory that are clear, logical, and irrefutable, in keeping with the scientific method” (Gagnon, p. 104). What would Foucault or any of the so-called poststructuralist/postmodern authors think of such an Enlightenment concept?

Writing is hard work and publishing requires courage—it leaves one vulnerable to critique. I give credit to Gagnon (2010) and others who have completed lengthy texts. I have tried to give an earnest account by reading the text multiple times and providing a detailed, constructive critique. I hope that students interested in case study will review the most recent work of Merriam (2009), Stake (2005, 2006), and Yin (2010), as well as this text, in order to achieve a comprehensive perspective on case study research.

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### Author Note

Brian T. Gearity is a 2nd year assistant professor at The University of Southern Mississippi in the department of Human Performance and Recreation. Brian T. Gearity (PhD, Tennessee) is an Assistant Professor of Sport Coaching Education at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has published theoretical papers, empirical research, and book reviews in *The Qualitative Report*, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *Journal of Coaching Education*, *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, *Journal of Latinos and Education* and the *NASSP Bulletin*. His work focuses on sport and education, athlete's experiences of sport, the coach-athlete relationship, and philosophy and qualitative research. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed to: Dr. Brian Gearity, Human Performance and Recreation #5142, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39406. Phone: 1-601-266-6321; Fax: 1-601-266-4445 and E-mail: Brian.Gearity@usm.edu

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