

## Issues and Opinions

### Letter to the Editor

A colleague brought to my attention the article by Izak Benbasat, David Goldstein and Melissa Mead, which was published in your September 1987 issue ("The Case Research Strategy in Studies of Information Systems," pp. 369-386). It focuses on case research strategies and is based, in part, on an evaluation of a case study I published on the implementation of a computer-based model (Dutton, W.H. "The Rejection of an Innovation: The Political Environment of a Computer-Based Model," *Systems, Objectives, Solutions* (1:4), November 1981, pp. 179-201). I was delighted to see more attention given the methodological issues of case research. I found their description of case study research published in information systems journals interesting. For example, it underscored how few case studies have been published. Also, most conclusions of the article are inarguable, such as a call for multiple sources of data. And, from a personal perspective, the critique of my case study was reasonable. Nevertheless, I think the argument of this article deserves some comment. From my perspective, Benbasat, et al., judge case research on questionable if not inappropriate criteria. I expect many scholars involved in case research would agree.

First, Benbasat and his colleagues accept one particular reconstruction of the logic of case research as their model of scientific inquiry. Essentially, Benbasat and others take a few textbook treatments on how to do case studies, such as Robert Yin's (*Case Study Research, Design, and Methods*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA, 1984), to construct a set of evaluation criteria. Yin wrote an excellent introductory text that developed guidelines for conducting case research. Yin offers much advice to those approaching case study research for experienced as well as novice researchers. Unfortunately, Benbasat and others take such primers as definitive accounts of the logic of case study research — the basis from which they judge the merits of a sample of published case studies. Instead of examining how successful case researchers actually conduct and report on case studies, they accept one particular reconstruction of a logic of inquiry that might not conform even to the methods Yin has used in practice. Of course, they could not discover how social scientists actually conduct case study research because they base their review only on one published report

of each case. They do not interview the researchers, observe the research process, or even look at the case materials on which the articles are based. Imagine if our understanding of how scientists go about their work was based solely on reading the published research.

Second, and more importantly, they evaluate qualitative/historical case study research on the basis of criteria central to other modes of scientific inquiry. In my opinion, Benbasat and others incorrectly apply criteria common to experimental and survey research methods to case research. Thus, they look at sampling issues such as site selection and approaches to developing and validating theory such as the formulation and testing of hypotheses as desirable attributes of case research. In doing so, the authors are evaluating case studies on the basis of an approach to scientific inquiry that is quite different from case research. Compared to survey research, for example, participant-observer approaches, which are most typical of case studies, develop and validate theory in different ways. It is not just misleading to evaluate case studies on the basis of one's image of good survey research methods, it suggests that one particular logic of inquiry (i.e., survey research) is a superior one. In this way, their treatment reinforces a traditional view among quantitative behavioral scientists that case studies are less scientific approaches to empirical inquiry. Benbasat and others make no bones about this when they assign a secondary role to case studies. They argue that "research phenomena not supported by a strong theoretical base may be fruitfully pursued through case research" (1987, p.372).

An understanding of how successful case study researchers discover and report findings could be of great value to furthering research on information systems. Instead, Benbasat, Goldstein and Mead offer critiques of published case studies from perspectives alien to qualitative, participant-observer modes of inquiry. Perhaps the article will be of some value to case researchers attempting to craft articles in a manner acceptable to journals oriented toward experimental and survey research. But it should not be taken seriously as a guide to case research strategies.

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