

Issues and Opinions

Letter to the Editor

We welcome this opportunity to reply to Professor Dutton's letter to the editor. An important goal in writing our paper was to start a dialogue on case research and on IS research strategies in general. We are pleased that this discussion has begun with this exchange of letters as well as with the Allen S. Lee article ("A Scientific Methodology for MIS Case Studies") that will appear in the March issue.

We will address three key points raised by Professor Dutton:

1. the relative importance of the case research strategy,
2. the selection of appropriate evaluation criteria for case research, and
3. the importance of developing "an understanding of how successful case study researchers discover and report findings."

In our paper we explore how the case research method could contribute to the accrual of knowledge in IS. We do not believe that the case method is inferior to other research methods, nor is it dominant over them. As explained in our paper, the investigator should apply the appropriate method(s) based on the research problem to be studied. When we say that case research may be useful for studying "research phenomena not supported by a strong theoretical base" we are suggesting an expansive rather than a limited view of this approach. In fact, the method is useful for hypothesis testing as well as for hypothesis generation and exploration. This was illustrated with an example (the Markus study described on p. 375) of how a case study could be used for testing explanatory models.

Perhaps the question of evaluation criteria can be best put into perspective by distinguishing between "discovery" and "validation" (for a more detailed description see, Richard S. Rudner, *Philosophy of Social Science*, Prentice-Hall Foundations of Philosophy Series, 1966, pp. 4-7). Issues in discovery include how one generates hypotheses or develops novel explanations for observed phenomena. Validation, in contrast, is concerned with the logic of justification. To illustrate these points consider the editor of a well-known accounting research journal who wanted

to receive papers that were "new, true, and interesting." In this context, "new" and "interesting" relates to discovery and "true" refers to validation.

We believe that different *techniques* of "discovery" (e.g., instrumentation, random assignment, stratified sampling) are most appropriate for different research strategies, the same way that different techniques are chosen for research in the social and physical sciences. We also believe there should be a common logic of inquiry for all social science research and that this logic suggests a common set of evaluation criteria. These rules of "validation" could be more or less stringently applied depending on the phase of knowledge accrual. For example, the evaluation criteria used in the drift or exploration stage may not be as stringent as those applied during hypothesis testing (see Table 2, p. 372). Professor Dutton takes issue with this by stating that we have incorrectly applied evaluation criteria suited to other modes of scientific inquiry. He has not suggested an alternative approach.

Finally, we agree that it would be interesting to better understand how successful case researchers carry out their work. This would be a research question of "discovery." How one would select appropriate techniques for conducting this research as well as the criteria one would use to identify suitable subjects are challenging issues to ponder. Whether this would lead to findings of "great value" remains an empirical question. In any case, these questions are not within the scope of our paper.

Upon reflection it is possible that Professor Dutton and we are looking at two sides of the same coin. Our work has dealt primarily with questions of validation while Professor Dutton has raised additional questions that are primarily ones of discovery.

Izak Benbasat
Professor and Chairman
The University of British Columbia

David K. Goldstein
Assistant Professor
Harvard University

Melissa Mead
Assistant Professor
Harvard University