Case Study Research

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

John Gerring

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Principles and Practices

Case Study Research: Principles and Practices aims to provide a general understanding of the case study method as well as specific tools for its successful implementation. These tools can be utilized in all fields where the case study method is prominent, including anthropology, business, communications, economics, education, medicine, political science, social work, and sociology. Topics covered include the definition of a case study, the strengths and weaknesses of this distinctive method, strategies for choosing cases, an experimental template for understanding research design, and the role of singular observations in case study research. It is argued that a diversity of approaches – experimental, observational, qualitative, quantitative, ethnographic – may be successfully integrated into case study research. This book breaks down traditional boundaries between qualitative and quantitative, experimental and nonexperimental, positivist and interpretivist.

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Principles and Practices

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For Liz, Kirk, Nicole, and Anthony,
who are hereby exempted from the usual familial obligation
to pretend to have read Uncle John's latest book.

Historical knowledge and generalization (i.e., classificatory and nomothetic) knowledge . . . differ merely in the relative emphasis they put upon the one or the other of the two essential and complementary directions of scientific research: in both cases we find a movement from concrete reality to abstract concepts and from abstract concepts back to concrete reality – a ceaseless pulsation which keeps science alive and forging ahead.

– Florian Znaniecki (1934: 25)

Contents

Acknowledgments

I began thinking seriously about this project while conducting a workshop on case studies at Bremen University, sponsored by the Transformations of the State Collaborative Research Center (CRC). I owe special thanks to my hosts in Bremen: Ingo Rohlfing, Peter Starke, and Dieter Wolf. Subsequently, the various parts of the project were presented at the Third Congress of the Working Group on Approaches and Methods in Comparative Politics, Liege, Belgium; at the annual meetings of the Institute for Qualitative Research (IQRM), Arizona State University; at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE); and at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association. I am thankful for comments and suggestions from participants at these gatherings.

The book evolved from a series of projects: articles in the *American Political Science Review, Comparative Political Studies*, and *International Sociology*; chapters in the *Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* and the *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*; and papers coauthored with Rose McDermott, Jason Seawright, and Craig Thomas.[1] I am grateful to these coauthors, and to the publishers of these papers, for permission to adapt these works for use in the present volume.

For detailed feedback on various drafts, I owe thanks to Andy Bennett, Tom Burke, Melani Cammett, Kanchan Chandra, Renske Doorenspleet, Colin Elman, Gary Goertz, Shareen Hertel, Staci Kaiser, Bernhard Kittel, Ned Lebow, Jack Levy, Evan Lieberman, Jim Mahoney, Ellen Mastenbroek, Devra Moehler, Howard Reiter, Kirsten Rodine,

[1] See Gerring (2004b, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c); Gerring and McDermott (2005); Gerring and Thomas (2005); Seawright and Gerring (2005).

Ingo Rohlfing, Richard Snyder, Peter Starke, Craig Thomas, Lily Tsai, and David Woodruff. For clarification on various subjects, I am in debt to Bear Braumoeller, Patrick Johnston, Jason Seawright, Jas Sekhon, and Peter Spiegler.

This book also owes a large debt to a recent volume on the same subject, *Case Studies and Theory Development* by Alexander George and Andrew Bennett – cited copiously in footnotes on the following pages. I like to think of these two books as distinct, yet complementary, explorations of an immensely complex subject. Anyone who, upon finishing this text, wishes further enlightenment should turn to George and Bennett.

My final acknowledgment is to the generations of scholars who have written on this subject, whose ideas I appropriate, misrepresent, or warp beyond recognition. (In academic venues, the first is recognized as a citation, the second is known as a reinterpretation, and the third is called original research.) The case study method has a long and largely neglected history, beginning with Frederic Le Play (1806–1882) in France and the so-called Chicago School in the United States, including such luminaries as Herbert Blumer, Ernest W. Burgess, Everett C. Hughes, George Herbert Mead, Robert Park, Robert Redfield, William I. Thomas, Louis Wirth, and Florian Znaniecki. Arguably, the case study was the first method of social science. Depending upon one's understanding of the method, it may extend back to the earliest historical accounts or to mythic accounts of past events.[2] Certainly, it was the dominant method of most of the social science disciplines in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] Among contemporary writers, the work of Donald Campbell, David Collier, and Harry Eckstein has been particularly influential on my own thinking about these matters. It is a great pleasure to acknowledge my indebtedness to these scholars.

[2] Bernard (1928); Jocher (1928: 203).

[3] Glimpses of this early history can be found in Brooke (1970); Hamel (1993); and in various studies conducted by members of the Chicago School (e.g., Bulmer 1984; Hammersley 1989; Smith and White 1921). A good survey of the concept as it has been used in twentieth-century sociology can be found in Platt (1992). Dufour and Fortin (1992) provide an annotated bibliography, focusing mostly on sociology.

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1

The Conundrum of the Case Study

There are two ways to learn how to build a house. One might study the construction of many houses – perhaps a large subdivision or even hundreds of thousands of houses. Or one might study the construction of a particular house. The first approach is a cross-case method. The second is a within-case or *case study* method. While both are concerned with the same general subject – the building of houses – they follow different paths to this goal.

The same could be said about social research. Researchers may choose to observe lots of cases superficially, or a few cases more intensively. (They may of course do both, as recommended in this book. But there are usually trade-offs involved in this methodological choice.)

For anthropologists and sociologists, the key unit is often the social group (family, ethnic group, village, religious group, etc.). For psychologists, it is usually the individual. For economists, it may be the individual, the firm, or some larger agglomeration. For political scientists, the topic is often nation-states, regions, organizations, statutes, or elections.

In all these instances, the case study – of an individual, group, organization or event – rests implicitly on the existence of a micro-macro link in social behavior.[1] It is a form of cross-level inference. Sometimes, in-depth knowledge of an individual example is more helpful than fleeting knowledge about a larger number of examples. We gain better understanding of the whole by focusing on a key part.

[1] Alexander et al. (1987).

Two centuries after Frederic Le Play's pioneering work, the various disciplines of the social sciences continue to produce a vast number of case studies, many of which have entered the pantheon of classic works. The case study research design occupies a central position in anthropology, archaeology, business, education, history, medicine, political science, psychology, social work, and sociology.[2] Even in economics and political economy, fields not usually noted for their receptiveness to case-based work, there has been something of a renaissance. Recent studies of economic growth have turned to case studies of unusual countries such as Botswana, Korea, and Mauritius.[3] Debates on the relationship between trade policy and growth have likewise combined cross-national regression evidence with in-depth (quantitative and qualitative) case analysis.[4] Work on ethnic politics and ethnic conflict has exploited within-country variation or small-N cross-country comparisons.[5] By the standard of praxis,

[2] For examples, surveys of the case study method in various disciplines and subfields, see: anthropology/archeaology (Bernhard 2001; Steadman 2002); business, marketing, organizational behavior, public administration (Bailey 1992; Benbasat, Goldstein, and Mead 1987; Bock 1962; Bonoma 1985; Jensen and Rodgers 2001); city and state politics (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2002); comparative politics (Collier 1993; George and Bennett 2005: Appendix; Hull 1999; Nissen 1998); education (Campoy 2004; Merriam 1988); international political economy (Odell 2004; Lawrence, Devereaux, and Watkins 2005); international relations (George and Bennett 2005: Appendix; Maoz 2002; Maoz et al. 2004; Russett 1970); medicine, public health (Jenicek 2001; Keen and Packwood 1995; Mays and Pope 1995; "Case Records from the Massachusetts General Hospital," a regular feature in the *New England Journal of Medicine*; Vandenbroucke 2001); psychology (Brown and Lloyd 2001; Corsini 2004; Davidson and Costello 1969; Franklin, Allison, and Gorman 1997; Hersen and Barlow 1976; Kaarbo and Beasley 1999; Kennedy 2005; Robinson 2001); social work (Lecroy 1998). For cross-disciplinary samplers, see Hamel (1993) and Yin (2004). For general discussion of the methodological properties of the case study (focused mostly on political science and sociology), see Brady and Collier (2004); Burawoy (1998); Campbell (1975/1988); Eckstein (1975); Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg (1991); George (1979); George and Bennett (2005); Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster (2000); Lijphart (1975); McKeown (1999); Platt (1992); Ragin (1987, 1997); Ragin and Becker (1992); Stake (1995); Stoecker (1991); Van Evera (1997); Yin (1994); and the symposia in *Comparative Social Research* 16 (1997). An annotated bibliography of works (primarily in sociology) can be found in Dufour and Fortin (1992).

[3] Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2003); Chernoff and Warner (2002); Rodrik (2003). See also studies focused on particular firms or regions, e.g., Coase (1959, 2000) and Libecap (1989).

[4] Srinivasan and Bhagwati (1999); Stiglitz (2002, 2005); Vreeland (2003).

[5] Abadie and Gardeazabal (2003); Chandra (2004); Miguel (2004); Posner (2004). For additional examples of case-based work in political economy, see Abadie and Gardeazabal (2003); Alston (2005); Bates et al. (1998); Bevan, Collier, and Gunning (1999); Chang and Golden (in process); Fisman (2001); Huber (1996); Piore (1979); Rodrik (2003); Udry (2003); and Vreeland (2003).

therefore, it would appear that the method of the case study is solidly ensconced, perhaps even thriving. Arguably, we are witnessing a movement in the social sciences away from a variable-centered approach to causality and toward a case-based approach.[6]

Contributing to this movement is a heightened skepticism toward cross-case econometrics.[7] It no longer seems self-evident that nonexperimental data drawn from nation-states, cities, social movements, civil conflicts, or other complex phenomena should be treated in standard regression formats. The complaints are myriad, and oft-reviewed.[8] They include: (a) the problem of arriving at an adequate specification of a causal model, given a plethora of plausible models, and the associated problem of modeling interactions among these covariates;[9] (b) identification problems (which cannot always be corrected by instrumental variable techniques);[10] (c) the problem of "extreme" counterfactuals (i.e., extrapolating or interpolating results from a general model where the extrapolations extend beyond the observable data points);[11] (d) problems posed by influential cases;[12] (e) the arbitrariness of standard significance tests;[13] (f) the misleading precision of point estimates in the context of "curve-fitting" models;[14] (g) the problem of finding an appropriate estimator and

[6] This classic distinction has a long lineage. See, e.g., Abbott (1990); Abell (1987); Bendix (1963); Meehl (1954); Przeworski and Teune (1970: 8–9); Ragin (1987; 2004: 124); and Znaniecki (1934: 250–1).

[7] Of the cross-country growth regression, a standard technique in economics and political science, a recent authoritative review notes: "The weight borne by such studies is remarkable, particularly since so many economists profess to distrust them. The cross-sectional (or panel) assumption that the same model and parameter set applies to Austria and Angola is heroic; so too is the neglect of dynamics and path dependency implicit in the view that the data reflect stable steady-state relationships. There are huge cross-country differences in the measurement of many of the variables used. Obviously important idiosyncratic factors are ignored, and there is no indication of how long it takes for the cross-sectional relationship to be achieved. Nonetheless the attraction of simple generalizations has seduced most of the profession into taking their results seriously" (Winters, McCullock, and McKay 2004: 78).

[8] For general discussion of the following points, see Achen (1986); Ebbinghaus (2005); Freedman (1991); Kittel (1999, 2005); Kittel and Winner (2005); Manski (1993); Winship and Morgan (1999); and Winship and Sobel (2004).

[9] Achen (2002, 2005); Leamer (1983); Sala-i-Martin (1997).

[10] Bartels (1991); Bound, Jaeger, and Baker (1995); Diprete and Gangl (2004); Manski (1993); Morgan (2002a, 2002b); Reiss (2003); Rodrik (2005); Staiger and Stock (1997).

[11] King and Zeng (2004a, 2004b).

[12] Bollen and Jackman (1985).

[13] Gill (1999).

[14] Chatfield (1995).

modeling temporal autocorrelation in pooled time-series datasets;[15] (h) the difficulty of identifying causal mechanisms;[16] and, last but certainly not least, (i) the ubiquitous problem of faulty data (measurement error).[17] Many of the foregoing difficulties may be understood as the by-product of causal variables that offer limited variation through time, cases that are extremely heterogeneous, and "treatments" that are correlated with many possible confounders.

A second factor militating in favor of case-based analysis is the development of a series of alternatives to the standard linear/additive model of cross-case analysis, thus establishing a more variegated set of tools to capture the complexity of social behavior.[18] Charles Ragin and associates have explored ways of dealing with situations where different combinations of factors lead to the same set of outcomes, a set of techniques known as qualitative comparative analysis (QCA).[19] Andrew Abbott has worked out a method that maps causal sequences across cases, known as optimal sequence matching.[20] Bear Braumoeller, Gary Goertz, Jack Levy, and Harvey Starr have defended the importance of necessary-condition arguments in the social sciences, and have shown how these arguments might be analyzed.[21] James Fearon, Ned Lebow, Philip Tetlock, and others have explored the role of counterfactual thought experiments in the analysis of individual case histories.[22] Andrew Bennett, Colin Elman, and Alexander George have developed typological methods for analyzing cases.[23] David Collier, Jack Goldstone, Peter Hall, James Mahoney, and Dietrich Rueschemeyer have worked to revitalize the comparative and comparative-historical methods.[24] And scores of researchers have attacked the problem of how to convert the relevant details of a temporally constructed narrative into standardized formats so that cases can be meaningfully compared.[25] While not all of these techniques are, strictly

[15] Kittel (1999, 2005); Kittel and Winner (2005).
[16] George and Bennett (2005).
[17] Herrera and Kapur (2005).
[18] On this topic, see the landmark volume edited by Brady and Collier (2004).
[19] Drass and Ragin (1992); Hicks (1999: 69–73); Hicks et al. (1995); Ragin (1987, 2000); several chapters by Ragin in Janoski and Hicks (1993); "Symposium: qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)" (2004).
[20] Abbott (2001); Abbott and Forrest (1986); Abbott and Tsay (2000).
[21] Braumoeller and Goertz (2000); Goertz (2003); Goertz and Levy (forthcoming); Goertz and Starr (2003).
[22] Fearon (1991); Lebow (2000); Tetlock and Belkin (1996).
[23] Elman (2005); George and Bennett (2005: Chapter 11).
[24] Collier (1993); Collier and Mahon (1993); Collier and Mahoney (1996); Goldstone (1997); Hall (2003); Mahoney (1999); Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003).
[25] Abbott (1992); Abell (1987, 2004); Buthe (2002); Griffin (1993).

speaking, case study techniques (they sometimes involve a rather large number of cases), they move us closer to a case-based understanding of causation insofar as they aim to preserve the texture and detail of individual cases, features that are often lost in large-N cross-case analyses.

A third factor inclining social scientists toward case-based methods is the recent marriage of rational-choice tools with single-case analysis, sometimes referred to as an *analytic narrative*.[26] Whether the technique is qualitative or quantitative, or some mix of both, scholars equipped with economic models are turning to case studies in order to test the theoretical predictions of a general model, to investigate causal mechanisms, and/or to explain the features of a key case.

Finally, epistemological shifts in recent decades have enhanced the attractiveness of the case study format. The "positivist" model of explanation, which informed work in the social sciences through most of the twentieth century, tended to downplay the importance of causal mechanisms in the analysis of causal relations. Famously, Milton Friedman argued that the only criterion for evaluating a model was to be found in its accurate prediction of outcomes. The verisimilitude of the model, its accurate depiction of reality, was beside the point.[27] In recent years, this explanatory trope has come under challenge from "realists," who claim (among other things) that causal analysis should pay close attention to causal mechanisms.[28] Within political science and sociology, the identification of a specific mechanism – a causal pathway – has come to be seen as integral to causal analysis, regardless of whether the model in question is formal or informal or whether the evidence is qualitative or quantitative.[29] Given this newfound (or at least newly self-conscious) interest in mechanisms, it is hardly surprising that social scientists would turn to case studies as a mode of causal investigation.

The Paradox

For all the reasons just stated, one might suppose that the case study holds an honored place among methods currently taught and practiced

[26] The term, attributed to Walter W. Stewart by Friedman and Schwartz (1963: xxi), was later popularized by Bates et al. (1998), and has since been adopted more widely (e.g., Rodrik 2003). See also Bueno de Mesquita (2000) and Levy (1990–91).

[27] Friedman (1953). See also Hempel (1942) and Popper (1934/1968).

[28] Bhaskar (1978); Bunge (1997); Glennan (1992); Harre (1970); Leplin (1984); Little (1998); Sayer (1992); Tooley (1988).

[29] Dessler (1991); Elster (1998); George and Bennett (2005); Hedstrom and Swedberg (1998); Mahoney (2001); McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001); Tilly (2001).

in the social sciences. But this is far from evident. Indeed, the case study research design is viewed by most methodologists with extreme circumspection. A work that focuses its attention on a single example of a broader phenomenon is apt to be described as a "mere" case study, and is often identified with loosely framed and nongeneralizable theories, biased case selection, informal and undisciplined research designs, weak empirical leverage (too many variables and too few cases), subjective conclusions, nonreplicability, and causal determinism.[30] To some, the term *case study* is an ambiguous designation covering a multitude of "inferential felonies."[31]

Arguably, many of the practitioners of this method are prone to invoking its name in vain – as an all-purpose excuse, a license to do whatever a researcher wishes to do with a chosen topic. Zeev Maoz notes,

> There is a nearly complete lack of documentation of the approach to data collection, data management, and data analysis and inference in case study research. In contrast to other research strategies in political research where authors devote considerable time and effort to document the technical aspects of their research, one often gets the impression that the use of case study [sic] absolves the author from any kind of methodological considerations. Case studies have become in many cases a synonym for free-form research where everything goes and the author does not feel compelled to spell out how he or she intends to do the research, why a specific case or set of cases has been selected, which data are used and which are omitted, how data are processed and analyzed, and how inferences were derived from the story presented. Yet, at the end of the story, we often find sweeping generalizations and "lessons" derived from this case.[32]

To say that one is conducting a case study sometimes seems to imply that normal methodological rules do not apply; that one has entered a different methodological or epistemological (perhaps even ontological)

[30] Achen and Snidal (1989); Geddes (1990, 2003); Goldthorpe (1997); King, Keohane, and Verba (1994); Lieberson (1985: 107–15; 1992; 1994); Lijphart (1971: 683–4); Odell (2004); Sekhon (2004); Smelser (1973: 45, 57). It should be underlined that these writers, while critical of the case study format, are not necessarily opposed to case studies per se; that is to say, they should not be classified as *opponents* of the case study. More than an echo of current critiques can be found in earlier papers, e.g., Lazarsfeld and Robinson (1940) and Sarbin (1943, 1944). In psychology, Kratochwill (1978: 4–5) writes: "Case study methodology was typically characterized by numerous sources of uncontrolled variation, inadequate description of independent, dependent variables, was generally difficult to replicate. While this made case study methodology of little scientific value, it helped to generate hypotheses for subsequent research. . . ." See also Hersen, Barlow (1976: Chapter 1) and Meehl (1954).

[31] Achen and Snidal (1989: 160).

[32] Maoz (2002: 164–5).