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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).

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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).

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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).

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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).

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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).

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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).

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zone. As early as 1934, Willard Waller described the case study approach as an essentially *artistic* process.

> Men who can produce good case studies, accurate and convincing pictures of people and institutions, are essentially artists; they may not be learned men, and sometimes they are not even intelligent men, but they have imagination and know how to use words to convey truth.[33]

The product of a good case study is *insight*, and insight is

> the unknown quantity which has eluded students of scientific method. That is why the really great men of sociology had no "method." They had a method; it was the search for insight. They went "by guess and by God," but they found out things.[34]

Decades later, a methods textbook describes case studies as a product of "the mother wit, common sense and imagination of person doing the case study. The investigator makes up his procedure as he goes along."[35]

The quasi-mystical qualities associated with the case study persist to this day. In the field of psychology, a gulf separates "scientists" engaged in cross-case research from "practitioners" engaged in clinical research, usually focused on individual cases.[36] In the fields of political science and sociology, case study researchers are acknowledged to be on the soft side of increasingly hard disciplines. And across fields, the persisting case study orientations of anthropology, education, law, social work, and various other fields and subfields relegate them to the nonrigorous, nonsystematic, nonscientific, nonpositivist end of the academic spectrum.

Apparently, the methodological status of the case study is still highly suspect. Even among its defenders there is confusion over the virtues and vices of this ambiguous research design. Practitioners continue to ply their trade but have difficulty articulating what it is they are doing, methodologically speaking. The case study survives in a curious methodological limbo.

[33] Waller (1934: 296–7).
[34] Ibid.
[35] Simon (1969: 267), quoted in Platt (1992: 18).
[36] Hersen and Barlow (1976: 21) write that in the 1960s, when this split developed, "clinical procedures were largely judged as unproven, the prevailing naturalistic research was unacceptable to most scientists concerned with precise definition of variables, cause-effect relationships. On the other hand, the elegantly designed, scientifically rigorous group comparison design was seen as impractical, incapable of dealing with the complexities, idiosyncrasies of individuals by most clinicians."

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This leads to a paradox: although much of what we know about the empirical world has been generated by case studies, and case studies continue to constitute a large proportion of the work generated by the social science disciplines (as demonstrated in the previous section), the case study *method* is generally unappreciated – arguably, because it is poorly understood.

How can we make sense of the profound disjuncture between the acknowledged contributions of this genre to the various disciplines of social science and its maligned status within these disciplines? If case studies are methodologically flawed, why do they persist? Should they be rehabilitated, or suppressed? How fruitful *is* this style of research?

Situating This Book

This book aims to provide a general understanding of the case study as well as the tools and techniques necessary for its successful implementation. The subtitle reflects my dual concerns with general principles as well as with specific practices.

The first section explores some of the complexities embedded in the topic. Chapter Two provides a definition of the case study and the logical entailments of this definition. A great deal flows from this definition, so this is not a chapter that should be passed over quickly. Chapter Three addresses the methodological strengths and weaknesses of case study research, as contrasted with cross-case research. Case studies are useful in some research contexts, but not in all. We need to do better in identifying these different circumstances.

The second section of the book addresses the practical question of how one might go about constructing a case study. Chapter Four addresses preliminary issues. Chapter Five outlines a variety of strategies for choosing cases. Chapter Six proposes an experimental template for understanding case study research design. Chapter Seven presents a rather different sort of approach called process tracing. An epilogue provides a short discussion of case studies whose purpose is to explain a single outcome, rather than a class of outcomes. (This is understood as a *single-outcome study*, to distinguish it from the garden-variety case study.) A glossary provides a lexicon of key terms.

A number of differences between the book in your hands and other books exploring the same general topic should be signaled at the outset. First, unlike some texts, this one does not intend to provide a comprehensive review of methodological issues pertaining to social science research.

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My intention, rather, is to hone in on those issues that pertain specifically to case study research. Issues that apply equally to single-case and cross-case analysis are ignored, or are treated only in passing.[37] Philosophy-of-science issues are almost entirely bypassed, except where they impinge directly upon case study research.

Second, I focus on the role of case studies in facilitating *causal* analysis. This is not intended to denigrate the interpretive case study or the essentially descriptive task of gathering evidence – for example, through ethnography, interviews, surveys, or primary and secondary accounts. If I give these matters short shrift, it is only because they are well covered by other authors.[38]

Third, rather than focusing on a single field or subfield of the social sciences, I take a broad, cross-disciplinary view of the topic. My conviction is that the methodological issues entailed by the case study method are general, rather than field-specific. Moreover, by examining basic methodological issues in widely varying empirical contexts we sometimes gain insights into these issues that are not apparent from a narrower perspective. Examples are drawn from all fields of the social sciences, and occasionally from the natural sciences. To be sure, the discussion betrays a pronounced tilt toward my own discipline, political science, and toward two subfields where case studies have been particularly prominent – comparative politics and international relations. However, the arguments should be equally applicable to anthropology, business, economics, history, law, medicine, organizational behavior, public health, social work, and sociology – indeed, to any field in the social sciences.

The reader should be aware that the examples chosen for discussion in this book often privilege work that has come to be understood as classic or paradigmatic – that is, works that have elicited commentary from other writers. The inclusion of an exemplar should not be taken as an indication that I endorse the writer's findings, or even her methodological choices.

[37] I have assumed, for example, that the reader is aware of various injunctions such as the following: (1) One's use of sources – written, oral, or dataset – should be intelligent, taking into account possible biases and omissions; (2) whatever procedures the writer follows (qualitative or quantitative, library work or field research) should be described in enough detail to be replicable; (3) the author should consider plausible alternatives to the argument that she presents, those presented by the literature on a topic as well as those that might suggest themselves to a knowledgeable reader. These standard-issue topics are covered elsewhere, e.g., in Gerring (2001); King, Keohane, and Verba (1994); and in numerous handbooks devoted to qualitative or quantitative research.

[38] See text citations in Chapter Four as well as the extensive bibliography at the end of this work.

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It means only that a work serves as "a good example of X." The point of the example is thus to illustrate specific methodological issues, not to portray the state of research in a given field.

Indeed, many of my examples will be familiar to readers of other methodological texts, where these examples have been chewed over. The replication of familiar examples should serve to enhance methodological understanding of difficult points, as recurrence to familiar cases enhances clarity and consensus in the law. A case-based method rests on an in-depth knowledge of key cases, through which general points are elucidated and evaluated. It is altogether fitting, I might add, that a book on the case study method should assume a case-based heuristic.[39]

Foregrounding the Arguments

Although this purports to be a textbook on the case study, it is also inevitably an argument about what the case study should be. All methods texts have this two-faced quality, even if the writer is not explicit about her arguments. I wish to be as explicit as possible. What follows, therefore, is a brief résumé of larger arguments that circulate throughout the book.

Qualitative and Quantitative

Traditionally, the case study has been associated with qualitative methods of analysis. Indeed, the notion of a case study is sometimes employed as a broad rubric covering a host of nonquantitative approaches – ethnographic, clinical, anecdotal, participant-observation, process-tracing, historical, textual, field research, and so forth. I argue that this offhand usage should be understood as a methodological affinity, not a definitional entailment. To study a single case intensively need not limit an investigator to qualitative techniques. Granted, large-N cross-case analysis is always quantitative, since there are (by construction) too many cases to handle in a qualitative way. Yet case study research may be either quant or qual, or some combination of both, as emphasized in the following chapter and in various examples sprinkled throughout the book. Moreover, there is no reason that case study work cannot accommodate formal mathematical

[39] I do not mean to suggest that cases written for teaching purposes (e.g., at the Harvard Business School [Roberts 2002]), which are entirely descriptive (though they are intended to allow students to reach specific conclusions), are similar to case studies written for analytic purposes. This book is focused on the second, not the first.

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