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978-0-521-85928-8 - Case Study Research: Principles and Practices

John Gerring

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Case Study Research

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.

John Gerring is currently associate professor of political science at Boston University. His books include *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996* (1998) and *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework* (2001).

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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.*

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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)

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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.

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

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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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