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978-0-521-42188-1 - What is a Case?: Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry

Edited by Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker

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Introduction: Cases of “What is a case?”¹

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The precept of case analysis

Social science methodology is anchored by a number of basic precepts that are rarely questioned by practitioners. One precept that is central to the logic of analysis is the idea of having *cases*. Social scientists use terms like “*N* of cases,” “case study,” and “sample of cases” with relatively little consideration of the possible theories and metatheories embedded in these terms or in the methods that use cases and make conventional forms of analysis possible. For example, we may describe an investigation as a case study because it involves ethnographic research in one setting, without ever considering what constitutes a case study or whether there are methodologically decisive differences between case studies and other kinds of studies. Another example: In quantitative research, we use the terms “cases” and “units of analysis” interchangeably without considering the problems that might come from conflating data categories and theoretical categories (Ragin 1987:7–9). One researcher may use *families* as data-collection sites in a survey study; another may write a book called *What Is Family?* (Gubrium and Holstein 1990). A third example: A study that uses interviews of employees to construct a picture of the informal organization of a firm looks superficially like one that uses interviews of employees to address variation in job satisfaction. Both studies use interviews of employees as the primary data source, but the first is about the firm as a whole, while the second is about employees’ subjective states. In short, the term “case” and the various terms linked to the idea of case analysis are not well defined in social science, despite their widespread usage and their centrality to social scientific discourse.

Implicit in most social scientific notions of case analysis is the idea that the objects of investigation are similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon. At a minimum, most social scientists believe that their

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methods are powerful enough to overwhelm the uniqueness inherent in objects and events in the social world. The idea of comparable cases is implicated in the boundary between dominant forms of social science and other types of discourse about social life (e.g., journalism and, in many quarters, history). The audiences for social science expect the results of social scientific investigation to be based on systematic appraisal of empirical evidence. Use of evidence that is repetitious and extensive in form, as when it is based on observations of many cases or of varied cases, has proved to be a dependable way for social scientists to substantiate their arguments. Social scientists who conduct case studies argue that their cases are typical or exemplary or extreme or theoretically decisive in some other way. Thus, even in case-study research the principle of repetition is often implicated in statements concerning the relation between the chosen case and other cases. [For an extended discussion of this issue, see Feagin, Orum, and Sjöberg (1991) and especially Sjöberg et al. (1991).]

No matter which case or unit investigators use in their empirical analyses, they typically invoke additional units in the presentation of their research. An analysis of individual-level survey data from a sample of adults in the United States, for example, provides a foundation for statements about individuals and about the United States (in addition to the range of units in between these two poles – e.g., communities, cities, social classes). A study of this type can be seen both as an extensive analysis of many cases (the sample of individuals) and as an intensive case study of the United States. Further, the United States may be seen as a case in several different senses. For example, it may be seen as a member of a larger set of broadly defined objects (e.g., advanced societies), or as an instance of an important theoretical concept or process (e.g., partial implementation of meritocratic principles), or as an intrinsically interesting historical or cultural entity in its own right (e.g., a country that is changing in historically specific or decisive ways). This example shows as well that while it is tempting to see the case study as a type of qualitative analysis, and perhaps even to equate the two, virtually every social scientific study is a case study or can be conceived as a case study, often from a variety of viewpoints. At a minimum, every study is a case study because it is an analysis of social phenomena specific to time and place.

When presenting their results, investigators manipulate both empirical cases and theoretical cases, and these different cases may vary by level, as when they are nested or hierarchically arrayed, and they may vary in specificity. A given body of empirical evidence also can be constructed into a variety of different substantive cases (a case of mis-

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management, or a case of overwhelming external pressures, or a case of inertia, etc.). To the question "What is a case?" most social scientists would have to give multiple answers. A case may be theoretical or empirical or both; it may be a relatively bounded object or a process; and it may be generic and universal or specific in some way. Asking "What is a case?" questions many different aspects of empirical social science.

Conceptions of "cases" and social science discourse

The various usages and meanings of the term "case" have far-reaching implications for the conduct of social science; this fact alone is enough to justify questioning its status. The issue also deserves careful consideration because different conceptions of the term "case" are central to the enduring gulf between quantitative and qualitative social science. The term "case" is one of many basic methodological constructs that have become distorted or corrupted over time. The typical pattern is for a key methodological term to gain multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. Consider, for example, the term "cause." A fundamental rule of quantitative social science is that "correlation is not causation." Yet social scientists routinely make statements that one variable *causes* variation in another, when the evidence is based entirely on correlational patterns. The term "cause" has been permitted multiple, non-overlapping meanings. It is only when critics challenge a researcher who uses correlational evidence that "cause" in the sense of documented empirical connections is addressed (see Becker's discussion, Chapter 9). The term "control" offers another example. Originally, "control" referred almost exclusively to experimental designs, where causal factors are directly manipulated by the investigator (hence the appropriateness of the term "control"). Today we use the term "control" to refer as well to arithmetic adjustments based on assumptions of causal linearity and additivity in analyses of naturally occurring data. [A conceptually oriented overview of these practices is offered by Lieberman (1985).] Thus, we say that we control statistically for the effect of parental social class when we assess the effects of public-versus-private-school attendance on student performance, when in fact we have no real control at all over who attends which school. The term has been broadened in meaning to refer to very different research activities.

The same holds true for the term "case." The view that quantitative researchers look at many cases, while qualitative researchers look at only one or a small number of cases, can be maintained only by allowing considerable slippage in what is meant by "case." The ethnographer

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who interviews the employees of a firm in order to uncover its informal organization has at least as much empirical data as the researcher who uses these same interviews to construct a data set appropriate for quantitative assessment of variation among employees in job satisfaction. Both have data on employees and on the firm, and both produce findings specific in time and place to that single firm. Further, both researchers make sense of their findings by connecting them to studies of other firms. Yet the ethnographer is said to have but one case and to be conducting a case study, while the quantitative researcher is seen as having many cases.

In this light, much of what is considered large-*N* research also must be seen as case-study research, and the tendency to conflate *qualitative study* and *case study* should be resisted. To apply the same term to vastly different methodological constructs serves only to increase the perception that the different kinds of social science are irreconcilable and that their practitioners speak mutually unintelligible languages. We need to strive for greater clarity in what we mean by “case” and differentiate its various meanings. This emendment of current practices will simplify the task of linking qualitative and quantitative research and bring greater richness and unity to the conduct of social science (Ragin 1991).

Consider this book a first step in confronting this important task. Collectively, the contributors have questioned the term “case” from a variety of viewpoints; their contributions to this volume can be seen as the groundwork for future efforts toward refining the various meanings of “case.” As the contributions show, it is difficult to ask “What is a case?” without addressing other bases of social scientific methodology. Asking this question initiates a long-overdue conversation about the foundations of social science and the meanings of the terms we use to describe what we do.

Conversations about “What is a case?”

The conversation about the term “case” presented in this volume had its origins in other conversations. The issue of cases came up often in a logic-of-analysis workshop that Howard Becker and I conducted in the winter and spring of 1988. This particular workshop had its origins in still other exchanges, based on our shared reaction to the unexamined status of the case in social science methodology.

This peculiar status of the “case” was clear to me in my work *The Comparative Method* (Ragin 1987). In that work I showed how conventional variable-oriented comparative work (e.g., quantitative cross-national research), as compared with case-oriented comparative work,

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disembodies and obscures cases. In most variable-oriented work, investigators begin by defining the problem in a way that allows examination of many cases (conceived as empirical units or observations); then they specify the relevant variables, matched to theoretical concepts; and finally they collect information on these variables, usually one variable at a time – not one case at a time. From that point on, the language of variables and the relations among them dominate the research process. The resulting understanding of these relations is shaped by examining patterns of covariation in the data set, observed and averaged across many cases, not by studying how different features or causes fit together in individual cases.

The alternative, case-oriented approach places cases, not variables, center stage. But what is a case? Comparative social science has a ready-made, conventionalized answer to this question: Boundaries around places and time periods define cases (e.g., Italy after World War II). In comparative and historical social science, there is a long tradition of studying individual countries or sets of theoretically or empirically related countries conceived as comparable cases. The conventionalized nature of the answer in macrosocial inquiry made it simple to contrast variable-oriented and case-oriented approaches. It could just as easily be argued, however, that not countries but rather parallel and contrasting event sequences are cases (see Abbott's contribution, Chapter 2), or that generic macrosocial processes, or historical outcomes, or macro-level narratives are cases. "What is a case?" is problematic even where researchers are confronted at every turn by big, enduring, formally constituted macrosocial units such as countries.

The problem of "What is a case?" is even more crucial when the contrast between variable-oriented and case-oriented approaches is transferred to other research domains, because in most research areas the answers are less conventionalized. Is a social class a case or a variable? (See Platt's discussion in Chapter 1.) This is not a trivial question for scholars interested in social movements and the future of inequality. Is an analysis of United States census data a study of many cases (individuals) or one case (the United States)? As I pushed my ideas about case-oriented research into new substantive areas, I found that I had a lot of new questions about cases. The logic-of-analysis workshop provided a good setting for exploring these questions.

Howard Becker brought many questions about cases to the workshop, too. His concerns overlap with mine, but also differ qualitatively (see Chapter 9). In the workshop, and later in the symposium where the essays in this volume were first presented, he persistently pulled the rug out from under any possible consensus about "What is a case?" From

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his perspective, to begin research with a confident notion of “What is a case?” (or, more precisely, what *this* – the research subject – is a case of) is counterproductive. Strong preconceptions are likely to hamper conceptual development. Researchers probably will not know what their cases are until the research, including the task of writing up the results, is virtually completed. What *it* is a case of will coalesce gradually, sometimes catalytically, and the final realization of the case’s nature may be the most important part of the interaction between ideas and evidence.

In short, Becker wanted to make researchers continually ask the question “What is this a case of?” The less sure that researchers are of their answers, the better their research may be. From this perspective, no definitive answer to the question “What is a case?” can or should be given, especially not at the outset, because *it depends*. The question should be asked again and again, and researchers should treat any answer to the question as tentative and specific to the evidence and issues at hand. Working through the relation of ideas to evidence answers the question “What is this a case of?”

Thus, while I hoped the workshop would bring the start of an answer to my questions about cases, Becker, my co-conspirator, hoped to keep the question on the floor, unanswered. These contrasting orientations made for a lively workshop, with some participants sharing my concern for answers, however tentative and incomplete, and others sharing Becker’s concern for keeping the question alive. Still, we all left the workshop with a strong sense of unfinished business. This sense that there was much more that could be mined from the topic was our primary motivation for organizing a symposium on the topic.

We decided to keep the conversation about cases going by posing the question to a select group of eight social scientists in the fall of 1989, to be followed by a symposium on the topic in the following spring. Our primary selection principles were diversity and originality. Convincing eight diverse social scientists to come to Northwestern University and offer their thoughts on “What is a case?” was easier than we had anticipated. Potential participants were eager to take a crack at our question. As a lure we suggested the following topics to our participants as possible issues for discussion:

1. Alternative definitions of cases, of case study, and of case analysis.
2. The contrast between observational and explanatory units and the implications of this distinction for research findings as representations of social life.
3. The hierarchical nature of units and the implications of this structure for case analysis and the goal of generalization.
4. The place of theoretical and purposive sampling in social science and the relation between these sampling strategies and case study.

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5. The relationship between analysis of cases and analysis of research literatures.
6. The different uses of case studies in social science.
7. The boundary between social science and other forms of discourse and the place of the concept of the case in supporting this boundary.
8. What is a good case study?

Our lure produced a collection of contrasting answers to the question "What is a case?" and an avalanche of new questions as well. During the two-day conference, which involved not only the invited scholars but also many of the original workshop participants and a lively group of students and faculty from Northwestern and other universities in the Chicago area, it was difficult to separate our questions about cases from a wide array of issues concerning the foundation of modern social science methodologies.

The present collection of essays includes all eight prepared specifically for the symposium. However, the essays have been modified in response to the discussion at the symposium and in response to each other as well.

Starting points for answering "What is a case?"

Before discussing the different responses, it is important to note that none of the symposium participants offered what might be considered conventional answers to the question. For example, no one pushed methodological individualism or the idea that social life can be understood only from the perspective of individual actors. Nor did any of the participants attempt to defend textbook treatments of cases – the idea that there are populations of cases (observations) "out there" waiting for social scientific analysis. (However, acceptance of this position is implied in Lieberman's essay; see Chapter 4.) Nor did anyone endorse the idea that the definition of a set or population of cases was the purely practical task, specific to each research endeavor, of defining the universe of possibly relevant or comparable observations. When sampling came up for discussion at the symposium, the primary focus was on theoretical or purposive sampling, not random sampling from a population. Correspondingly, there was little discussion of issues in estimating population parameters. The concept of "the case" is logically prior both to the concept of "the population" and the concept of "the variable." In a context where the concept of "the case" is made problematic, these other concepts appear impenetrable.

While the answers to "What is a case?" were diverse, they displayed common themes. Participants agreed that the precept of case analysis is

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fundamental to the conduct of social science and that it has a special, unexamined status. They agreed that individual social scientists answer the question "What is a case?" in remarkably different ways and that answers to this question affect the conduct and results of research. And all agreed that cases may be multiple in a given piece of research: What the case is may change both in the hands of the researcher (during the course of the research and when the results are presented) and in the hands of the researcher's audiences.

This general agreement on the importance and indeterminate nature of the term "case" should not be taken as evidence that striking differences in emphases do not exist among the eight responses. In fact, the differences are dramatic. At the most general level, the contributions differ in whether the question stimulated a critique of current practices or a reflection on research experiences. Four of the eight contributions focus on critiques of common practices, and four focus on their own experiences. Crosscutting this descriptive dichotomy, however, are more fundamental differences which reflect different starting points for answering the question. To understand these different starting points, consider two key dichotomies in how cases are conceived: (1) whether they are seen as involving empirical units or theoretical constructs and (2) whether these, in turn, are understood as general or specific.

The first dichotomy (whether the question of cases involves empirical units or theoretical categories) is common in discussions of social science methodology and overlaps with the philosophical distinction between realism and nominalism. Realists believe that there are cases (more or less empirically verifiable as such) "out there." Nominalists think cases are theoretical constructs that exist primarily to serve the interests of investigators. A realist sees cases as either given or empirically discoverable. A nominalist sees cases as the consequences of theories or of conventions.

The second dichotomy concerns the generality of case categories. Are case designations specific (e.g., the "authoritarian personality" or the "anti-neocolonial revolution") and developed in the course of research (e.g., through in-depth interviews or historical research) or are they general (e.g., individuals, families, cities, firms) and relatively external to the conduct of research? In many areas of research, generic units are conventionally treated as cases, and case categories are neither found nor derived in the course of research. They exist prior to research and are collectively recognized as valid units by at least a subset of social scientists. Specific case categories, by contrast, emerge or are delineated in the course of the research itself. What the research subject is a "case of" may not be known until after most of the empirical part of the

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Table I.1. *Conceptual map for answers to "What is a case?"*

Understanding of cases	Case conceptions	
	Specific	General
As empirical units	1. Cases are found (Harper)	2. Cases are objects (Vaughan)
As theoretical constructs	3. Cases are made (Wieviorka)	4. Cases are conventions (Platt)

project is completed. To a limited extent, this second dichotomy overlaps with the qualitative-quantitative divide in social science. The cases of quantitative research tend to exist as conventionalized, generic categories independent of any particular research effort. The cases of qualitative research tend to coalesce as specific categories in the course of the research. "What is this – the research subject – a case of?" is a question that is best asked in qualitative social science.

The cross-tabulation of these two dichotomies (Table I.1) yields four possible starting points for answering the question "What is a case?" Consider the nature of "cases" from the perspective of each cell of the cross-tabulation:

Cell 1: Cases are found. In the first quadrant, researchers see cases as empirically real and bounded, but specific. They must be identified and established as cases in the course of the research process. A researcher may believe that "world systems" (networks of interacting and interdependent human societies) are fundamentally important empirical units for understanding the history of human social organization and therefore may seek to determine the empirical boundaries of various historical world systems (verifiable, e.g., through evidence of trade in bulk goods between peoples of differing cultures). Researchers who approach cases in this way see assessment of the empirical bounding of cases as an integral part of the research process. Among the eight contributions, the clearest advocate of this view of cases is Douglas Harper (Chapter 6). Harper makes the empirical unit "community" problematic and attempts to delineate communities inductively, through individuals. Communities are bounded in different ways depending on their nature, and the boundary of a single community may be fluid and ever-changing.

Cell 2: Cases are objects. In the second quadrant, researchers also view cases as empirically real and bounded, but feel no need to verify

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their existence or establish their empirical boundaries in the course of the research process, because cases are general and conventionalized. These researchers usually base their case designations on existing definitions present in research literatures. A researcher interested in explaining contemporary international inequality, for example, would accept nation-states (as conventionally defined) as appropriate cases for his or her analysis. Often coupled with this view is an instrumental attitude toward cases – they exist to be manipulated by investigators. Diane Vaughan's contribution (Chapter 8) offers the best example of this approach. Her empirical cases are conventional units such as organizations and families. She argues that by exploring generic processes (e.g., misconduct) across different types of generic empirical units (e.g., families and formal organizations), it is possible to develop better theories.

Cell 3: Cases are made. Researchers in this quadrant see cases as specific theoretical constructs which coalesce in the course of the research. Neither empirical nor given, they are gradually imposed on empirical evidence as they take shape in the course of the research. A cell-3 investigator interested in tyranny, for example, would study many possible instances of tyranny. This investigation might lead to an identification of an important subset of instances with many common characteristics, which might be conceived, in turn, as *cases* of the same thing (e.g., as cases of "patrimonial praetorianism" or as cases of "modern tyranny"). Interaction between ideas and evidence results in a progressive refinement of the case conceived as a theoretical construct. At the start of the research, it may not be at all clear that a case can or will be discerned. Constructing cases does not entail determining their empirical limits, as in cell 1, but rather pinpointing and then demonstrating their theoretical significance. Michel Wieviorka's contribution (Chapter 7) offers a good example of this understanding of cases (as does John Walton's; see Chapter 5). Wieviorka's essay shows how the interaction of ideas and evidence in his research on terrorism made it possible for him to identify its sociologically decisive features.

Cell 4: Cases are conventions. Finally, in the fourth quadrant, researchers see cases as general theoretical constructs, but nevertheless view these constructions as the products of collective scholarly work and interaction and therefore as external to any particular research effort. A researcher, for example, might conduct research on "industrial societies," recognizing that the assignment of empirical cases to this theoretical category is problematic and that the theoretical category