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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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The concept of the “case” is a basic feature of social science research, and yet many questions about how a case should be defined, how cases should be selected, and what the criteria are for a good case or set of cases are far from settled. Are cases preexisting phenomena that need only be identified by the researcher before analysis can begin? Or are cases constructed during the course of research, only after analysis has revealed which features should be considered defining characteristics? Will cases be selected randomly from the total pool of available cases? Or will cases be chosen because of their unique qualities? To what degree must cases be comparable? Is the logic of quantitative research, using a large number of cases, fundamentally different from that of qualitative research, using only one or a few cases?

These questions and many others are addressed by the contributors to this volume as they probe the nature of the case and the ways in which different understandings of what a case is affect the conduct and the results of research. The contributors find a good deal of common ground, and yet they also express strikingly different views on many key points. In his introduction, Charles Ragin provides a framework for distinguishing four fundamentally different approaches to case-based research. These approaches are organized around two dichotomies in how cases are conceived: whether they are considered to be empirical units or theoretical constructs and whether they are understood as examples of general phenomena or as specific phenomena. Each approach involves procedural and analytical guidelines that will affect the course of research and the conclusions the research draws. As Ragin argues and the other contributors demonstrate, the work of any given researcher often is characterized by some hybrid of these basic approaches, and it is important to understand that most research involves multiple definitions and uses of cases, both as specific empirical phenomena and as general theoretical categories.

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WHAT IS A CASE?

Exploring the foundations of social inquiry

Edited by

Charles C. Ragin, *Northwestern University*

and

Howard S. Becker, *University of Washington*



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