

## Case Study Research

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### Principles and Practices

*Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* provides a general understanding of the case study method as well as specific tools for its successful implementation. These tools are applicable in a variety of fields, including anthropology, business and management, communications, economics, education, medicine, political science, psychology, social work, and sociology. Topics include: a survey of case study approaches; a methodologically tractable definition of “case study”; strategies for case selection, including random sampling and other algorithmic approaches; quantitative and qualitative modes of case study analysis; and problems of internal and external validity. The new edition of this core textbook is designed to be accessible to readers who are new to the subject and is thoroughly revised and updated, incorporating recent research.

**John Gerring** is Professor of Government at University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Party Ideologies in America, 1828–1996* (Cambridge, 1998), *A Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance* (Cambridge, 2008), *Concepts and Method: Giovanni Sartori and His Legacy* (with David Collier, 2009), *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, 2012), and *Applied Social Science Methodology: An Introductory Guide* (with Dino Christenson, Cambridge, 2017), along with numerous articles.

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Principles and Practices

Second Edition

**John Gerring**

*University of Texas at Austin*



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Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her, she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in Story, warmed her, and sent her out again. Clothed in Story, Truth knocked again at the villagers' doors and was readily welcomed into the people's houses. They invited her to eat at their table and to warm herself by the fire.

Jewish Teaching Story

People foolishly imagine that the broad generalities of social phenomena afford an excellent opportunity to penetrate further into the human soul; they ought, on the contrary, to realise that it is by plumbing the depths of a single personality that they might have a chance of understanding those phenomena.

Marcel Proust (1992: 450; quoted in Ginzburg 2007: 256)

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)

Immersion in the particular proved, as usual, essential for the catching of anything general.

Albert Hirschman (1967: 3)

The examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a “case”: a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power. The case is no longer, as in casuistry or jurisprudence, a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule; it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.

Michel Foucault (1977:191; quoted in Forrester 1996: 12)

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## Preface

There are two ways to learn about a subject. One may study many examples at once, focusing on a few selected dimensions of the phenomena. Or, one may study a particular example, or several examples, in greater depth.

I shall refer to the first as a large-*C* approach, characterized by a large number of cases (denoted *C*) and a correspondingly narrow focus of attention. I shall refer to the second as a small-*C* or *case study* approach, characterized by one or several cases and a correspondingly broad focus of attention.<sup>1</sup>

While both are concerned with the same general subject they follow different paths to this goal. But they are not equally regarded. At the heart of social science lies a fundamental conflict between extensive and intensive modes of analysis.

By the standard of praxis, the case study method is flourishing (see Chapter 1). At the same time, case studies continue to be viewed 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 ideas, non-generalizable theories, biased case selection, undisciplined research designs, weak empirical leverage (too many variables and too few cases), subjective conclusions, and non-replicability.

This is a historic reversal of the case study’s origins. When the term “case study” first entered scientific usage at the turn of the twentieth

<sup>1</sup> I reserve “*N*” to refer to the number of observations in a study, which is quite different from the number of cases (*C*) – a crucial distinction, as it turns out (see Chapter 8).

century, it represented an attempt to think more systematically about evidence and inference. Narratives about *X* were to be understood as “cases,” signifying their connection to a broader set of phenomena and the possibility of developing a general theory of *X*. In this manner, it was thought that knowledge would cumulate and general theories would be formulated and systematically tested.

By the 1920s, however, the term had become suspect. In one of the first attempts to contrast case study and non-case study approaches to social science, Stuart Rice (1928: Chapter 4) associated the former with “history” and the latter with “statistics” and “science” – a telling contrast.<sup>2</sup> A few years later, Willard Waller (1934: 296–7) 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.

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 (Waller 1934: 296–7).

Several decades later, Julian Simon (1969: 267, quoted in Platt 1992: 18) opines,

The specific method of the case study depends upon the mother wit, common sense and imagination of the person doing the case study. The investigator makes up his procedure as he goes along.

Practitioners of this method are prone to invoking its name in vain – as an all-purpose excuse, a license to do whatever a researcher

<sup>2</sup> See also Lazarsfeld and Robinson (1940), Sarbin (1943, 1944).

wishes to do with his or her particular topic. Zeev Maoz (2002: 164–5) noted recently,

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 absolves the author from any kind of methodological considerations. Case studies have become in many cases a synonym for freeform 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.

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) zone. Here, the term functions as an ambiguous designation covering a multitude of “inferential felonies.”<sup>3</sup>

In the field of psychology, a gulf separates “scientists” engaged in large-*C* research and “practitioners” engaged in clinical research,

<sup>3</sup> Achen and Snidal (1989: 160). See also Geddes (1990, 2003), Goldthorpe (1997), King *et al.* (1994), Lieberman (1985: 107–15, 1992, 1994), Lijphart (1971: 683–4), Odell (2004), Sekhon (2004), Smelser (1973: 45, 57). 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 and Barlow (1976: Chapter 1), Meehl (1954). 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.

usually focused on one or several cases.<sup>4</sup> 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 case study orientations of cultural anthropology, education, law, social work, and various other fields relegate them to the non-rigorous, non-systematic, non-scientific, non-positivist end of the academic spectrum.

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.

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 significant proportion of work generated by the social science disciplines (see Chapter 1), the case study *method* is unappreciated, perhaps even under siege.

How can we make sense of the profound disjuncture between the acknowledged contributions of this genre and its maligned status? If case studies are methodologically flawed, why do they persist? Should they be rehabilitated, or suppressed? How fruitful *is* this style of research? And, finally, in what respects can current practices be improved?

## 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

<sup>4</sup> 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.”

implementation. The subtitle reflects my dual concern with general principles as well as specific practices. To assist the reader, a number of differences between this work and others on the same general topic should be signaled at the outset.

First, this book does not attempt to vindicate or vilify the case study method. There is much to be said “for” and “against” it. I think the genre is best served by a clear-eyed depiction of the pros and cons so that researchers can understand the benefits, as well as the limitations, of adopting a case study format. If the tone of the book is occasionally defensive, it is only because I wish to dispel certain misperceptions that (in my opinion) serve to downgrade the contributions of case studies to the work of social science.

Second, this book adopts what might be called (if one can stomach the term) a “positivist” approach to case study research. That is, I hope to show that case studies can be employed in a rigorous, systematic, replicable, and theoretically informed fashion – one that is fully consistent with, and complementary to, work conducted with a large sample of cases (large-*C* research).

Third, the book gives special attention to the role of case studies in facilitating causal analysis. This is because the descriptive aspects of case studies are difficult to distinguish from methods of data collection, e.g., surveys, interviews, ethnographies, archival research, and so forth. These topics are not unique to case study research, are well covered by other texts, and are not especially problematic from a methodological point of view. What is problematic – at least in the eyes of many methodologists – is the attempt to reach causal inferences from case study evidence. Accordingly, we focus our attention on this vexed subject. Even so, we should not lose sight of the fact that many of the most influential case studies are descriptive in nature. I hope, therefore, to encompass both sub-genres in the chapters that follow.

Fourth, rather than focusing on a single field or sub-field 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 discussed in this book are drawn from all fields of the social sciences, and occasionally from the natural sciences and humanities. To be sure, the discussion betrays a pronounced tilt towards my own discipline, political science. However, the arguments should be equally applicable to other fields in the social sciences.

Fifth, this volume does not intend to provide a comprehensive review of methodological issues pertaining to social science research.<sup>5</sup> My intention, rather, is to home in on those issues that pertain specifically to case study research. Issues that apply equally to small- and large-*N* analysis are given short shrift. Thus, I do not have much to say about the process of data collection, the discovery of new ideas (the formulation of theories), the nature of causal inference, research ethics, or issues of epistemology or philosophy of science. Likewise, techniques drawn from the field of statistics and econometrics – *regression*, *matching*, *cluster analysis*, and so forth – are not fully explained or developed. To do so would require a very different sort of book. Readers who wish to know more about these and other topics touched upon in the text may consult cited references or general introductions to social science methodology and statistics.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Some case study textbooks seem to cover the subject of social research in its entirety – conceptualization, measurement, research design, analysis, along with reflections on epistemology and philosophy of science. As such, they function as introductory methods texts with a special focus on qualitative research methods (e.g., Berg and Lune 2011; Hancke 2009; Somekh and Lewin 2005; Yin 2009).

<sup>6</sup> General introductions to social science methodology include Gerring (2012b) and King *et al.* (1994) – pitched to graduate students – and Gerring and Christenson (2017), which is designed for an undergraduate or master's level audience. Introductory statistics texts are legion. Readers primarily concerned with causal inference might consider Angrist and Pischke (2009) or their shorter, pithier text (Angrist and Pischke 2015).

Even with respect to issues pertaining directly to case study research, the present volume cannot hope to be entirely comprehensive. Fortunately, there is now a sizeable literature on these topics. Readers looking for more in-depth treatment of various subjects are advised to follow the trail of citations in the text or meander through the voluminous references at the end of the book.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the text is designed to make the material accessible to readers who are new to the subject. Notation is minimal (see Key symbols and terms). Debates with the literature are minimized, or relegated to footnotes. Key terms are defined in the text, and may be located by consulting page references in the Index. At the end of each chapter, a concluding section summarizes the main points that have been presented.

I hope that the book is useful for those who are embarking for the first time in a social science field as well as those who have completed many voyages.

## Outline

Part I of the book establishes our subject. Chapter 1 surveys the field of case study research across the social sciences. Chapter 2 proposes definitions for “case study” and associated terms. A great deal flows from these definitions so the chapter should not be passed over quickly.

Part II deals with case selection – the choice of cases to analyze intensively. Chapter 3 sets forth a summary of strategies. This serves to introduce readers to a wide variety of work conducted in a case study mode and more specifically, to illustrate the diversity of methods that may be employed to select cases for intensive analysis. Chapter 4 focuses on the selection of cases for purposes of description and Chapter 5 on the selection of cases for the purpose of causal inference. Chapter 6 discusses the application of random sampling and other algorithmic approaches to case selection, as well as the viability of medium-C samples.

Part III deals with methods of analysis – what to do with cases once they are chosen. Chapter 7 establishes a typology of research designs, distinguishing among case studies, large-*C* studies, and multimethod studies. Chapter 8 distinguishes quantitative and qualitative modes of analysis, focusing primarily on the latter.

Part IV deals with the problem of validity. Chapter 9 focuses on internal validity and Chapter 10 on external validity.

The book concludes, in Chapter 11, with a series of comparisons and contrasts between small-*C* and large-*C* research in order to understand their distinctive affinities. I argue that the many of the perceived weaknesses of the case study are overcome if case studies are complemented by large-*C* studies of the same general topic. Multimethod work – whether incorporated in the same study or in different studies – often provides a reasonable solution to situations where case studies sit uneasily on their own.

## Acknowledgements

This book evolved from a series of papers (Gerring 2004b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007b, 2017; Gerring and Cojocar 2016; Gerring and McDermott 2007; Gerring and Thomas 2005; Seawright and Gerring 2008). I am grateful to my collaborators and also to the publishers of these papers for permission to adapt these works for use in the present volume.

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The impetus for a second edition, nearly a decade after the first, came partly in response to the ongoing trajectory of work on case study methodology and related topics. Important recent works include Beach and Pedersen (2013), Bennett and Checkel (2015), Blatter and

Haverland (2012), Fearon and Laitin (2008, 2014, 2015), Glynn and Ichino (2015, 2016), Goertz (2017), Herron and Quinn (2016), Humphreys and Jacobs (2015), Levy (2008a, 2008b), Lieberman (2015), Mahoney (2012), Mahoney and Thelen (2015), Nielsen (2016), Rohlfing (2012), Schneider and Rohlfing (2013, 2016), Seawright (2016a, 2016b), Soifer (2015), Waldner (2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2016), and Weller and Barnes (2014).

Readers of the second edition will find a book that is re-written from scratch, with a revised summary of case-selection methods, an expanded section focused on case analysis, and a somewhat revised notation.

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George, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, Arend Lijphart, Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune, and Neil Smelser – not to mention prior work by logicians and philosophers such as J.S. Mill and Cohen and Nagel. My debts are apparent in the crowded footnotes and lengthy set of references.

## Key symbols and terms

### Phenomena

- D* Descriptive features  
*M* Mechanism connecting *X* and *Y*  
*X* Causal factor of theoretical interest – usually a single factor but occasionally a vector of related factors  
*Y* Outcome  
*Z* Vector of background factors which may affect *X* and *Y* and thus serve as confounders

### Causal argument

- $X \rightarrow Y$  Apparent or estimated causal effect of a change in *X* on *Y*  
 $H_X$  Hypothesis about  $X \rightarrow Y$   
 $P(H_X)$  The probability of  $H_X$  being true

### Research design

- K* Variables  
*N* Observation(s): the lowest-level units in an analysis, which may or may not be of theoretical interest  
*C* Case(s): a spatially and temporally delimited phenomenon of theoretical interest  
*T* Time-periods ( $T_1, T_2, T_3, \dots, T_N$ )  
 Sample All the observations in an analysis, regardless of how they are chosen  
 Population Cases/observations of theoretical interest, generally much larger than the sample.

**Case selection**

- Algorithmic By algorithm, e.g., descriptive statistics, regression, matching, QCA
- Non-algorithmic In an informal, qualitative fashion

**Analysis**

- Small-*C*/case study One or several cases, each of which is analyzed intensively in order to shed light on a larger population
- Medium-*C* Hybrid – several dozen cases each of which is analyzed intensively
- Large-*C* Sizeable sample of cases, analyzed with a quantitative algorithm
- Multimethod Small- and large-*C* analyses combined in a single study or research stream
- Cross-case Cross-sectional, across cases
- Within-case Within a case, either longitudinally (through time) or at a lower level of analysis
- Quantitative Formal analysis based on matrix observations – generally with a large sample
- Qualitative Informal analysis based on non-comparable observations – generally with a small sample