

Letter to Editor:

**THE ROLE OF CASE STUDY METHOD  
IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines some of the issues which arise from management research which develops theory from case studies. It raises some fundamental questions which arise when case material is used in management research. For example, confusion surrounds the distinctions between qualitative data, inductive logic and case study research. Although every researcher has his/her preferred approach, it is concluded that case studies may be built up in a number of ways: from, on the one hand, deep single case studies to multiple case studies using comparative logic, on the other. Between these two extremes are a number of hybrid methods which use both approaches.

*Keywords:* Case study, management research, inductive logic, comparative logic.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Feagin et al., 1991). Case studies have been used in various investigations, particularly in sociological studies, but increasingly, in instruction. Yin (1984), Stake (1995), and others who have wide experience in this methodology have developed robust procedures.

Whether the study is experimental or quasi-experimental, the data collection and analysis methods are known to hide some

details (Stake 1995). Case studies, on the other hand, are designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data. The term "case study" is often used loosely, as an impressive but redundant synonym for "study". But the difference between a case study and a study is methodologically significant. Indeed, the distinction helps to clarify the nature of comparative research itself.

A case is an instance of a more general category. To conduct a case study is therefore to investigate something, which has

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significance beyond its boundaries. For instance, lawyers study cases which are taken to define a legal principle with wide applicability; sociologists study particular communities to cast light on general issues in their discipline. A project turns into a case study only when it becomes clear what the study is a case of.

Case study research (CSR) is not sampling research; that is a fact asserted by all the major researchers in the field, including Yin, Stake, Feagin and others. However, selecting cases must be done so as to maximize what can be learned in the period of time available for the study.

In a case study, we seek to deepen our understanding of process which has already been accepted within the discipline as significant. Thus one practical advantage of conducting a case study is that there is sure to be some interest in the findings. Compared with studies, case studies provide intellectual gearing, making a contribution to a wider debate as well as offering a rounded account of a particular subject. They offer a double return on the research investment.

While case studies are sometimes treated as week sibling in the family of research strategies, it would be pretentious to adopt such a lofty attitude. Management is an untidy subject, in which cases are continually changing in path-dependent ways, often influencing each other as they evolve. By nature, the subject matter of management is data-rich and theory-poor; for this reason, cases are and will remain the major route to understanding. Unlike, say, economics, we do not have a single theoretical model to underpin our research. We must proceed by inspecting cases rather than by making deductions from first principles. In consequence, much comparative management analysis takes the

form not of relating cases to abstract theory, but simply of drawing analogies between the cases themselves. In the absence of overarching theory, case studies are the building blocks from which we construct our understanding of the managerial world.

## 2. RESEARCH STEPS REQUIRED TO ACHIEVE DEEP UNDERSTANDING

Case studies are a strategy for selecting a topic more than a technique for conducting research. In practice, they are normally multi-method, using the range of techniques in the managerial scientist's tool-kit: reading the academic literature, examining secondary documents (for example, newspapers), searching for primary material (for example, unpublished reports) and ideally conducting interview with participants and other observers. Scholars of cases engage in "soaking and poking, marinating themselves in minutiae" (King et al., 1994).

Case studies aim to provide a description which is both rounded and detailed, a goal which anthropologist Clifford Greetz (1973) famously defined as "thick description". Because of this rounded character, case studies are often contrasted with research using a single, systematic technique. Sample surveys, for instance, offer one particular form of evidence on the topic. Compared to the single slice of data provided by a survey, case students look through multiple lenses, mixing history and analysis, specific detail and wider implications, in an often compelling combination.

Achieving deep understanding in CSR usually involves the use of multiple research methods across multiple time periods (Denzin, 1978). Triangulation often includes:

- direct observation by the researcher within the environments of the case;
- probing by asking case participants for explanations and interpretations of “operational data” (Van Maanan, 1979); and
- analyses of written documents and natural sites occurring in case environments.

Operational data includes spontaneous conversations of participants in a case, activities engaged in and observed by the researcher, and documents written by the participants. “Presentational data” are the appearances and answers to inquiries that informants strive to establish and maintain: in the eyes of the fieldworker, outsiders and strangers in general, work colleagues, close and intimate associates, and to varying degrees, themselves (Van Maanan, 1979).

### 3. TYPES OF CASE STUDIES

#### 3.1. Representative Cases

The first and most common form of case study is the representative case – the study of a typical, standard example of a wider category (Table 1). This is the workhorse of case study designs, as useful as it is undramatic. As Peters (1998) says "one very valid reason for doing a case study is to collect information on the topic in question, especially while the case is still in progress". Examining the managerial process while it is still in progress may be especially valuable in comparative studies of, for instance, corporate social responsibility, given that the researcher may be less familiar with the national setting of the case than he or she would be for their own country.

*Table 1. Some Types of Case Study (Hague et al., 1998)*

Type	Definition
Representative	Typical of the category
Prototypical	Expected to become typical
Deviant	An exception to the norm
Crucial	Tests a theory in the least favorable conditions
Archetypal	Creates the category

#### 3.2. Prototypical Cases

The second type of case study is the prototypical form. Here, a topic is chosen not because it is representative but because it is expected to become so: "their present is our future" (Rose, 1991). Studying an early example may help us to understand a phenomenon of growing significance. Thus we will look closely to the new public management experience in Slovenia, since that country has traveled furthest down the road of economic reform.

The danger with the prototypical case is that it involves a bet on the future: what if the prototype turns into a dud? Also, innovators are by nature un-representatives; they often possess unusual enthusiasm and experience difficulties to those confronting their imitators. Yet by the same token, the prototypical case study does offer opportunities for lesson-drawing: later adopters can learn from the mistakes of the innovator. Here the prototype still exerts influence but in a negative rather than a positive way.

#### 3.3. Deviant Cases

Deviant case studies are based on a different logic from both representative and prototypical designs. The purpose of a deviant case study is to cast light on the

exceptional and the untypical. Deviant cases are often used to tidy up our understanding of exceptions and anomalies. Normal science, suggests Khun (1970), proceeds in exactly this way, with researchers seeking to show how apparent paradoxes can be resolved within a dominant intellectual tradition.

But deviant cases can also be of considerable value in identifying underlying causes (Kazancigil, 1994). This is because they can provide the variation without which well-founded explanation is impossible. If we want to argue that X causes Y, we must come up with cases of not-X and show that they not lead to not-Y. While deviant cases always attract interest, the danger is that they become over-studied. The exceptional is always more exotic than the typical.

### 3.4. Crucial Cases

The crucial case study is sometimes commended, but less often used, in economy and management science. The idea here is that if a proposition can be shown to work when conditions are least favorable for its validity, it is likely to be valid in all other circumstances as well. If liberal economies, let us say, are now consolidating in countries (such as the post-communistic countries of Eastern and Central Europe) which have no previous experience of that form of economy, we can be sure that the modern move toward liberal economy is significant. Alternatively, a proposition which fails to work even in the most favorable conditions can quickly be dismissed.

Similarly, if post-material values are nowhere to be found among graduates in the wealthiest countries, then the theory of post-materialism is no good. Depending on expectations, we can set out either to support

a theory by showing its value in unfavorable conditions (a "least favorable" design) or to disprove a theory by showing it fails even in favorable circumstances (a most favorable design).

Eckstein (1975) is a strong advocate of crucial case studies. He suggests that "a single crucial case may certainly score a clean knockout over a theory". But his thesis is limited in three ways. First, common sense suggests we should not place too much weight on any one case, no matter how crucial it appears to be. Second, the crucial case design assumes a narrow theory-testing role for case studies, which, as we have suggested, is often inappropriate for comparative politics. Third, crucial case studies involve a risky bet on the results. If the findings run counter to expectations, we have learned nothing at all of significance beyond the case.

### 3.5. Archetypal Cases

The idea here is that a case generates the category of which it is then taken, in somewhat misleading way, as representative. Take the Industrial Revolution. This episode altered the whole concept of technological development, reconstructing the idea as progressive, modernizing force. In this way, the Industrial Revolution made possible all the technological revolutions which followed.

The various uses and types of case studies are also discussed by Lijphart. Lijphart's terminology for identifying the various types is similar to other widely accepted notions such as Eckstein's, with two exceptions: Lijphart does not designate a separate category for Eckstein's 'plausibility probe'; and Lijphart adds a quite important type of case study, the analysis of the 'deviant' case,

for which Eckstein does not make explicit provision. The similarities and differences between these two listings of types of case studies are illustrated in Table 2:

*Table 2. Additional Typologies of Case Studies: Lijphart vs. Eckstein (George & Alexander, 1979).*

<b>Lijphart</b>	<b>Eckstein</b>
atheoretical case study	configurative- idiographic
interpretative case study	disciplined- configurative
hypothesis-generating case study	heuristic
?	plausibility probe
'theory confirming' case study 'theory infirming' case study	crucial case
deviant case study	?

#### 4. 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 meta-theories embedded in these terms or in the methods that use cases and make conventional forms of analysis possible. For 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. It is argued here

that 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.

To the question "What is a case?" most social scientists would have to give multiple answers (Ragin & Becker, 1992). 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.

#### **4.1. The Comparativ Method - Case Study with other Methods**

The discussion about the term "case" presented in this paper had its origins in other works. The peculiar status of the "case" was clear in work *The Comparative Method* (Ragin, 1987). In that work Ragin showed how conventional variable-oriented comparative work (e.g., quantitative cross-national research), as compared with case-oriented comparative work, 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 gather 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 focuses on cases, not variables. However, 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., Serbia after the fall of Communism). 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 macro social 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, or that generic macro social 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 macro-social 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?. This is not a trivial question for scholars interested in social movements and the future of inequality.

There are different approaches to answer the question "what is a case?". To understand them, consider two key dichotomies in how cases are conceived (Table 3):

- whether they are seen as involving empirical units or theoretical constructs, and
- whether these, in turn, are understood as general or specific.

Table 3. Conceptual map for answers to "What is a case?"

Understanding cases	Case conception	
	Specific	General
As empirical units	1. Cases are found	2. Cases are objects
As theoretical constructs	3. Cases are made	4. Cases are conventions

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". According to nominalists, 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") 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 contest, 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 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.

The cross-tabulation of these two dichotomies (Table 3) 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.

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

**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 leadership, for example, would study many possible instances of leadership. 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 "authoritarian leadership" or as cases of "democratic leadership"). 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.

**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 itself exists primarily because of collective scholarly interest. In this view, cases are general theoretical constructs that structure ways of seeing social life and doing social science. They are the collective products of the social scientific community and thus shape and constrain the practice of social science.

This fourfold division of case conceptions is not absolute. A researcher could both use conventionalized empirical units, accepting them as empirically valid (cell 2), and try to generate new theoretical categories or case constructs (cell 3) in the course of his or her research. Frustrations with conventional case

definitions and practices (cell 4) could lead researchers to intensify their empirical efforts and to define cases and their boundaries in a more inductive manner (cell 1). In fact, most research involves multiple uses of cases, as specific or general theoretical categories and as specific or general empirical units. These multiple uses occur because research combines theoretical and empirical analysis, and the two kinds of analyses need not use parallel cases or units. The point of Table 4 is not to establish boundaries between different kinds of research, but to establish a conceptual map for linking different approaches to the question of cases.

Table 4. *Situating the Comparative Method as of 1971: Lijphart's Scheme (Collier, 1971)*

Case Study Method	Comparative Method	Experimental Method	Statistical Method
<p><b>Merit:</b> Permits intensive examination of cases even with limited resources</p> <p><b>Inherent Problem:</b> Contributes less to building theory than studies with more cases</p> <p><b>Types of Case Studies:</b> 1. Theoretical 2. Interpretive 3. Hypothesis-generating 4. Theory-confirming 5. Theory-infirming (i.e., case studies that weaken a theory marginally) 6. Deviant case studies</p>	<p><b>Defined as:</b> Systematic analysis of small number of cases ("small-<i>N</i>" analysis)</p> <p><b>Merit:</b> "Given inevitable scarcity of time, energy, and financial resources, the intensive analysis of a few cases may be more promising than the superficial statistical analysis of many cases" (Lijphart, 1971, p. 685)</p> <p><b>Inherent Problem:</b> Weak capacity to sort out trivial explanations, specifically, the problem of: "many variables, few cases"</p> <p><b>Potential Solutions:</b> 1. Increase number of cases 2. Focus on comparable cases 3. Reduce number of variables:     a. Combine Variables     b. Employ more parsimonious theory</p>	<p><b>Merit:</b> Eliminates rival explanation through experimental control</p> <p><b>Inherent Problem:</b> Experimental control is impossible for many or most topics relevance to field of comparative politics</p>	<p><b>Merit:</b> Assesses rival explanations through statistical control</p> <p><b>Inherent Problem:</b> Difficult to collect adequate information in a sufficient number of cases, due to limited time and resources</p>



## 4.2. Synopsis of Lijphart

Lijphart defined the comparative method as the analysis of a small number of cases, entailing at least two observations, but less than about twenty. The central goal of his paper is to assess the comparative method in relation to the experimental, statistical, and case study approaches. He evaluates these different approaches by two criteria: (1) how well they achieve the goal of testing theory through adjudicating among rival explanations, and (2) how difficult it is to acquire the data needed to employ each method (Table 4).

The case study method has the merit of allowing the scholar with relatively modest time and resources to assess at least one case with care, but the opportunities for systematically testing hypotheses are far more limited than with the other methods. Yet, case studies do make a contribution, and Lijphart offers a suggestive typology of the different ways case studies can be used in forming and testing theories.

The comparative method, as defined by Lijphart, has an intermediate status on both of his criteria. It provides a weaker basis than the experimental or statistical method for evaluating hypotheses, specifically because of the many variables, small-N problem. Yet it offers a stronger basis for evaluating hypotheses than do case studies. Even with the problem of having more variables than cases, the comparative method allows systematic comparison which, if appropriately utilized, can contribute to the assessment of alternative explanations.

Lijphart therefore views the comparative method as suitable in research based on modest resources, and he suggests that studies using the comparative method might often serve as a first step toward statistical

analysis. The intensive comparative analysis of a few cases may be more promising than a more superficial statistical analysis of many cases.

With regard to the large number of variables, he suggests two approaches: First, analysts can focus on "comparable cases", that is, on cases that (are matched on many variables than are not central to the study, thus in effect "controlling" for these variables, and differ in terms of the key variables that are the focus of analysis, thereby allowing a more adequate assessment of their influence. Hence, the selection of cases acts as a partial substitute for statistical or experimental control. Second, analysts can reduce the number of variables either by combining variables or through theoretical parsimony, that is, through the careful elaboration of a theory that focuses on a small number of explanatory factors (Collier, 1971).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The case study methodology has been subjected to scrutiny and criticism at various times since the 1930's. As a research tool, it has not been a choice that is listed in the major research texts in the social sciences. However, case study is a reliable methodology when executed with due care. The literature, while not extensive, contains specific guidelines for researchers to follow in carrying out case studies.

CSR is focused on describing, understanding, predicting, and controlling the individual (i.e. process, animal, person, household, organization, group, industry, culture, or nationality). Any one or combination of the following purposes may serve as the major objective of CSR:

**description, understanding, prediction, or control.** However, in most situations, deep understanding of the actors, interactions, sentiments, and behaviors occurring for specific processes through time should be taken as the principal objective by the case study researcher.

A mental model of a process provided by a participant interviewed in a case study is an *emic* representation of reality. The interpretation of same process provided by the case study researcher is an etic representation of reality. Etic representation in CSR often includes description and explanation of emic meaning as well as building composite accounts of the process based on data from triangulation. Triangulation includes: direct observation by the researcher within the environments of the case, and, probing by asking case participants for explanations and

interpretations of operational data, and analyses of written documents and natural sites occurring in case environments.

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## УЛОГА МЕТОДЕ СТУДИЈЕ СЛУЧАЈА У МЕНАЦМЕНТ ИСТРАЖИВАЊУ

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### Извод

Овај рад проучава неке од елемената који проистичу из менаџмент истраживања са циљем развоја теорије путем студија случаја. Овде се покрећу одређена фундаментална питања која проистичу из употребе студијског материјала током менаџмент истраживања. На пример, конфузија која окружује разликовање квалитативних података, индуктивне логике и истраживања по принципу студије случаја. Иако сваки истраживач има свој приоритетни приступ, долази се до закључка да се студије случаја могу сачинити на више начина: од, с једне стране, појединачних студија до студије вишеструких случајева уз употребу компаративне логике, с друге стране. Између ова два екстремна случаја постоји велики број хибридних метода које користе оба приступа.

*Кључне речи:* Студије случаја, менаџмент истраживања, индуктивна логика, компаративна логика.

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