

Swanborn, P. (2010) 'What Is a Case Study?' in Case Study Research: What, Why and How?. London, England: SAGE Publications. pp.1-23.

ONE

What is a Case Study?

In this chapter we distinguish between extensive and intensive research in social science (section 1.1). The object of case studies – a social phenomenon – is discussed in section 1.2. After surveying some historical origins of the case study in section 1.3, section 1.4 examines the research question as a methodological point of departure. It determines which general type of design is to be used: an extensive design (e.g. a survey) or an intensive one (e.g. a case study). A definition of the case study is presented in section 1.5, and expanded upon in section 1.6. The popular point of view that a case study is characterised by a holistic approach is explained and discussed in section 1.7. In section 1.8 we review the contents of this chapter and we draw conclusions.

1.1 Introduction

In social research, we describe and explain certain phenomena that relate to people, groups, organisations, communities, large towns or even countries. Such phenomena are, for instance: leisure time activities; the treatment of an ADHD child; the determinants of individual health; the way in which people use their social network; how people cope with a disaster; riots; strikes; the process of adoption of an organisational innovation in a hospital; the principles according to which political coalitions are formed; or, an arms' race between nation-states. In order to study social phenomena, we use a diversity of approaches or strategies. They can roughly be divided into two general types: extensive approaches and intensive approaches.¹

In an *extensive approach* we collect information about the relevant properties of a large number of instances of a phenomenon. We draw our conclusions by putting together all the information and calculating and interpreting correlations between the properties of these examples. For instance, in a study about the conditions for and causes of riots (the phenomenon under study) we may start by making an inventory of, say, 200 riots using documentary sources. We establish the 'scores' of

¹This pair of concepts is popularised by the British philosopher of science and social scientist Rom Harré (1979: 132–135).

each riot with respect to a set of properties (such as the number of people involved, the extent of damage to property, the weather conditions), and study the correlations between these properties (these are usually called variables) in order to construct a model of causes and consequences.

In extensive research, we use a large set of events, people, organisations or nation-states to ground our conclusions about the phenomenon. In sociology, in the political and educational sciences, as well as in several other disciplines, large-scale surveying of people is the dominant extensive strategy to collect empirical data. Hundreds or even thousands of respondents may be involved to study a phenomenon. This might, for instance, be the causation of (non)-smoking habits in individuals. Each survey respondent provides information in the form of answers to a series of standardised questions. These answers are *not* used to study the development of the phenomenon within *this* individual person. They are *aggregated over all respondents* to create information about frequency distributions and relationships between the variables under study which might be helpful in understanding and explaining the phenomenon.

Alternatively, in applying an *intensive approach*, a researcher focuses on only *one* specific instance of the phenomenon to be studied, or on only a handful of instances in order to study a phenomenon in depth. We would therefore be inclined to study *some* riots, or *some* young people, or *some* traffic accidents, or only a *handful* of schools by probing into the details of the process (i.e. the phenomenon) we are interested in. Each instance is studied in its own specific context, and in greater detail than in extensive research. Data is collected using many sources of information, such as spokespeople, documents and behavioural observations. There are not only many separate variables to measure, but a phenomenon is also followed over time by repeatedly measuring some of these variables. This explains the label 'intensive'. Monitoring helps us to describe and explain the history, the changes during the period under study and the complex structure of the phenomenon. Each instance, or example, is usually called *a case*. Therefore, an intensive approach is generally called a 'case study', or a multiple-case study if more than one instance of the phenomenon is studied. The word 'case' originates from the Latin '*casus*' (*cadere* = to fall); it simply means 'event', 'situation' or 'condition'.

Let us take an example, such as the origins of (differences in) civic participation. An intensive approach often takes the form of a field study within a specific local setting. As a 'case', we might select an election campaign in a small town: a clear, local, manifestation of political participation (or the lack of it). We may even restrict ourselves to the membership of one political party in that town. The researcher monitors the process, by reading all available documentation, interviewing people who were, or are, involved in the case in order to get first-hand information, and – if possible – by using observation in the field as a technique to widen understanding of what happens in this case. To lay a hand on the phenomenon, we focus, *within each selected case*, on the relationships between

a number of variables and the ways in which the scores on pairs, or sets, of variables simultaneously change *over time*. For instance, during a municipal election campaign we monitor the political participation of party members and other volunteers, and their changing expectations, attitudes, decisions as well as their influence on each other.

Alternatively, we could select participation in a trade union during a certain period as our case. Evidently, on the basis of our results, we will not be able to say much about the 'political participation of the adult population in this country' or about 'participation in trade unions in general'. However, we can probably formulate very interesting conclusions about how differences in participation developed *within this selected case*. And this might suggest some tentative ideas about the phenomenon in general, and at least provide us with suggestions about designing further research. So, in a case study, the researcher collects information by studying the characteristics of those people who are/were involved in the same case and their relationships. Instead of the word 'people', one could use the words 'organisations', 'events', 'nation-states' or any other entity. But even in studying entities like these, one should not overlook that it is people who act and react to each another within the given case.

In these examples, comparisons between the researched cases – if more than one election campaign, party, or more than one city, is involved in the study design – are of *secondary importance*. In selecting more than one case, the usual procedure is to design a tentative model based on the results of the first studied case, and to adjust the resulting model when and where necessary while studying the other cases, until the designed model fits all cases. Alternatively, we may discover that different models are necessary to fit different cases, depending on certain conditions. But the focus is on the description and explanation of developments *within one case*.

Evidently, an intensive approach may provide us with tentative ideas about the social phenomenon, based on knowledge about the studied event or about this specific person, organisation or country, and 'how it all came about'. That is to say, a case study is an appropriate way to answer broad research questions, by providing us with a thorough understanding of how the process develops in this case. Whether its results can be generalised in other contexts remains an open question, to be answered by complementary case studies and/or an extensive approach.

In Box 1.1 we give two examples of an intensive role of case study research and an extensive approach. Both examples are selected to demonstrate a dual strategy. Phenomena can often be studied in both ways. However, as we will see in Chapter 2, for solving some research questions a survey is to be preferred (it might even be the only way to obtain useful results). For other questions, or under some special circumstances, a case study is far more appropriate. It goes without saying that there are several research designs 'in between' an extensive and an intensive approach. Moreover, not all research designs can be easily labelled in this respect, but the intensive and extensive concepts are at least workable.

BOX 1.1

Example 1. Let us assume that a sociologist or a policy scientist intends to study the integration of ethnic minorities within the local municipal services in some Western European country. An *extensive* approach would be to conduct a mail survey among the heads of personnel departments of some 200 municipalities. In a precoded questionnaire, a set of precisely formulated questions are posed about the participation of members of ethnic minorities in civil service jobs in the respondent's municipality. An *intensive* approach would be to conduct participatory observation and interviews in say three municipalities during a six months' period. The researcher *hangs around* in three departments, observes patterns of interethnic social interaction in corridors and restaurants, interviews people at several places and on different occasions. (S)he studies documents about decision-making as it takes place in the municipal council and in the mayor and aldermen's deliberations, and (s)he interviews as many employees as possible about the topic in question. Attention is paid, for instance, to the reactions of departmental heads to decisions from higher levels when these *are made against their advice*. Finally a research report is drawn up. Sometimes, a draft of the research report is discussed with stakeholders in several rounds.

Example 2. We could tackle the problem of the relation between formal education of school leavers and the labour market by administering some hard variables to a national cohort of school leavers: what exactly was their formal education; how long did it take them to find a first job, etc. Alternatively, we might focus on one specific local group of school leavers, and organise intensive group interviewing as well as individual interviews. From this, it may become clear how these boys and girls perceive their own situation; how they evaluate their experiences with potential employers; how they perceive the experiences of their friends; how they influence each other, and so on.

In the social and behavioural sciences we perceive a certain oscillatory movement with respect to the popularity of case studies.² Several contemporaneous social science disciplines, such as sociology, show a rather one-sided emphasis on the extensive, large-scale strategy. One of the causes of this lack of balance is that

²Feagin et al. (1991) construct a challenging distinction between modern 'article sociology' (as represented in the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*) on the one hand, and 'book sociology' on the other hand. In their opinion, the articles, based as they are on 'the scientific method' (the variable language), are almost irrelevant and are largely ignored, whereas book publications—especially those based on case studies—are the focus of public attention. There is an element of truth in this undoubtedly one-sided view. The fate of sociology and of some other disciplines is still the lack of consensus with respect to a methodological core, a consensus that might enable scientists to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not.

an extensive approach easily allows for quantification. Multivariate analysis of data, and statistics, together with the advance of computers in data analysis, has facilitated an extremely rapid development in the field. At the same time, however, modern social science is confronted with many problems that cannot be solved by an exclusively extensive approach. That is why, especially in applied research, a sub-stream of intensive studies grows in importance. In several fields, such as the educational sciences, an intensive approach is already frequently employed; in others, for example organisational studies and the nursing studies, it is even dominant. In the last decades of the twentieth century the *combination* of a survey (as a strategy 'in width') with an intensive counterpart (the 'indepth' strategy) gradually developed as the standard approach in applied research projects. It is generally called a mixed-method approach (see Chapter 7).

To summarise:

	Extensive research	Intensive research
Example:	survey	case study
Comparisons made:	<i>between</i> units of observation (i.e. between males and females regarding their political participation)	<i>within</i> the unit of observation (i.e. between different stakeholders in an organisation)
Global character:	'in width'	'in depth'

1.2 Phenomena and cases

Social science phenomena studied by case researchers are as different as:

- individual health histories or labour market careers,
- production processes or innovations in organizations,
- riots, strikes, protest marches,
- selection procedures,
- initiation rituals,
- industrial mergers,
- collective decision-making,
- procedures of quality care,
- attempts to de-bureaucratise a public service sector merger,
- inter-organisational efforts against drug use,
- implementation processes of a governmental policy,
- alliance formation or war termination between nation-states;
- socialisation processes,
- election campaigns,
- causes of traffic accidents,
- effects of restrictions on the 'policy space' of policy-makers
- (or whatever other processes of social interaction one is interested in!)

In a case study on the causes of traffic accidents (involving pedestrians (e.g. pedestrian/motor vehicle collisions) we may, for instance, select from documentary sources of, say, ten accidents that occurred within the boundaries of a selected city. Cause within this specific type of traffic accident constitutes the phenomenon, and the ten *accidents* constitute the (ten) cases. Within the study of each accident, the regulations and specific features of the local situation as well as the characteristics of the participants involved and the actions of the local police are taken **into consideration**. In another example – a case study about fatal decisions on battlefields (the phenomenon) – the study may consist of an intensive analysis of documents concerning some fatal decision in five great battles (the five cases) in the Second World War.

Note that in a survey about political attitudes and behaviour, involving several thousands of people, the respondents are usually not labelled as cases. Not only because of the numbers involved, which exclude an intensive approach, but principally because the individual respondent is not studied primarily as a specific example of the reason of political attitudes; (s)he acts only as an ‘informer’ about a set of scores on variables that are taken together with those of all the other respondents in data analysis. Explanations are based on correlations between variables that are regarded as causally independent or causally dependent.

A phenomenon may involve only one actor, such as in a study about the trajectory of terminal illness in one individual person. In other examples, such as in studying the development of friendships in a classroom, a riot or an industrial merger, *each case or manifestation of a phenomenon may often involve many individual as well as collective actors*. Hence, a case does *not* necessarily involve *only one* ‘actor’, such as a person, an organization or a local settlement. Depending on the phenomenon of interest, the actors involved in a case may be located on the micro-level (persons and interpersonal relations), and/or the meso- (organizational, institutional) level and/or the macro-level (large communities, nation-states).

Micro-level, focusing on one actor:

For example, clinical research, such as description, diagnosis and monitoring the treatment of individual patients; or historical research such as biographies of famous politicians.

Micro-level, more than one actor involved:

For example, people in a restaurant; some people together in an elevator (the phenomenon might be how people bring a conversation to an end or the continuous adjustment of physical positions in the elevator).

Meso-level, only one actor:

For example, an organisation, such as a firm or a department; a police station; a hospital; a voluntary association.

Meso-level, more than one actor involved:

For example, co-operations or networks, such as between four local primary schools and a school for special education; conflicts between public service and private enterprise in the renovation of an inner city; co-operation of industrial firms and educational institutions with respect to the labour market and learning places.

Macro-level, only one actor:

For example, a local social system such as a street or, a village; a nation-state, a civilisation.

Macro-level, more than one actor involved:

For example, an arms race; the process of organising a common European Foreign policy.

A combination of micro- and meso-level actors:

For example, socialising newcomers into an organisation.

By far the most popular branch of case studies relates to organisations. Substantial fields where case studies are used include marketing, human resources management, management information systems and strategy.

However, on the micro-level as well as on the macro-level, there is an important research tradition that has its own specific character, even though it uses using the label 'case study'. This begs for some elaboration.

On the micro-level, the label 'case study' is often applied to the tradition of a single-subject research³ (in earlier days called 'N=1 research') and was common in cognitive and developmental psychology, in counselling and psychotherapy, and

³Single-subject research has a long tradition. Over the period 1939–63, Dukes (1965) already counted 246 N=1 publications in American psychological periodicals. We mention some references for information. Barlow and Hersen (1984) is a useful textbook for design and analysis of single-subject research. It contains an historical overview, and discusses in a reasonably systematic way, starting from the A–B design (A = 'baseline', B = treatment), several of the more complex time series designs. Comparable is Kratochwill (1978). The first part of the book offers a complete introduction to single-subject research, and many references are made to Cook and Campbell's (1979) book on quasi-experimental designs. As a consequence, both books can be studied very well together. Some of the other chapters have a statistical-technical character and are aimed at the clarification of specific problems. Kratochwill and Levin (1992) contains an overview of historical developments since 1978, and is state of the art. This publication offers many interesting bibliographical suggestions. It limits itself to methods of analysis, including meta-analysis, for case study researchers. Another source is Bromley (1986), in which – exclusively in its qualitative interpretation – single-subject research is discussed, with the help of some clinical cases. The author applies Toulmin's argumentation-analysis on his case reports. *In this logic, arguments are weighed.* The trust of the speaker or writer in the argument, and the explication of assumptions are of central importance. A view on actual developments is offered in the e-journal *Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy* (2007, 3 (4)), with contributions by Clement, Kazdin and Barlow.

in health studies. In this approach, an individual is monitored during a certain period. In health studies, the researcher focuses on a few variables only, for instance the introduction and dosage of medication, and the patient's status on a handful of health indicators. If the number of moments of measurement is large (above 50), this kind of research constitutes a tradition of its own. Quantitative analysis is possible, and may be highly sophisticated. This mostly refers to monitoring the development of the client after the introduction of a treatment, and assessing the effects. In psychotherapy, many characteristics of the client are usually monitored and carefully documented.

Although this type of research (only one or just a few 'case(s)', or multi-moment research) is in some respects related to the intensive approach, it also shares common ground with the scientific tradition of experiments. It belongs to the broad category of evaluation research, and nowadays is undoubtedly the most popular branch of applied research. In evaluation research, both extensive and intensive approaches are used. Nonetheless, in the fields of psychology, psychotherapy and medicine, the label 'case study' is generally used for this kind of research. In this book, this micro-level tradition is not where our main interest lies. Rather, for readers wishing to pursue this tradition, see Fishman (1999).

On a macro-level, the dominant tradition is represented by those case studies in political science and the economy, in which, certain phenomena (i.e. peasant revolutions, wars) are connected to a restrictive set of causative 'hard' variables, such as population size, climate, economic development or armament level. An exemplary study might be about the impact of electoral systems on the number of parties in a country. Data is obtained from documentary sources. The political sciences and economics traditions stand apart from the case study tradition in sociology, the administrative and management sciences, health- and social care sciences, and most other disciplines. Although this tradition is largely beyond the focus of this book, we pay attention to the methodology of the 'case-comparative methods' in the political sciences in section 4.3. The central topic – how to ground causal conclusions on data from a restricted set of cases – certainly is of general importance. We will present examples, and discuss aspects of this strand of research. Appendix 2 presents a (very short) description of the history of the debate.

Both the clinical approach and the political sciences approach are focused on the study of causal relations – does the therapy work? What were the causes of this revolution? But we have a wider interest. It is not only causal relations we are interested in, but also case studies aimed at detailed description, at uncovering a phenomenon that is situated in the context of this special case. Our emphasis is on an exploratory approach.

One should keep in mind that the researcher is interested in the general phenomenon, and not in the more or less accidental case, or 'instance', in which the phenomenon manifests itself. This is not self-evident because already some definitions of the case study may put you on the wrong foot, for example: 'a case study is *an intensive study of a single case* (or a small set of cases) with an aim to generalize across a larger

set of cases of the same general type' (Gerring 2007: 65).⁴ A more appropriate expression would be that a case study is *the study of a phenomenon* or a process as it develops within one case. The point needs to be emphasised, particularly where only one actor (person, organisation or local setting) is involved. In intensively studying the medical history of a person, or the development of some public service, sometimes the researcher's attention gradually shifts towards this specific, selected person, organisation or nation-state, while the phenomenon in general more or less remains backstage. If we asked what constitutes 'the case' in a case study on hysteria, researcher A would perhaps answer: 'hysteria in person P', while researcher B would reply: 'person P' (person P happens to be hysteric). The danger implied in the second point of view is that one focuses on irrelevant features of the actor, 'the bearer of the phenomenon', and that one overlooks the original intention to study the case for its representativeness of the phenomenon in general.

We do not argue that, in so far as applied science is concerned, the psychologist, psychotherapist or doctor does not have the health of the individual patient or client as a focus of interest. Of course the patient or client is 'central'. But in so far as the goal of the project is to use the research results of cases for comparative purposes, the phenomenon (e.g. the treatment of ADHD) is central.

Confusion between the phenomenon and the studied social unit(s), however, is to be expected in view of the fact that, mostly, the boundaries of the phenomenon to be studied are not yet clearly defined. In other words, often it is not yet clear which features are relevant to a general model and which properties are irrelevant. This explains a report writer's reluctance to leave out local and often colourful details, and the sometimes over-abundance of irrelevant aspects. It may put some report's readers – and sometimes the researcher him/herself – on the wrong foot: to erroneously regard the selected case, instead of the phenomenon to be studied, as paramount.

BOX 1.2

Yin (1994: 16) presents Bernstein and Woodward's *All the President's Men* (1974) on the Watergate scandal as a fine example of a journalistic case study, in which the case is defined as 'the cover-up'. As often happens, however, it is unclear whether the Watergate scandal can be used as an empirical case from which to generalise about the domain of (Presidential) scandals, or to some other broader phenomenon. Anyway, one would prefer to have 'cover-ups' defined as the central phenomenon, and 'Watergate' as 'the case', that is to say if the Watergate book is considered to be a contribution to scientific knowledge.

⁴Additionally, we do not see 'the intention to generalise' as a definitional property of the case study. In Chapter 2, the difference between the study of 'stand-alone cases' and '*pars pro toto* cases' is elaborated.

There is another implication. At the start of a case study we should know which phenomenon to study. If we start, however, at the wrong side, by selecting an individual person, organisation or setting, and only afterwards start thinking about *which phenomenon* to study, complications are certainly to be expected. A researcher who starts studying 'something' in a selected place, but doesn't know 'of which phenomenon this place is a case', is comparable to the secondary school pupil who starts writing a paper without having an idea about the topic, but after deciding that it has to be about his/her own school.

BOX 1.3

The researcher's choice of the phenomenon, a specific topic, is the primary choice that should be expressed in the research question. Somebody who is going to study a computer factory where a new 'generation' is being developed is still rather vague. What is the phenomenon to be studied? Procedures in R&D departments? Problems connected with outsourcing? Conflicts between engineers and marketing people? Communication processes in general? Many possibilities present themselves to the naïve researcher. Selection of a certain enterprise and within this context the selection of a certain generation are secondary aspects. In applied research, generally the choice of the case(s) is not up to the researcher, but this doesn't imply that the relation between the phenomenon to be studied and the case(s) is much different: the phenomenon deserves to be central.

1.3 Historical background

Writing and speaking about case studies, one experiences some frustration: the label 'case studies' seems to be used for many purposes. One is confronted with several different strands of case study research. This is evident already by glancing at some of the classic popular texts in the area: Glaser and Strauss (1967); Stake (1995); Yin (1994, 1989) and Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994). Each one of them has little in common with the others. On the other hand, in this field several labels are in use, sometimes addressing the same subject, sometimes used for very different things: case report, case history, case biography, case study and case method.⁵ The confusion relates to the fact that case studies originate from many traditions. We mention the most important ones here.⁶

⁵The term 'case study' may refer to the process of research as well as to the end product of such a process. To put an end to this confusion, Stenhouse suggested using the term 'case record' for the end product, but this suggestion has not been followed (L. Stenhouse, in R.G. Burgess (1984)).

⁶An outstanding historical overview of the role of the label 'case study' in American sociology is presented by Jennifer Platt (1992).

- The growth and development of many sciences, such as the health sciences, clinical psychotherapy and law, went hand in hand with the study of cases. Description and attempts to explain the peculiarities of a case precede, or are part of, steps towards generalisation. In the teaching of these disciplines, cases still play an important role as a didactical vehicle.⁷ A similar orientation on cases can be observed in fields that developed later on, such as political science and organisational studies.
- A specific source of inspiration in social science is constituted by the traditional study of a village or local setting in cultural anthropology (Malinowski, Margaret Mead and many others).
- A third source is the sociological Chicago School. *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1941); *The Jack Roller* (Shaw, 2nd edn 1966); *The Taxi Dance Hall* (Cressey 1932); *Boys in White* (Becker et al. 1961) and many other monographs illustrate this tradition. In this tradition, it is not always evident that it is a general phenomenon, not the local setting itself, that constitutes the focus of research.
- In political science, historical roots include a strong tradition building on case studies. Later on, when the methodology of the behavioural sciences became dominant, this tradition was partly replaced. Debates between proponents of the case study method (only one case) and those of the comparative method (a few cases) and finally the correlative method (many cases) still colour the field.
- Well-known from the field of psychology are the studies of Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts. Later on, the study of individual persons (cases) on other domains, such as personality psychology and clinical psychology, developed.
- More recently, the study of cases in many policy fields (e.g. social work, youth support, labour market intermediary, the integration of ethnic minorities) presents new impulses. Case study research in these fields is not seen as an admission of weakness, as it is in some domains, but as one of the central strategies for research.

In recent decades, confusion increased because the character of case studies changed rapidly within the social and the behavioural sciences. While in the past basic research, by means of a qualitative, exploratory approach, dominated the field, nowadays attention has shifted to applied research. The present-day popularity of terms such as ‘policy experiment’ and ‘evaluation research’ (both strands often using case studies as their preferred research strategy) is an illustration of this development.⁸ Another relatively recent development is the blending of qualitative and quantitative approaches (see section 7.2).

⁷Concerning the use of case studies, or rather more or less ‘extensive case reports’ in education, see Lee (1983). The ‘Harvard Business School’ tradition is well known (see, for instance, Stein 1952). This is an example of an education-guided compilation of cases for management scientists. The cases, which are described in great detail, concern the change of production from military purposes to civilian aims; collective decision-making in the United States during and after the end of the Second World War. Other examples of the use of case descriptions in education are given by Towl (1969) and Windsor and Greanias (1983). The most useful book on this topic is perhaps Easton (1992). Learning to summarise information, to understand, to diagnose, to invent alternative scenarios, reduction and selecting from alternatives are illustrated with the help of an example of an industrial take-over. A Web source is: ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/case.html

⁸The distinction between basic research and applied research is highlighted in section 2.4.2.

1.4 Methodological point of departure

This book is based on a simple central principle: the idea that different traditions in, and strategies for, social science research are complementary rather than incompatible. Therefore, we emphasise a common methodological core for case studies and other types of research. This strongly contrasts with the majority of methodology texts, in which a major split between ‘the scientific method’ and the ‘case study method’ dominates. For ‘science’, labels such as ‘quantitative’ and ‘hypothetico-deductive method’ are used; in the context of ‘case studies’, labels such as ‘qualitative’ and ‘holistic’ are more common. In debates on the results of case studies (e.g. with respect to the relevance of an evaluation research project), not infrequently invalid arguments are used to upgrade or, conversely, to downgrade, research results. The know-how to posit case studies in a rational way in the general scientific enterprise seems to be lacking. As far as is evident from these texts, one assumes that intensive research methodology is quite different from extensive research methodology. Especially with respect to applied research, it seems necessary to correct this exaggeration.

Literature on the methodology of case studies is, comparatively speaking, not vast, and is actually very heterogeneous. The relative lack of reflection on the methodology of case research means there are few additions to the existing literature. Researchers cite the already well-known texts; newer publications refer to the older ones. Often it is insufficiently clarified what additional value case studies contribute to the results of a survey, and vice versa. Many researchers experience difficulties in formulating conclusive results based on their case studies, composed to their ability to do so in the field of survey results (compare Yin, 1993: 70). They seem to rely on the premise that descriptions and interview reports speak for themselves (this especially is the case when quotations from interviews are exclusively used for illustrative purposes) and pay little attention to the specific research question.

1.5 Definition

To elaborate our introduction into the difference between intensive and extensive research, let’s try to *attain* a sharper outline. Case studies are already difficult enough to define as a research strategy, because typologies of research strategies are generally based on different sources of data. A case study, however, is compatible with many data sources, and therefore hard to posit in a system of strategies.

The case study may be defined in different ways, one definition being broader than the other. We prefer to offer a definition that includes those properties that are present in *most case studies*. We attach the word ‘most’ to several of these properties in order to indicate that not all aspects are always present. This implies

that a debate about the question of whether a certain research project is a case study or not is not always fruitful.⁹

A case study refers to the study of a *social phenomenon*:

- carried out within the boundaries of one social system (the case), or within the boundaries of a few social systems (the cases), such as people, organisations, groups, individuals, local communities or nation-states, in which the phenomenon to be studied exists,
- in the case's natural context
- by monitoring the phenomenon during a certain period or, alternatively, by collecting information afterwards with respect to the development of the phenomenon during a certain period
- in which the researcher focuses on process-tracing: the description and explanation of social processes that unfold between persons participating in the process, people with their values, expectations, opinions, perceptions, resources, controversies, decisions, mutual relations and behaviour, or the description and explanation of processes within and between social institutions
- where the researcher, guided by an initially broad research question, explores the data and only after some time formulates more precise research questions, keeping an open eye to unexpected aspects of the process by abstaining from pre-arranged procedures and operationalisations;
- using several data sources, the main ones being (in this order) available documents, interviews with informants and (participatory) observation
- in which (optionally), in the final stage of an applied research case study project, the investigator invites the studied persons and stakeholders to a debate on their subjective perspectives, to confront them with preliminary research conclusions, in order not only to attain a more solid base for the final research report, but sometimes also to clear up misunderstandings, ameliorate internal social relations and 'point everyone in the same direction'.

It is a wide definition. Perhaps too wide? What does it exclude?

⁹ Almost every author on the topic 'case study' presents his own definition. In most of them some of the elements of our 'cloak'-definition are mentioned or emphasised. An overview of definitions would serve some academic purpose, but is not useful in the present context. Here, we limit ourselves to a comparison with Yin's definition. In his view, the case study is determined by the 'how' and 'why' research questions; by events in which the researcher has no control, and is restricted to contemporary situations, not to situations in the past. In the 1994 edition *Case Study Research*, Yin adds two more elements: the real-life context, and the fact that the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear. We do not agree with Yin with respect to the necessity of contemporary phenomena. With regard to phenomena in the past, a retrospective approach is fitting, and can be put into practice in a case study (although observation as a research technique is excluded). Furthermore, the fact that researchers have no control over actual behavioural events is only relevant in so far as causal research questions are at hand; it is less relevant with respect to descriptive purposes, for which case studies can be used as well (Yin, 1994: Chapter 1). The argument about the necessary vagueness of the boundaries between phenomenon and context is represented in our definition in two places: studying a phenomenon in its natural surroundings is based on this argument as well as using an 'open approach'.

Excluded are, of course, extensive approaches, the most typical of them being social surveys. In a standard social survey, many people are approached, but in their capacity of as individuals, generally at one and only one specific moment, using one data source exclusively (verbal responses). Also excluded is a standard survey even if it takes place in one bounded social system, for instance a village. Some methodologists would call this a case study too, especially if that village is selected from a set of villages about which the researcher wishes to draw conclusions. But here the label 'case' means that *for practical purposes only* the sample is restricted to one local setting. Other characteristics of such a project are typical for standard extensive research. From a purely formal point of view, one could likewise label a survey on people's norms and values in France a case study, especially if the domain of the wider project is, for instance, Western European countries, and the project is repeated in other countries, such as Belgium or Norway. But this use of the label 'case study' has nothing in common with what is defined as a case study in this book.

In identifying 'case studies' with 'intensive research' and focusing on the perceptions, interactions and decisions of people, we attach a substantive meaning to the label 'case study'. This contrasts with a purely formal approach, in which a case study would relate simply to the study of one case versus other approaches that involve a number of cases. It might be possible to combine both points of view and state that some research project (such as the survey in France) is a survey as well as a case study. For reasons of clarity, we avoid this ambiguity in using the label 'case study'.

Excluded, too, are laboratory experiments and simulation studies because some of their essential characteristics include manipulation and isolation from the natural context. When taken in a strict sense, our definition also excludes the two powerful sub-traditions focusing on individuals, respectively on nation-states, as practised in psychotherapy on the one hand, and by political scientists/economists on the other hand. If we follow a more ecumenical course, however, by leaving some aspects of the definition out, these approaches would fall well within the boundaries of our definition.

1.6 Additional remarks about the definition

The label 'case study' nowadays is not only used in connection with the study of one case, but includes the study of a small number of cases as well. 'Small' means that normally not more than four or five cases are included in a study. Exceptions, however, exist, in which the number of cases may be as many as 40 or 50, particularly when individuals are cases. In the older literature, a sharp distinction used to be maintained between 'non-comparative' or 'case studies' (N=1) and the 'comparative method', in which more than one case is included (Lijphart 1971;

Eckstein 1975; George 1979).¹⁰ The latter approach was called the ‘case-oriented comparative method’ by Ragin (1987), and later on ‘diversity-oriented methods’ (Ragin (2000). The generally used label nowadays is ‘comparative politics’. The reader should be aware of the fact, however, that *all* research boils down to comparison. Even if only one case is studied, implicitly comparisons are made with a standard or an ideal case, or with the case itself in an earlier phase of development. Hence, from a methodological point of view, the fading away of this distinction is not regrettable. In this book, wherever useful, we apply the labels ‘*single-case studies*’ (N=1) and ‘*multiple-case studies*’ (N>1).¹¹

The phenomenon is studied in its natural surroundings because, at the start of the research, it is not yet quite clear *what the spatial and temporal boundaries of the phenomenon are*. In other words, it is not yet clear which properties of the context are relevant and should be included in modelling the phenomenon, and which properties should be left out. Therefore, for the time being it is better not to isolate the phenomenon from its context.

Studying ‘a phenomenon in its natural context’ means that the researcher does not set apart individuals from their normal life situation, such as in a standardised interview, or that (s)he models a social process under the simplifying conditions of a laboratory experiment, but that (s)he studies social phenomena with as little disruption of the original setting as possible. Moreover, because the research takes place in the natural context of the phenomenon, we may be able to explore – in repeated case studies – the significance of *different* social and physical contexts and their impact on the social process.

BOX 1.4

A complex phenomenon in an open social system such as the ones in Box 1.1 is far removed from examples we meet in our natural or physical environment. For the malfunctioning of an electric circuit at home, three explanations may suffice: a defective bulb, a defective switch or some loose contact in the wiring. Each of

(Continued)

¹⁰In political science, the struggle with one of its sources, the historical sciences, has triggered a protracted debate, in which authors such as Verba, Lijphart, Eckstein and George argued, about the role of case study research (N=1) as opposed to the strategy called comparative method (N>1). A summary of the debate is included in Appendix 2.

¹¹Yin (1994) uses the labels ‘single-case designs’ and ‘multiple-case designs’. Miles and Huberman (1984) discuss ‘within-site analysis’ versus ‘cross-site analysis’ and in the second edition of their *Qualitative Data Analysis*, these labels are replaced by ‘within-case displays’ and ‘cross-case displays’ (Miles & Huberman 1994).

(Continued)

these explanations may be tested by one simple experiment. Characteristics of the house or its surroundings are irrelevant. However, with broad social science problems, many factors come into play. For example in fractured relations between the established insiders and the outsiders in a little town, one always wonders whether it is a specific problem of this town. Or is it the same as in other, surrounding, towns? Or can it even be broadened out and applied to problems of immigration in western European countries? Or do we deal with a clash between very specific cultural subgroups, subgroups that get into trouble wherever they come into contact with each other? Does the local press play a role, or is it the national media that triggers the emergence of riots? What are the reference groups (or cultures) of different stakeholders? Thus, it is often impossible to define the relevance of the contextual properties of the phenomenon is at the start of a study.

The monitoring approach differs strongly from the one-moment measurement in a survey. This is so even if we compare the case study's monitoring with a 'multi-moment' survey, such as a panel survey, that is a 'repeated' survey. In a case study, it is generally not possible to distinguish sharply between different measurement 'waves'. Normally, observations are collected continuously but irregularly during the relevant period (e.g. a 10-days' period, a month or six months). Research designs in which relevant variables are measured at several moments, and in which changes in the environment can be monitored at the same time, provide many advantages over the 'one-moment survey', certainly where time-lags regarding the impact of one variable on the other are concerned. Our insight into the association of successive events and conditions is much furthered by longitudinal research compared to transversal (= cross-sectional, one-moment) research.

In order to describe and explain (parts of) social processes, doing a case study presents a unique opportunity to focus on social interactions and the developing meanings that participants in the system attach to each other, and how they interpret each other's acts. Another object of our attention is the existence of multiple realities: the different, and sometimes contrasting, views participants in a system have, and their diverging interpretations of events and conditions. Moreover, in applied research of innovations, one of the standard foci is on factual and perceived physical and social bottlenecks, and how people cope with them. These aspects of the research approach are elaborated in section 2.2.1.

As in all research, in doing a case study we focus on the problem we want to solve. Whatever research project one has in mind, the research question is the point of departure. In the majority of case studies, the researcher starts with a rather broad and perhaps sometimes still vague question. If little is known about the object, one

can only pose broad ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions. This does not exclude the fact that the researcher, after defining the problem, proceeds by selecting some possibly applicable theories. Generally, during the research process the broad question develops into a series of more precise questions. In most case studies the researcher tries to maintain a maximal openness towards unknown aspects, and to ‘let the object speak’ (serendipity!¹²). This implies – for most case studies – an exploratory approach (see section 2.2.3).¹³ However, occasionally, a case study starts with precise questions, or even with an hypothesis to be tested (see section 2.2.2).¹⁴ The latter requires an all but exploratory approach.

In case studies several data sources are used. Obviously, documents as well as interviews and observational data are not always available. In the eyes of many scientists, the case study is more or less identical with field research in a natural context, as is well known from cultural anthropology. A case study, however, need not necessarily include participatory observation. The possibility to observe behaviour renders the case study exclusively apt for studying contemporary phenomena. But we also use the label ‘case study’ for some forms of historical studies in a not too distant past. One may afterwards collect information about developments during a specified period. In *historical* case studies, exclusive use is made of documents (or, if the recent past is concerned, of oral history). Particularly with respect to organisational studies, in which we want to understand an extant situation by reconstructing developmental processes through the use of documents and/or interviews with participants, but also on the macro- and micro-levels, retrospective case studies are carried out. Asking retrospective questions may give us some insight in what happened in the recent past, or about the perceptions earlier people had about each other and about the process itself. However, apart from the fact that we do not always know the proper questions to ask because of lacking information, or that we even don’t know the suitable informants, answers on retrospective questions are notoriously liable to bias. If possible, collecting data ‘on the spur of the moment itself’ is to be preferred. Being critical about the data and the way they are gathered is one of the key requirements of the researcher’s attitude. ‘The most important rule for all data collection is to report how the data were created and how we came to possess them’ (King et al. 1994: 51).

¹²This nowadays well-coined term refers to the fairly common experience of observing unanticipated, anomalous and strategic data which may start the development of a new theory or extend an existing theory (see Merton 1945; Merton & Barber 2004).

¹³The ideal goal of an exploratory researcher is, of course, that some day (s)he may stumble upon a great discovery, such as Beveridge (1950), who describes how, in 1889, a laboratory assistant accidentally observed the urine of a dog whose pancreas had been removed. The amount of sugar in the urine led to the discovery of the relation between the pancreas and diabetes.

¹⁴A hypothesis is a precise question with an answer to that question, accompanied by a question mark. The aim of the researcher is to test whether the question mark can be omitted.

Often in case studies, the applied researcher deals with several (groups of) stakeholders, each with their own perceptions, interpretations, arguments, explanations and prejudices. It may be very useful to confront each of these groups with the ideas and opinions of some of the others in order to better understand the history of sometimes long-standing controversies or prejudices. Also, the researcher may take the opportunity to present his/her preliminary results to the participants in order to gather last-minute corrections and additions. The general expression for this procedure is 'member checking'.

In some forms of applied case research a further step is being taken. If it is detected that different groups of stakeholders have different views, the researcher may see it as his/her task to bring all participants to agreement. Now, the researcher's role is linked to a change agency role. This generally implies lengthy workshops, in which the researcher invites comments of all stakeholders, where groups present their opinions, etc. This merger of research and action agency is generally called 'action research'. It is representative for much of modern qualitative approaches in applied sociology. In this book, action research is not our focus of interest.

1.7 A holistic approach?

Often, in defining 'case studies', some expression indicating a 'holistic approach' is added.

The case study ... is a way of organising social data so as to preserve the unitary character of the social object being studied. (Goode & Hatt 1952: XXX)

Case studies are those research projects which attempt to explain (w)holistically the dynamics of a certain historical period of a particular social unit. (Stoecker 1991: XXX)

The label 'holistic' means we have to take into account that behaviour of people and social phenomena, in general, are determined by a complex set of causes. As a consequence, simple causal models, such as those used in most survey analysis, are not adequate.

In a more technical language, statistical interaction (between causal and contextual variables) is the rule; simple models of additive independent variables are not adequate. Put in this way, one cannot but agree that 'holistic researchers' have a point. However, if this leads to radically refusing to think in terms of variables, one is likely to throw away the baby with the bathwater.

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 dominates the research process. The resulting understanding of these relations is shaped by examining patterns of co-variation 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, centre stage.* (Ragin, in Ragin & Becker 1992: 5)

The following sour comment on the analysis of survey data is also very illustrative:

...the person disappears from the analysis, which instead merely compares traits. The person who is recorded on a polling schedule is not only dissolved by becoming a set of traits individually tabulated; he almost fails to exist from the beginning by virtue of the narrow range of the data concerning him. (Goode & Hatt 1952: 331)

The comment of the clinical psychologists Gordon and Shontz (1990: XXX) is very apt:

A suitable guideline (in a case study, PGS) is to formulate the research problem by stating: 'I wish to study a person who...' and following that with a description of the condition, experience or circumstances of interest (the obvious contrast is with the classical formulation: 'I wish to test the hypothesis that...') after which a specification of the reasons why the study is important, is to follow. For example, I wish to study a person who is adapting to the prospect of dying from a terminal illness, because facing death is a universal problem, and what I learn about that person will reveal one of many ways to experience and deal with it. Knowing in detail how one person does so will open up possibilities for studying how other persons deal with it and eventually for discovering which aspects are universal, which differ as a function of general characteristics of people (traits, values, motives, aptitudes and abilities) and which are idiosyncratic. Used appropriately, such knowledge will promote understanding among counsellors and give guidance to others who face similar problems in the future.

In holistic explanations in the classical sense, one doesn't take recourse to general laws and initial conditions from which an occurrence or condition is deduced, but explanation is based on 'the pattern' of the existing situation, which is called 'a type'. In this view, the difference between *explanans* (the statements that explain) and *explanandum* (the thing to be explained) disappears. An explanation is never 'ready', but is continually elaborated. Because each element of a pattern can change, it may influence other elements. Such ideas are easily recognised in many arguments for qualitative research¹⁵ but they are not accepted in the mainstream of social science research.

The battle between the 'variate language' and a 'typological approach' is almost as old as science itself. In this context, reference is made to a 'Galilean

¹⁵See, for instance, Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994/2000). A first examination of into the holistic point of view in science is offered by Diesing (1972).

approach' versus an 'Aristotelian approach'. Our view on this matter is that it is a misunderstanding to think that researchers are interested in 'the complete person' or in an exhaustive description of all the ins and outs of a social system. Researchers who emphasise the 'holistic character' of a case neglect the fact that, starting from a research question, the researcher leaves out a long parade of specific factors and conditions that (s)he considers irrelevant, to be separated in analysis from the relevant properties of the *phenomenon to be studied* and the general factors that influence it. That is, the researcher is interested in general or at least generalisable phenomena and does not follow an idiographic interest (i.e. is only interested in this particular case). A researcher always selects, looks at the world from a certain point of view, and reduces the complexity of reality to a simplified model that seems to be adequate for the solution of the research problem. Failures are possible of course; some observed and measured data may afterwards prove to be irrelevant, while some relevant properties are erroneously left out in the initial modelling. But we do not make any scientific progress if we keep thinking in terms of 'we must observe the whole', instead of thinking in terms of properties or variables.

What is the origin of the point of view that case studies should be 'holistic'? It originates from the usual situation that a case study is undertaken because it is not (yet) possible to isolate the phenomenon under study from its environment: *we simply do not yet know which variables are relevant for the model and which variables are not*. In such a situation it seems wise not to be too selective in the choice of variables. That is not to say that we, as an unguided missile, are going to observe everything (if that would be possible). Making use of available theoretical knowledge is always to be advised. But arguments for an holistic approach in our view should be taken as a warning against

- a premature selection of aspects by the researcher;
- a premature closure where one is not open for unexpected aspects;
- too simple models of reality, in which, for instance, interactions are not taken into account between several independent variables and neither are non-linear associations;¹⁶
- a premature closure of schemes for data collection and data analysis (on the contrary, one should always be ready to follow unexpected leads in the data as this implies a general search for a flexible research practice);
- negligence of the fact that human beings attach meanings to occurrences, facts, circumstances, other people, and that these meanings differ between persons and are liable to change in the course of the social process.

Holism, in this sense, is not a vague concept, but an intelligent choice as long as a satisfying model of the phenomenon is not attained.

¹⁶A non-linear relation between two variables means that their relationship cannot be portrayed by a straight line, such as the relation between length and weight of people (linear between certain boundaries).

In the same vein, we add that a case study is not necessarily 'qualitative'. In most textbooks an 'open' approach is strongly associated with a qualitative style of analysis and reporting (analysis and reporting in *words, not numbers!*). That is why many scientists in cultural anthropology and sociology identify case studies with a qualitative approach. However, case study research is not to be identified with qualitative research. First, qualitative research contains many more approaches (such as using focus groups, or performing a qualitative analysis of documents, or doing an extended series of non-structured interviews). Secondly, in several case studies the wealth of within-case data about sub-units¹⁷ requires a strongly quantified measurement and analysis. And in political science case studies, the interest in generalisation, and in systematic quantitative research in order to reach comparability of cases, has been present almost from the beginning. Besides, the dichotomy qualitative/quantitative is used in many different ways, and the use of numbers to represent categories of variables is of minor importance from an epistemological point of view. That is a general reason why we prefer to abstain from these labels.

1.8 Conclusions

There are two ways to learn how to build a house. One might study the construction of many houses – perhaps a large subdivision or even hundreds of thousands of houses. Or one might study the construction of one particular house. The first approach is a cross-case method. The second is a within-case or case study method. (Gerring 2007: 1)

This quote may act as a very apt and short formulation of what a case study is about. A case concerns a specific instance or manifestation of the phenomenon to be studied. A case study may be based on one case (*a single-case study*), or on several cases (*a multiple-case study*). Furthermore, a case may involve only one actor, such as a person, an organisation or a village, or it may involve several, sometimes many, interacting actors (such as in studying a conflict between organisations, a conversation between people, a riot involving hooligans and the police, or a traffic accident).

At least three traditions can be distinguished depending on the level of the inquiry. At the micro-level, in the health sciences, psychology and psychotherapy, a strong tradition exists of N=1 studies, aiming at the healing of this patient or helping this client. While in earlier times many of these studies lacked a firm methodological framework, nowadays most of them are much more disciplined in the striving for comparable data and in the general goal of understanding an illness

¹⁷For instance members of a studied organization, or people living in a village destructed by a typhoon.

and finding an adequate treatment. At the meso-level, disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, the administrative and organisational sciences, education and many others use the label 'case studies' in research with an emphasis on detailed description and an understanding and explanation of a social process or phenomenon. At the macro-level, the political sciences and parts of economy apply the label 'case studies' mostly to those research projects that try to uncover relationships between causes and effects using a small number of units, invariably nation-states.

In this book, our focus is on the meso-level.

A case study is defined as the study of a social phenomenon

- in one, or only a few, of its manifestations;
- in its natural surroundings;
- during a certain period;
- that focuses on detailed descriptions, interpretations and explanations that several categories of participants in the system attach to the social process;
- in which the researcher starts with a broad research question on an ongoing social process and uses available theories, but abstains from pre-fixed procedures of data collection and data analysis, and always keeps an eye open to the newly gathered data in order to flexibly adjust subsequent research steps;
- that exploits several sources of data (informants, documents, observatory notes);
- in which sometimes the participants in the studied case are engaged in a process of confrontation with the explanations, views and behaviours of other participants and with the resulting preliminary results of the researcher.

By the research strategy that is called 'case study' many different phenomena may be studied. The case study has its own place in the gallery of social science strategies. It is, together with other strategies, based on a common methodological framework. However, a clear positioning of the case study between the others is still lacking. This is one of the consequences of the complex origin of the case study: it has its roots in several disciplinary traditions.

EXERCISES

- 1.1 In addition to those given in Box 1.1, find another example of a social phenomenon that can be fruitfully studied in an intensive as well as an extensive way. Define a research question. Elaborate in not more than 15 lines the main steps taken in each research approach.
- 1.2 In section 1.2, 16 examples are presented as phenomena that can be the subject of a case study. (a) Define the level (micro-, meso- or macro-) for each example. (b) For each example, define a research question. (c) For each research question, select one or more cases to study. (d) With each case, which actors are involved?

- 1.3 Find one or two monographs on a case study in a policy field in a library. Make sure the monographs are less than 10 years old. (a) Why do you define these monographs as case studies? (b) Detect the phenomenon to be studied and the research question(s) asked. (c) Write down the selected cases and the units involved. You will be asked to use these monographs for answering more questions in following chapters.
- 1.4 Scrutinise the cases in the selected monographs for the elements of the definition of a case study presented in this chapter. In which respects do the cases agree with the definition, in which respects do they differ?
- 1.5 Do the authors of the selected monographs use the idea of an holistic approach? How do they define this? What is the importance of their arguments?
- 1.6 Some forms of desk research exist that are sometimes considered to be examples of case studies as well. An example might be a comparative study of styles of reporting the same crime in several national newspapers during a certain period. On the basis of our definition, check in which respects this kind of research qualifies as a case study, and in which respects it does not.

KEY TERMS

extensive research	natural context
intensive research	continuous monitoring
phenomenon	multiple data sources
case	exploratory approach
micro-, meso- and macro-level	action agency
confusion of phenomenon and case	single- and multiple-case studies
historical origins	holistic approach