PART 1
GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

In this first part of the book, I look at:

- what the case study is, and the kinds of inquiries for which it may be useful
- some ground rules for the conduct and design of a case study
- what we are trying to do with the case study as a form of inquiry – namely, look at a situation in its completeness and all its complexity
- why, throughout the history of inquiry, people have felt that it is a good idea to examine something in its completeness
- some of the ways in which the success of a case study may be measured
- the ethical dimensions of case study.
WHAT IS A CASE STUDY?

If you use case study as the design frame for your research you will be concentrating on one thing, looking at it in detail. When you do a case study, you are interested in that thing in itself, as a whole.

I'm using the word ‘thing’ advisedly since the thing may be a person, a group, an institution, a country, an event, a period in time or whatever. You may be looking at the process of a medical diagnosis with one patient or you may be looking at relationships among a gang of teenagers or you may be looking at one student’s learning in class. You may be looking at a family or at IKEA’s development as a business or at the USA’s political stance at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. Any of these ‘things’, these phenomena, could form the subject of a case study. What is of interest is the uniqueness of the thing and the thing in its completeness.

Being about one thing, it is about the particular, rather than the general. You can’t generalise from one thing, so there is no point in trying to do so – no point, in other words, in trying to say, ‘This is the case here, so it is also the case there, there and there.’ You cannot, for example, say, ‘The treatment of this patient with influenza with our new drug Flugone has worked. Hooray! Let’s give it to everyone with influenza.’

Because you are not able to generalise from this one case, there is no point in thinking about all of the sampling techniques that are used with other kinds of research. The only sense in which ‘sampling’ is relevant in a case study is the sense in which you go out and find the subject of your case study.

The main feature of your choice of case will be the interest that you have in the subject of the study. Why are you interested in it? It could be interesting because …

- you are intimately connected with it – perhaps it is a child in your class, a patient in your hospital or a project in your company
- it is a conspicuously good example of something in which you are interested – for example, IKEA as an example of a successful business

A case study is about the particular rather than the general. You cannot generalise from a case study.
it is different from what is typical – it is an ‘outlier’ that shows something remarkable by virtue of its difference from what seems to be the norm, such as, perhaps, Kerala as a state in India where, despite widespread poverty, people have a far longer life expectancy than they do elsewhere in India.

Singleness is the watchword with a case study.

Should you worry about this singleness? You may, after all, have heard people being snooty about ‘anecdotal evidence’ – in other words, evidence that comes from just one situation or one event. Such anecdotal evidence is uncorroborated by evidence from different experiences. Social science is about getting beyond what is merely anecdotal, some would say.

Certainly, when we want to generalise – to say that this phenomenon has occurred in this sample of people and we can generalise this finding to the wider population – clearly we cannot use just one person’s experience or a single set of uncorroborated observations as the basis for this. That is why such trouble has to be taken in many kinds of research to establish the sample as being representative of the wider population. If we want to generalise we need to make the basis of our generalisation clear. What gives us grounds to make the claim that we can generalise?

What we are talking about with a case study, though, is a different kind of inquiry from those where generalisation is expected to follow. Here we are talking about understanding how and why something might have happened or why it might be the case. The assumption in a case study is that, with a great deal of intricate study of one case, looking at your subject from many and varied angles, you can get closer to the ‘why’ and the ‘how’. As Becker (2014: 3) puts it: ‘Everything present in or connected to a situation I want to understand should be taken account of and made use of. If it’s there, it’s doing something, however unimportant that thing seems, no matter how unobtrusive it is.’

You’ll notice that although the assumptions about valid processes of inquiry and analysis differ from those in many kinds of social research (for we are not working from samples that enable us to generalise), assumptions about the use of evidence do not change. With a case study there is still the assumption that we must collect good evidence and lots of it. In the modern phrase, we must ‘drill down’ as deep as we possibly can to get evidence, penetrating into every nook and cranny and squeezing out every little bit that can be found.

To mix our metaphors even more, we must look at our subject from many and varied angles, to develop what the great historian–philosopher Michel Foucault (1981) called ‘a polyhedron of intelligibility’. By this he meant that inquiries in the humanities and social sciences are too often one-dimensional, as if
we are looking at our subject just from one direction. In looking from several directions, a more rounded, richer, more balanced picture of our subject is developed – we get a three-dimensional view.

It is not just in the social sciences and the humanities that this multifaceted view is valuable. In what are taken to be ‘harder’ sciences, such as biology, astronomy and geology, and in many applied sciences, such as palaeoanthropology (the study of humanoid fossils), the case study is one of the principal methods used.

Let’s look at astronomers. They can’t experiment with the stars and, although there are a lot of stars (around $10^{22}$ – that’s 1 with 22 noughts after it), when something unusual happens in the sky, astronomers have to make inferences from a very small number of cases – often, only one case. Their work is carried out by means of case study. As evidence accumulates bits of it are patched together. Astronomers try things out with the data they amass, trialling various models and explanations.

For example, in 1967, an astronomical phenomenon (to which the name ‘pulsar’ was later given) was discovered by the astronomer Jocelyn Bell Burnell and her colleagues with the then new radio telescope at Jodrell Bank. As she was drinking her tea one morning and eating her Penguin biscuit for elevenses, gazing into the green cathode-ray tube, Jocelyn noticed something unusual. Something in a distant galaxy was giving off massive pulses of radio energy at fantastically regular intervals. The rhythm was as regular as an atomic clock.

How could this amazingly regular pulse be accounted for? At first, it was thought by these hard-nosed scientists that this was a message from intelligent life and the pulsar was given the name LGM-1 (Little Green Men 1). There was no better explanation for this regular-as-clockwork beep-beep-beeping; nothing else in the known universe did anything like this. The astronomers had to make judgements based on their existing knowledge of phenomena such as this, and the best they could come up with at the time was little green men trying to communicate with us.

This pulsing phenomenon was a case – The Case of the Beeping Astronomical Phenomenon, Sherlock Holmes might have called it – and astronomers had to go about studying it idiographically (see box for definition). In fact, the case study is sometimes called idiographic study since the ideas are all based on and rooted in a single picture – the picture drawn by the inquirer. Given that there was only this case to study and little green men provided a possible, yet unlikely, source of explanation, the scientists let this explanation suffice for the time being.

To go beyond this simplistic (that is to say, too simple) explanation, Jocelyn and her astronomer colleagues had to come up with different kinds of observations and work on different explanations. They had to look in different ways
at the pulse to work out what it might be. By using their existing knowledge and theoretical speculation – putting forward and rejecting or accepting plausible hypotheses – they eventually worked out these regular pulses were the flashes of radiation from a collapsed neutron star that was spinning very fast to give out a directed and extraordinarily condensed beam of light, like a lighthouse.

The important point about this story is that this conclusion was arrived at not by studying thousands or hundreds or even tens of these pulsars, but by studying just one or two pulsars in a great deal of detail and employing a great deal of thinking (see Figure 1.1). Hugely significant scientific conclusions were drawn from this case. Much of the most important natural scientific endeavour and discovery has been achieved in similar ways. Indeed, it is worth noting that Einstein’s *annus mirabilis* papers (including his conclusions on special relativity and mass–energy equivalence) were produced with little more than ‘thought experiments’ and a pencil, while Darwin’s theory of evolution could be said to have been based on the insights he gained from a series of meticulously conducted case studies. From Einstein’s ‘thought experiments’ to Darwin’s finches to Jocelyn Bell Burnell’s pulsar, the study was of cases.

The key, I think – and I am now moving back more single-mindedly to social research – is in what Flyvbjerg (2001: 132) calls ‘getting close to reality’. By this he means keeping in contact with the subject of study and thinking with your own experience and your own intelligence. It is this ‘staying real’ that the case study is particularly good at encouraging, for it eschews methodological formulae and endorses and stimulates a critical, creative approach to problem-solving.

Flyvbjerg puts the emphasis in this ‘getting close to reality’ on ‘little questions’ and ‘thick description’ (of which more in Chapter 11). We sometimes ignore these little questions in the ‘Big Science’ view of what research should be like. Flyvbjerg (2001: 133) quotes Nietzsche as saying that ‘all the problems of politics, of social organization, and of education have been falsified through and through … because one learned to despise “little” things, which means the basic concerns of life itself’. As Flyvbjerg points out, small questions often lead to big answers.

For me, the truth of Flyvbjerg’s point is exemplified in one of the best case studies I have ever read: *A Glasgow Gang Observed* (Patrick, 1973). It was written by a young sociologist named James Patrick (a pseudonym, for reasons that will become
obvious), who had infiltrated a gang in the Maryhill district of Glasgow. By hoodwinking members of the gang into believing that he was like them, then joining the gang and becoming a participant in its activities, Patrick was able to paint a detailed picture of the way that it operated. Although it is a case study – there is only a single gang, not 50, from which to generalise – it gives, through sparkling analysis, an understanding of gangs. Even though there is no pretence that this is a representative picture or that all gangs are like this, we can nevertheless get a rich understanding of the dynamics, tensions and motivation of gangs in general.

I’ll let Flyvbjerg (2001: 135–6) have the last word on this since he puts it so nicely:

“practical rationality and judgment evolve and operate primarily by virtue of deep-going case experiences. Practical rationality, therefore, is best understood through cases – experienced or narrated – just as judgment is best cultivated and communicated via the exposition of cases … which is why … Richard Rorty [says]: ‘the way to re-enchant the world … is to stick to the concrete.’

A lot can be achieved by recourse to the concrete. We escape from a tendency too often found in academic writing to obfuscate with abstractions rather than clarify with specificity; to bring a fog over the topic in hand with abstract words and the seeking of generalisation where none is possible and none is helpful.

The great writer Harold Evans (2000: 32) said that the abstract should be ‘chased out’ in favour of the specific. He was talking of journalism rather than academic inquiry and writing, but I think his point is just as relevant in the academy, if not more so. It is a point that is especially germane to the use of the case study, where the reason-for-being concerns the validity of the concrete and the specific. Evans (2000: 33) quotes from C.E. Montague: ‘The great escape should be from “mere intellectualism, with its universals and essences, to concrete particulars, the smell of human breath, the sound of voices, the stir of living”.

You should, in a case study, be able to smell human breath and hear the sound of voices. Nothing is lost in their refraction through our own understanding as interpreting inquirers. In fact, much is gained as we add a separate viewpoint – one that moulds and melds the experiences of others through our own understandings.

Is the case study scientific?

If people are ever snippy about the case study with you – or, indeed, if ever you have doubts yourself about the validity of this method – then you should remind yourself of the pedigree of the case study in the natural sciences. It has a lineage of highly significant advances coming out of case studies – idiographic analysis.
The interesting thing about scientists’ own reflections on their work and the methodological traditions in which it grew is that it is generally accepted there is no particular, correct or proper way of generating or marshalling evidence and undertaking inquiries. As Einstein put it, the creative scientist must be an ‘unscrupulous opportunist’. The essence of science, he said, is the seeking ‘in whatever manner is suitable, a simplified and lucid image of the world … There is no logical path, but only intuition’ (cited in Holton, 1995: 168).

Some students in the social sciences seem unaware of this methodological eclecticism. In fact, they may assume that ‘serious’ scientific inquiry is of a different character from that of the case study and necessarily involves quantification, isolation and manipulation of variables and carefully controlled experiments. This, however, is a product only of a particular kind of mid-twentieth-century thinking on research and method.

In a classic article reviewing this mindset, two social scientists, Parlett and Hamilton (1987), suggested that social science – particularly education and psychology – had assumed the methods of social science should, at their best, properly involve work with large datasets from which generalisations could be made.

Parlett and Hamilton saw this attitude as wrong-headed. They saw the mistake as having emerged from an expropriation by the social sciences of the outlook and methods of certain branches of the biological sciences. In particular, they said, the methods of agricultural scientists and medics had been seen by large sections of the social science establishment as the template within which to fit. They described this outlook, this way of doing social science, as conforming to what they called the agricultural-botany paradigm. Plant scientists do most of their work comparing the growth of fields of wheat or potatoes or soya beans that have been subjected to different treatments, but you can’t, they suggested, treat social analysis in the same way that you treat plant analysis.

Their point was that the evaluative methods of agricultural scientists are fine and dandy for studying agriculture, but the trouble is that people are not ears of wheat, nor are they potatoes or even soya beans. We cannot, when we set up social scientific experiments, make assumptions about ‘before’ and ‘after’ conditions in the same way that agricultural scientists do, because there aren’t betores, middles and afters as there are in fields of crops being given extra doses of fertiliser or different insecticides.

People do odd things, in a way that potatoes don’t. People are, in the jargon, agents in their own destiny (in the way that potatoes aren’t) and in the habit of making subtle or even drastic changes to the conditions for a trial. The measures used to assess change can’t be taken with a tape-measure or a pair of callipers; they have to be undertaken with test scores, attitude ratings and so on. The trouble is that the latter are assumed
to be of the same order of robustness as the assessments – simple measures of length and weight – that are made of plant growth. They’re not. These social and psychological measures are not the same as centimetres and grams (which get gold star status in the measuring stakes because a centimetre is always a centimetre); they are far less trustworthy – in fact, they can be downright deceitful. In short, Parlett and Hamilton argued, studies undertaken in education and social sciences in this tradition fall short of their own claims that they are controlled, exact and unambiguous. (See also my own musings on this subject: Thomas, 2009)

The long and the short of this is that there is no one way to be scientific and the case study is just as scientific as the next way to carry out an inquiry. As Einstein said (see above), science is not about a method, but about intuition or thinking – it’s about supplying answers to questions with good evidence and good reasoning, which can be done in a variety of ways, with the principal feature of importance being the thought and analysis that go into providing those answers.

We sometimes get too hung up, I think, on the shibboleths of science – that is, the things taken to be core to the enterprise of science, such as causation and generalisation. Einstein’s point is that it is not these that are at the core of good scientific thinking. Rather, it’s about making connections and having insights and testing these out, in whatever way. The great sociologist Howard Becker (1998: 41) put it this way when he wrote about how the connections we seek are multistranded and multidirectional, such that causality is a less than helpful concept in social science:

there are many modes of connection, for which we use words like ‘influence’ or ‘causality’ or ‘dependence’. All these words point to variation. Something will vary and something else, dependent on what happens to the first thing, will undergo some change as well. The things that so vary will often influence each other in complicated ways, so that ‘causality’ is not really an appropriate way to talk about what we want to emphasize.

Some definitions

The case study is not a method in itself. Rather, it is a focus and the focus is on one thing, looked at in depth and from many angles. Bob Stake (2005: 443) puts it this way:

Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied … By whatever methods, we choose to study the case. We could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically, organically or culturally, and by mixed methods – but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case.
So, you have the focus for the case and you choose methods to help you inquire into the subject. I’ll discuss some of those methods in Chapters 10 and 11.

Stake goes on to emphasise the importance of the singular in the case. So, a doctor may be a case to be studied, but it is difficult to see how methods of ‘doctoring’ could be a case. Nor could the reasons for child neglect be considered a case, says Stake (2005: 444), since ‘We think of those topics as generalities rather than specificities. The case is a specific One’ – note the upper-case ‘O’.

Helen Simons (2009: 21) sums this up well in her definition of the case study:

Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a ‘real life’ context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action.

Stake (1995: xi) makes a similar point: ‘Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.’

Both of these experts stress particularity and complexity and the real-life circumstances within which the research occurs. Looking at a number of definitions of the case study, Helen Simons says that what unites them is a commitment to studying the complexity that is involved in real situations and defining the case study other than by methods.

Still on the question of definition, Hammersley and Gomm (2000: 2) make the point that all research is, in a sense, case study because ‘there is always some unit, or set of units, in relation to which data are collected and/or analysed.’ They suggest that the important distinction between the case study and other kinds of research is the number of cases investigated and the amount of detailed information which can therefore be collected about each one. Whereas with social surveys, for example, you find a little bit – perhaps just one set of questionnaire responses – from each of the many people participating, with a case study you are finding much, much more, but about a very limited number.

A summary of Hammersley and Gomm’s table outlining the differences between the case study and two other forms of research (experiment and survey) is given in Table 1.1.

The choice of one case (or a small number) is made with a trade-off in mind, they say. You choose your very restricted sample so that you can gain greater detail, but this is at the expense of being able to make generalisations about your findings.
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Table 1.1  A comparison of the case study with other forms of inquiry (liberally adapted from Hammersley and Gomm, 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigates ...</td>
<td>one case or a small number of cases</td>
<td>a relatively large number of cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collected and analysed about ...</td>
<td>a large number of features of each case</td>
<td>a small number of features of each case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study of ...</td>
<td>naturally occurring cases where the aim is not to control variables</td>
<td>cases where the aim is to control the important variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantification of data ...</td>
<td>is not a priority</td>
<td>is a priority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To Hammersley and Gomm’s table I would add …

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Experiment</th>
<th>Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using ...</td>
<td>many methods and sources of data</td>
<td>one method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiming to ...</td>
<td>look at relationships and processes</td>
<td>look at causation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like Hammersley and Gomm, Ragin (1992: 5) also offers a definition by presenting a contrast with what we might call ‘variable-led research’:

The … case-oriented approach places cases, not variables, center stage. But what is a case? Comparative social science has a ready-made, conventionalized answer to this question: Boundaries around places and time periods define cases (for example, Italy after World War II).

Ragin’s definition does two things. It contrasts the emphasis on cases with an emphasis on variables in other kinds of research, but it also introduces the important idea of the boundary.

What is a case?

When I was writing this book, a moment of delightful serendipity occurred when, by mistake, I pressed the thesaurus button on my word processor while the cursor was stationed over ‘case’. I give a summary of the meanings it came up with in Table 1.2.

I had thought that I knew what ‘case’ meant, but this serendipitous opening led me to some personal research into the meanings of ‘case’. It turns out
How to Do Your Case Study

Table 1.2 Meanings given for ‘case’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>box</td>
<td>instance</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>casing</td>
<td>event</td>
<td>defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crate</td>
<td>occurrence</td>
<td>justification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suitcase</td>
<td>state of affairs</td>
<td>rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>folder</td>
<td>circumstances</td>
<td>basis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(if my less-than-scrupulously-thorough research is correct) that the rather different meanings of ‘case’ arise because the word is taken from two similar-sounding Latin roots that have arrived, after corruption, at the same word, ‘case’, in English. The two roots are:

- *capsa*, meaning ‘box’, ‘container’ and, thus, ‘case’

Kelly (1993: 35) notes that the Oxford Latin Dictionary lists 11 different meanings for the word ‘case’, suggesting that ‘the term was just as confusing in Latin as in English’.

Anyway, this personal etymological quest led me to realise that the use of ‘case’ in ‘case study’ ticked two important boxes – by good luck, probably, rather than good planning – about the essence of this kind of inquiry. Quite fortuitously, therefore, it is an entirely appropriate term for what is done in a case inquiry. Let’s look at these two meanings, plus the other one identified by my computer’s thesaurus.

The case as container

The first column in Table 1.2, headed ‘Container’, is about the physical, concrete meaning of ‘case’. While I hadn’t at first considered that this was relevant to the case study, interestingly it emphasises the *containment* of a case study. A case, in the example of a crate or suitcase (see Figure 1.2) or even a pencil case, is ‘bounded’: you close it and clip the latches and that’s it. The case – think ‘suitcase’ – is everything that is in it: T-shirts, jeans, socks, underwear, washbag, flip-flops, sunglasses, electric shaver (but not if you’re a lady, obviously).

At the risk of going from the ridiculous to the sublime, this is, in fact, similar to something the great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said in the opening line of his famous *Tractatus*: ‘The world is everything that is the case’ (see Kenny, 1993: 3). Wittgenstein’s language is sometimes thought to be a little mysterious, enigmatic or even poetic – as if he were teasing his merely mortal readers with riddles, saying,
‘I’m not giving you answers, peasants: go away and think about it.’

Wittgenstein’s enigmatic statement is relevant to the case study. Wittgenstein scholars (see Biletzki, 2009) have understood the great philosopher’s ‘The world is everything that is the case’ to mean that the world in which we are interested, as inquirers, is composed of facts and states of affairs and objects, all of which are in a constant interrelationship with one another. Like the zillions of atoms in a box, they bounce into one another, they fit or don’t fit with each other and intermesh in myriad ways, and the result is inherently highly complex and could have taken any one of a number of other forms in our box. This is, in a sense, what the case study is about: the focus is on the complexity. That is, we have a state of affairs bounded by the case (think ‘suitcase’ again) and we study the complexity of what is in there.

So, there we are: the case is like a suitcase or possibly a wrapper.

**The case as situation, event**

Here, ‘case’ means a particular instance, an event, a happening, and the set of circumstances that surround this. So, this is different from the bounded (suit)case since it is less about the parameters that define the extent of the subject and more about a set of conditions or a state of affairs.

This, too, very nicely defines what happens when a case study is undertaken. A case study is about a set of circumstances in its completeness and the case is described – marked out – by those circumstances. It is the circumstances of the instance that are being studied. Where did it happen? When? What had happened before? Who was around? What was in the news? How did all of this affect what was going on and how events turned out?

An important feature of the case here is that, as Mitchell (2006: 31) puts it, there is, in ordinary use of English, ‘a strong connotation that the word “case” implies a chance or haphazard occurrence’ and this haphazardness entails specificity or particularity. This is an important point to make, for, as I discuss in Chapter 4 regarding ‘samples’, there can be no assumption that the case is in any way representative of a wider whole – it is a one-off, defined by the peculiar circumstances that you, the researcher, describe.
The case as argument

The clue to the meaning of ‘case’ here is in statements such as ‘The case for … is as follows’ or ‘Here is the case for the prosecution’. ‘Case’ is thus now being taken to mean a rationale, an argument.

This is not, if I am honest, likely to be relevant to the origins of the term ‘case study’; nor is it likely to have been influential in the term’s take-up as describing a form of inquiry. It is interestingly relevant, however, since a case study involves the rationale of one thing relating to another or possibly causing another. It involves your train of reasoning about the interrelationships between the elements of your study. It involves you justifying your reasoning and the conclusions with which you emerge, using evidence drawn from your empirical work. It is essentially about the arguments that you make to connect the elements of your observations. The arguments that you pose are like the fibres and ropes that hold all of the disparate elements together (see Figure 1.3).

What is and is not a case?

I noted earlier Stake’s distinction between a study of a doctor, who could form the subject of a case study, and doctoring, which could not. On his or her own, though, even the doctor would not be a case – at least, not a very interesting or informative one. To be a case – an interesting one – we would have to be able to say that the doctor was a case of something (you should have an idea of what he or she is a case of at the outset). It will then be this analytical focus that crystallises, thickens or develops as the study proceeds. Indeed, it’s the way this emerges, grows and develops that is at the heart of the study.

So, the Korean War would not be a case unless it was a case of something. Is it a case of a war? If so, can you say that it is a case of an especially remarkable or unusual kind of war? Perhaps it may be, by contrast, essentially a case of a border dispute, but one that has blown up out of proportion. Is it a case of US resistance to what was assumed to be communist expansion? Just chronicling the story of the Korean War would not be a case study. An exploration of any one of these ‘ofs’ – any of these analytical backdrops – however, would make a fascinating case study.
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Wieviorka (1992: 159) explains the distinctions I have drawn in my Korean War example by noting that when we talk about a case we, in fact, are talking about two elements:

1. what he calls a ‘practical, historical unity’ (the Korean War in my example) – this is, in essence, the **subject**
2. what he calls the ‘theoretical, scientific basis’ of the case (such as US resistance to communist expansion, in my example) – this is the **analytical frame** or what we could call the **object**.

So, just extending the war theme for a moment, we could not have a case study entitled ‘World War II: a case study’. It is not a case study of anything. ‘World War II: a case study of a “just war”’, however, would contain both of the elements outlined by Wieviorka. It would make an interesting piece of work since it could examine in detail the notion of a just war, played out and exemplified through the case of World War II.

Alternatively, take the example of a hospital ward. Would a description of this ward constitute a case study? In my opinion, it would not – it’s not a case of anything. It becomes a case of something, as I explain in more detail in Chapter 6, when you can explain the analytical frame through which you might be viewing it. It might:

- be a good example of that analytical frame
- demonstrate something interesting in terms of your analysis because of its peculiarity
- be an example of an analytical focus that arises by virtue of your personal experience.

As I indicate in Table 1.3, the analytical focus must extend beyond mere description.

**Table 1.3** What is and is not a case?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject (the ‘practical unity’)</th>
<th>What would not (on its own) constitute a case study?</th>
<th>What would be a case study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesson Ward at Parktown Children's Hospital</td>
<td>a simple description of the ward</td>
<td>an analysis of why it is thought to be an outstanding children's ward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorials in the Daily Globe for the six days in week beginning 5 March</td>
<td>a content analysis of each editorial</td>
<td>a case study analysis of a newspaper proprietor’s influence over the content of editorials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleksandr the meerkat</td>
<td>the rise of this advertising phenomenon</td>
<td>a case study analysis of the exemplary use of personality and a storyline in advertising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So, a case study is like one of those capsules with two halves: each half, each ingredient, is necessary in order for the other half to work, as shown in Figure 1.4. It has to contain the ‘practical, historical unity’, as Wieviorka (1992: 159) puts it (or ‘the subject’ in plain English), and it has to contain the analytical frame (or ‘object’). It is not complete without both parts in place: one will not work without the other.

Wieviorka (1992: 160) continues:

For a ‘case’ to exist, we must be able to identify a characteristic unit ... This unit must be observed, but it has no meaning in itself. It is significant only if an observer ... can refer it to an analytical category or theory. It does not suffice to observe a social phenomenon, historical event, or set of behaviors in order to declare them to be ‘cases’. If you want to talk about a ‘case’, you also need the means of interpreting it or placing it in a context.

Let’s take one more example and put it in the two-part capsule. Let’s take as our subject the 1923 hung parliament in the UK. A narrative of this on its own is not a case study. How can we put it in the context of an analytical frame?

We first of all have to remember that we are looking at this one hung parliament – the 1923 one. We are looking at it as one of a set of hung parliaments. Why are we looking at this particular one? Perhaps it is an especially interesting one or an unusual one concerning the negotiations and the ‘horse-trading’ that occur among party leaders at the beginning of a hung parliament, just after the election result has been finalised and announced. This, then, would be our analytical frame. Clearly, a range of analytical frames could potentially accompany the subject, but we would need to choose one (or more) of these (see Figure 1.5).
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Subject: the 1923 hung parliament
Analytical frame: negotiation process at the beginning of the parliament

Figure 1.5 Putting the two parts together

What is the case study good and not good for?

Let’s start with what the case study is not good for. It’s not good for generalising from …

It’s not good for generalising from (yes, I said ‘not’)

In the history of social inquiry there have been two broad lines of thought about the way that inquiries can and should be done. One suggests that we should collect lots of data about an issue and then generalise from it. The other suggests that, with certain questions, we are better learning from a specific example. As I shall discuss in Chapter 3, the ancestry for those lines of thought is as old as the Athenian hills. As far as I am concerned, both of these forms of inquiry are perfectly legitimate for their own purposes, but it is important not to get them mixed up. We cannot, for example, come up with potential reasons for Billy hitting Ryan repeatedly by doing an experiment – at least not in the formal sense of the word ‘experiment.’ Nor can we generalise about the success of a drug after observing its success in the case of one patient.

Throughout this book I shall be making a bit of a meal of the difference between generalisation and particularisation. I do so because a misunderstanding of the purposes of research and what we can get from inquiries is at the root of many a wild goose chase by students and other first-time researchers.

The assumption made by some is that all research has to be governed by identical ground rules – ones that stress sampling, generalisation and induction. Induction is the process of deriving a general principle on the basis of many observations gathered from experience.

I feel that I need to make this point so emphatically and repeatedly because students often misunderstand the purpose of the case study. The case study is about
one thing, as I keep saying, but the unitary nature of the thing we are studying is unsatisfactory in itself for it to be called a case study. The work needs to have some purpose and direction behind it and the purpose and direction comes from the analytical frame I have just discussed (see Figure 1.4).

Let’s imagine Alex and Zac are horticultural (that is, gardening) researchers at a horticultural college – one that specialises in breeding roses. One morning, on their routine daily tour of the glasshouses, Zac finds a stunning new white rose, the buds having just burst into flower. The flowers are fabulous; they’re almost luminous. He bends to sniff one and immediately swoons as its perfume is hypnotic. Zac cuts the stem from the plant (don’t worry, there are plenty more buds) and runs to Alex, calling: ‘Hey, Alex, come and see this!’ As he reaches her, he holds out the rose for her to smell. She nearly faints as she takes in the perfume – Zac has to hold out a hand to support her. Here, Zac is offering Alex the rose as an example of a new and particularly beautiful rose. (It will certainly become a garden classic.)

Now, if you will, replace Alex and Zac in your mind with Paula, who is a lecturer in plant science in the botany department of Gotham University. Quentin is among a group of students listening to Paula give a lecture. Paula holds up a white rose to the class. The point she wants to make is that roses are not alone in the family Rosaceae – they are but one particular genus, Rosa, of the family Rosaceae, which also contains blackberries, apples and strawberries (yes, extraordinary, but true).

In both of these cases, the roses are offered for a purpose, but not as examples from which we can generalise. Because on each occasion it is one rose, we can make no generalisations about it. We cannot look at each rose and say, ‘All roses are white.’ Nor can we look at it and say, ‘All roses are perfumed’ or ‘All roses have thorns.’ It would be wrong, in other words, to generalise from this one rose. In each case, the rose is serving a particular exemplary function of an analytical category.

I’ll come back to this in a moment (under the next heading, ‘It’s good for uniqueness’), but before I do so I’d just like to spend a moment looking at a real-life example that I think shows why we should restrict the conclusions we draw from case studies. The case study has a fine history in medical education, particularly in psychiatry, where Sigmund Freud unpacked many of his new ideas through descriptions of cases. Freud, however, does something inappropriate, in my opinion, in one of his more famous cases and this serves as a good example of what should not be done with a case study.

The case was of a young woman to whom he gave the pseudonym Anna O. She had developed a set of neurotic behaviours, including a repeated paralysis, an inability to speak and a fear of drinking water. Of this latter characteristic, Freud (1957/2009) writes:

It was in the summer during a period of extreme heat, and the patient was suffering very badly from thirst; for, without being able to account for it in any way, she suddenly found it impossible to
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drink. She would take up the glass of water that she longed for, but as soon as it touched her lips she would push it away like someone suffering from hydrophobia. As she did this, she was obviously in an absence for a couple of seconds. She lived only on fruit, such as melons, etc., so as to lessen her tormenting thirst. This had lasted for some six weeks, when one day during hypnosis she grumbled about her English 'lady-companion', whom she did not care for, and went on to describe, with every sign of disgust, how she had once gone into this lady's room and how her little dog – horrid creature! – had drunk out of a glass there. The patient had said nothing, as she had wanted to be polite. After giving further energetic expression to the anger she had held back, she asked for something to drink, drank a large quantity of water without any difficulty, and awoke from her hypnosis with the glass at her lips; and thereupon the disturbance vanished, never to return.

The idea in the popular mind that personal acknowledgement and acceptance assist in the process of 'healing' is linked to many and varied contributory ideas stemming from psychoanalysis. Freud concludes:

Ladies and Gentlemen, if I may be allowed to generalize – which is unavoidable in so condensed an account as this – I should like to formulate what we have learned so far as follows: our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are residues and mnemonic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences.

Freud asks here if he ‘may be allowed to generalize’. Well, no, sorry Sigmund, you can’t generalise. You can’t generalise – at least not in a useful way – from this case study. We can certainly take inferences and interpret these in the context of our personal knowledge and that which comes by virtue of our reading. It is wrong, however, to generalise and conclude, as Freud is encouraging us to do here, that reminiscence is the basis of a hysterical reaction. How could this be a useful generalisation? You or I would not develop a fear of drinking water if, like Anna O., we had witnessed a friend’s dog drinking from a glass (well, I wouldn’t – I would think it was rather sweet, though you may be a more sensitive soul).

No, Anna O’s reaction was in the context of the era in which the episode happened and Anna’s own history, which, of course, Freud went on to analyse in some detail. His analysis in these terms is as particular and as positioned as it is fascinating. However fascinating, though, Freud was not right to generalise from this one case to others and we can now appreciate, as twenty-first-century readers, why this is so, why it was incorrect to generalise.
We can appreciate that such a reaction was not a function simply of the individual psychological history of this patient, but also of the social, moral and political context of the age. It was a time, in our terms now, of heightened sensitivity to what would have been considered vulgarity. If Anna O. could be taken in a time machine to watch one of today’s stand-up comedians, she would not just go off her water, she would have a fit of the vapours and probably never recover.

It’s good for uniqueness

Going back to the rose, what would have been the purpose of offering the rose as a single case? For Zac, the horticulturalist, its uniqueness would be defined by its beauty and fragrance, placing it in a special position in relation to other roses. For Paula, the botanist, its uniqueness is defined by its exemplification of the unique genus, *Rosa*, of the family *Rosaceae*. The list of potential uniquenesses could go on, as shown in Table 1.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unique relative to what?</th>
<th>How might a case study, in showing the rose in its completeness, be interesting or instructive?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a rose</td>
<td>Showing how the rose is different from other garden plants, such as in repeat flowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a white rose when used as emblems</td>
<td>A study of the significance of the white rose and its symbolic place in the history of different nations – in the Wars of the Roses, for example. Its cultivation and its popularity following this emblematic use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a fragrant rose</td>
<td>A case study of this rose and its selective breeding vis-à-vis fragrance. Its particular features that mark it out as an example of genetic mutation, including a discussion of the special difficulties in getting this variety to graft to the usual rootstocks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The point I am trying to make is that, if we are using the rose as an object for an inquiry, we are looking at its particular features in their variety and their completeness. We are, in other words, seeing the rose in terms of broader analytical categories, for, to quote from Wieviorka (1992: 160) again, the ‘case’ in itself (the rose) has no meaning in itself: ‘It is significant only if an observer … can refer it to an analytical category’. Wieviorka continues:

If you want to talk about a ‘case’, you also need the means of interpreting it or placing it in a context … Regardless of the practical approach for studying it, a case is an opportunity of relating facts
and concepts, reality and hypotheses. But do not make the mistake of thinking that it is, in itself, a concept. A case draws its unity not from the theoretical tools used to analyse it, but from the way it takes shape. (1992: 160)

Ragin (1992) makes an interesting point here, drawing from a seminar that he organised with Howard Becker – co-author of the celebrated case study *Boys in White* (Becker et al. 1961/1980). He says that Becker would continually pull the rug from under people's feet at the seminar by saying that cases should not be defined at the outset but, rather, *emerge* as the inquiry progresses. We should always be asking, Becker is suggesting, 'What is this a case of?' We should ask this question again and again, Becker advises, as our evidence accumulates around potential explanations (or 'theories'). The 'object' is then the explanation.

It's interesting to look at Becker's insight in the case of the three approaches to the rose set out in Table 1.4 because it puts the emphasis on the analytical part of the study – the explanation. It is the explanation and the theorising that are key in foci (roses in this case) that are quite similar.

**A rich picture – with boundaries**

A case study will not tell you the kinds of things that an experiment will tell you about causation (although you may choose to use an experiment as part of a case study, and this is covered in Chapter 8). What it does offer you is a rich picture with many kinds of insights coming from different angles, from different kinds of information. So, you may go into your case study and do interviews, make observations, keep a diary, look at statistics. Nothing is ruled out. The case study is a frame that offers a boundary to your research. Equally, you could think of the case study as representing the end of a searchlight beam. Everything at the end of the beam is seen in bright light and thrown into sharp relief, shadows and all. You study what is in the beam of light and your subject of interest in it is, 'What happened here? How did it happen? What was connected to what? Why did it happen?'

The end of a beam of light has a boundary, an edge, just as a case study has a boundary. Your case study is defined not so much by the methods that you are using to do the study, but the edges you put around your case – the direction in which you want your research to go and how far. You will define these at the outset. Perhaps you will say, 'I want to look at how IKEA grew to be the biggest furniture retailer in the world'. In making this examination you will be defining the subject of your case study by its growth, and growth implies development over time. Time implies history, with a beginning, middle and end.

Let's look at this particular example, defined by these parameters.
In this case study your principal theme of interest, we have just decided, will be growth. This case study will be focusing on change over time, beginning perhaps with a reconnoitre of the available statistics, to establish the grounds for your case. You will want to establish that IKEA really is the biggest furniture retailer in the world by comparing it with other retailers. You will want to show how it has grown over time, examining its turnover and profit figures since its creation by Ingvar Kamprad in Sweden in 1943. What does the graph of turnover figures look like over the years? Alternatively, you could show, on a series of maps, each representing a ten-year period, the countries in which IKEA stores have existed. You may be able to find out the figures you need quite easily or you may need to go to some quite obscure sources.

This gathering and plotting of basic data on turnover and profit over the years since 1943 provides the boundary for your case study. It says, ‘This has happened, IKEA really is the biggest and it has become the biggest in a period of less than 50 years’.

This, though, is not enough for a case study. Simply to show the growth over time is not sufficient. You have the boundaries defined by the growth, but now you want to know how and why the growth has happened and, while you will not be able to provide a definitive answer, the case study should provide you with enough evidence to make a convincing argument. You will need to click together bits of information like pieces in a jigsaw, bits of evidence that you collect in support of any one of a number of tentative ideas – sometimes called hypotheses or theories – about the growth of the company.

If you are thinking about the growth of the company, what might be plausible ideas to explain its growth? Let’s have a look at a few.

The company may have grown because its founder had one big idea or a series of ideas, such as realising the:

- potential of sawdust and chipboard for making cheap furniture
- willingness of consumers to build their own furniture from a kit if the price and design are right
- ability and willingness of consumers to carry away their own flat-packed furniture with the advent of mass car ownership.

If any of these were important, where did Kamprad’s ideas come from? Did he work in a sawmill and notice the abundance of sawdust? Did he work in retailing and realise the wastage involved in ‘transporting air’ in assembled furniture? Was it, instead, down to the retailing technique employed in IKEA stores, wherein consumers are encouraged to walk along a certain route through the store, being encouraged to buy as they make their extended and unexpected walk? (How many times have I come away from IKEA with something like a never-to-be-used Benthölme drawer tidy precisely because I was steered along such a route?)

How could you go about finding out which of these potential ideas was important? Clearly the ideal would be an interview with Ingvar Kamprad, to ask him about your tentative theories, but I doubt if he gives many interviews. You will almost certainly
have to rely on printed biographies of him. The Wikipedia entry for him, for example, tells us that in 1976 he wrote a manifesto detailing the IKEA concept of frugality and enthusiasm. We learn that he also worked with Swedish journalist Bertil Torekull on the book *Leading by Design: The IKEA Story* (Kamprad, 2000). In the autobiographical account, he further describes his philosophies and the trials and triumphs of the founding of IKEA. Also, that he began to make a lot of money when he was a child by buying matches cheaply in bulk and then reselling them at a profit. He expanded to fish, ballpoint pens and pencils.

Already we can see that he seems to be one of those people who almost can’t help but make money. It’s not as if he had an especially good idea about furniture or an especially wonderful insight into how it could be mass-produced. Rather, the seed seems to have come from his dynamism in finding ways to sell. Alongside this, he apparently drives a 15-year-old Volvo, flies only economy class and encourages IKEA employees to always write on both sides of a piece of paper. So, an obsession with economy, paring expenses down to the very last little bit, also comes through.

This is the kind of emerging information on which the narrative in a case study is built. The analysis begins to ‘thicken’ in this way around one theme.

If you take only one thing from this chapter, take this …

- A case study is about seeing something in its completeness, looking at it from many angles. This is good science. In fact it is the *essence* of good science.

- Although we cannot generalise from a case study, generalisation is not always what is wanted from the inquiry process. We don’t always want or need to generalise and some of the most inspired and insightful research, of any kind, has come about as the result of case studies.

- What the case study is especially good for is getting a rich picture and gaining analytical insights from it. The ‘analytical’ bit is important: each study has a subject of interest (a person, place, event or phenomenon) and an analytical frame within which it is studied.

- Definitions of case study stress singularity and in-depth inquiry. The definition that I shall adopt for case study is as follows:

  Case studies are analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions or other systems which are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will illuminate and explicate some analytical theme, or object.
FURTHER READING

A widely cited article that provides an interesting contrast to the stance I have taken in this chapter, in that it defends case study research as meeting scientific criteria of generalisability, transferability and replicability.

Classic paper in which Donald Campbell – one of the most respected proponents of experimental method – comes round to seeing the value of the case study.

Originally published (with Ernest Nagel) in 1934, this is a magnificent, if slightly dated, outline of what constitutes science. It is good on the duty of doubt in science. See especially Chapters 2 and 12.

This book offers, as the editors put it, the most influential and important articles on the case study. See especially the introduction by Hammersley and Gomm for an excellent overview.

See Chapter 11, ‘So, what are case studies?’ By comparing the case study with surveys and experiments, Hammersley aims to show that these methods are not as different from each other as we sometimes assume and the differences that do exist between these ways of structuring research hinge on case selection.

This is a book I never tire of recommending. Like Becker et al.’s Boys in White (1961/1980), it is as good as a novel, describing the author’s infiltration of a gang of young men in Glasgow.

Many excellent articles are included here. See especially Ragin’s introduction.

An excellent, practical book on conducting a sociologically framed case study. Taken from the point of view of a student making her way through the process.

Stake is one of the doyens of the case study method and his work is well worth reading.

In this volume I have collected some iconic references for case study, including some of the key ones drawn upon in this chapter.