

Comparative Case Studies

Lesley Bartlett and Fran Vavrus

Case study methodology is widely used across multiple disciplines and fields. But what is a case, and what is a case study? ‘Case’ is often used in an obfuscating sense and may be defined as place, as institution, as study participants, as unit of analysis, as concept, or even as variable (Ragin 1992). In *Rethinking Case Study Research* (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) we offer an alternative conceptualization of case studies and the value of comparative case study research. We critique traditional conceptualizations of case studies, which often rely on narrow notions of culture, context, and comparison. We then explain why we favor a more expansive, process-oriented approach that is for a comparative case study (CCS). We provide details about the key ideas that undergird our approach, which include: focusing on the processes through which events unfold; reconceptualizing culture and context; a critical approach to power relations; and a greater appreciation of the value of comparison.

Scholars in the field of education often rely on methodologists such as Yin (2014), Stake (1995), and Merriam (1998) to design their research. However, we argue that traditional approaches to case study often conflate phenomenon and context and define context as place. They rely on a problematic and often unrecognized notion of holism. They prematurely bound the study, contradicting the fundamental qualitative commitment to iterative designs. Traditional approaches to case study unnecessarily eschew or discourage comparison, including comparison over time. Finally, they underestimate the generalizability of case study research and, thus, its potential significance.

The comparative case study approach diverges from established approaches in several important ways. To begin, it adopts what Maxwell called a *process orientation*. Process

approaches “tend to see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these; explanation is based on an analysis of how some situations and events influence others” (2013, p. 29). They “tend to ask *how x* plays a role in causing *y*, what the *process* is that connects *x* and *y*” (2013, p. 31). Thus, the process-oriented comparison inherent to our notion of comparative case studies insists on an *emergent design*, a hallmark of qualitative research. For this reason, comparative case studies do not start with a bounded case; they resist the holism of traditional case studies, eschewing the tendency to define case or phenomenon of interest as place. Instead of this a priori bounding of the case, the CCS approach features an iterative and contingent tracing of relevant factors, actors, and features.

Comparative case studies draw on contemporary conceptualizations of culture, context, and comparison. The CCS approach directs attention to cultural practices and repertoires, and it emphasizes the need to consider power relations within a single institution or community *and* across communities, states, and nations. In so doing, the CCS approach draws on critical geography (e.g., Massey 1994, 2005) to rethink context, place, space, and scale. It pays attention to social relations and networks. Finally, inspired by actor network theory and multi-sited ethnography, the CCS approach focuses not only on the traditional notions of comparison and contrast but also on tracing phenomena *across* and *through* sites as a means of encouraging researchers to follow the inquiry as it unfolds over space and time. To accomplish this task, comparative case studies envision comparison across three axes: a horizontal comparison that *contrasts* one case with another and traces social actors, documents, or other influences *across* these cases; a vertical comparison of influences at different scales, from the international to the national to regional and local; and a transversal comparison over time.

In *Rethinking Case Study Research*, we share comprehensive explanations of these three

interconnected axes and use examples of research by Ph.D. students and more established scholars who work in different world regions and on a wide range of educational and social problems. Each chapter in the book has exercises designed to guide readers through the research process using the comparative case study approach as a useful heuristic.

References

- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place, and gender*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Massey, D. (2005) *For space*. London: Sage.
- Maxwell, J. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ragin, C. C. (1992). Introduction: Cases of “what is a case?” In C. Ragin & H. S. Becker (Eds.), *What is a case? Exploring the foundations of social inquiry* (pp. 1-17). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (2003). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.) (pp. 134 - 164). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- van der Veer, P. (2016). *The Value of Comparison*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.