



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

WHAT IS A CASE?

Anna Bengtson & Susanne Åberg

anna.bengtson@fek.uu.se

susanne.aberg@fek.uu.se



What is a case? (I)

The word “**case**” comes from the Latin word ***casus***, meaning event (“to happen”) or chance – but also accident

- a description of a real situation (or a situation that could be real)



What is a case? (II)

- Background in teaching at universities and university colleges
- Pedagogical tool to teach law at Harvard Law School from the 1870s
- Used at Harvard Business School from the 1920s
- In law and medicine there are “already existing cases”
– law cases and patient cases respectively, while other subjects have to construct their cases



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Cases in Research



What is a (research) case?

“The biggest obstacle to clear thinking about ‘What is a case?’ is the simple fact that the term ‘case’ is used in so many different ways. It is used to refer to data categories, theoretical categories, historically specific categories, substantive categories, and so on.”

(Ragin, 1992, p.217)



Discussion: Question 1

Give a short overview of the case you have found:

- *Where was it published?*
- *What is the case(s) about?*
- *How is the purpose of the paper formulated?*



The purpose with cases according to Dawson (1997)

“not on working the data to strengthen the generalizability of the findings but rather to provide narrative accounts of the continuously developing and complex dynamic of people in organizations”



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

The purpose with cases according to Yin (1994)

...to investigate “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”



A collective term for many approaches



Positivism

- hypotheses*
- several cases*
- generalisability*
- reliability, validity*

Social constructivism

- capture complexity*
- one multifaceted case*
- convincing*
- *the text is central,
trustworthiness*



Discussion: Question 2

You had four texts to read for today. Where would you place them on the positivism – social constructivism scale?

*Where would you place the case that you have read?
Why?*



Case as a research method (I)

“This research approach is especially appropriate in new topic areas.” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.532)

“the case study produces the type of context-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts. [...] in the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge, which, thus, presently rules out the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction.” (Flyvberg, 2006, p.221)



Case as a research method (II)

Case study = “Research strategy that involves the empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, using multiple sources of evidence.”

(Saunders et al., 2016)



The object of study – the focal unit

- Given the aim and purpose of the study, which focal unit should the case revolve around?
 - A company
 - A location
 - A group
 - An individual
 - A relationship
 - A network
 - An event
 - A change process
 - *Etc. ...*



Framing and limiting the case (I)

“It is impossible to do research in a conceptual vacuum. Whether it is viewed as given or socially constructed, the empirical world is limitless in its detail, complexity, specificity, and uniqueness. [...] We make sense of this infinity by limiting it with our ideas.”

(Ragin, 1992, p.217)



Framing and limiting the case (II)

- Framing in time (e.g., 1998 – 2008)
- Importance for the research question(s) – research question helps in finding relevant frame
- Rarely given, but has to be decided on and explained



Discussion: Question 3

What was the focal unit in your case study?

How does the author handle time, space and perspective / voice in the case?

Implications of these choices for findings?



Discussion: Question 4

“if you want to write a case study that derives its excitement and justification through little more than the description of a particular phenomenon, make sure you have a talking pig.” (Siggelkow, 2007, p.20)

Question: What is a “talking pig”? Examples?



Process studies

- To study changes over time
- Interaction between action and context (Pettigrew, 1987)
- Different kinds of process studies (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995)
- Division into phases? (Langley, 1999)



Data sources

- Documents
- Archive material
- Interviews
- Physical artefacts
- Observations
 - *Direct*
 - *Participant*



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Discussion: Question 5

What type of data sources were used in your case? Why?



Analyzing case material

- “the lest codified part of the process”
- Different ways to look upon case (description) vs. analysis
- Coding (degree of theory drive differs)
 - Time bracketing
 - Empirical phenomenon/aspects
 - Theoretical themes
 - “Gioia-method”
 - Other?



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Discussion: Question 6

How is the process of analyzing described in your article?



One or several cases?

One-case design

- Pilot case
- Critical cases
- Unique / extreme cases
- Representative/typical cases
- Revelatory cases
- Longitudinal cases

Many-case design

- 2 or more
- Possibility to compare and contrast
- Increases the possibility to draw conclusions (?)



Common criticisms concerning case studies

- It is difficult to verify the information through independent sources
- It is normally impossible to generalise from the results (and it is mostly used to generate theory)
- There is a lack of stringency in the adoption of method – "biased", "careless", "sloppy"...



Questions you should ask yourself

To plan, carry out and communicate your case study, these questions need to be answered:

- What is your case a case of?
- "The phenomenon is complex" – but in what way?
- How do you limit your case in time and space, and why?
- Are there other ways of writing your case? Why have you chosen this one?
- What can we learn from the case?



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

QUESTIONS? REFLECTIONS?